



VOLUME

DECEMBER 2023

# Europe, the Arctic and Asia: Balancing Competing Priorities in Canadian Foreign Policy

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THE INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & DIPLOMACY

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# **Introduction: Toward a Canadian Grand Strategy?**

ZACHARY PAIKIN  
HENRIK LARSEN



## Introduction: Toward a Canadian Grand Strategy?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was launched in February last year and continues unabated. However, it also occurred amid growing recognition of the increasing strategic and economic significance of the Indo-Pacific theatre. When combined with the visible multipolarization of global politics and the relative decline of Canada and its Western allies, this raises the question: How should the Canadian government allocate its limited resources to meet myriad foreign policy challenges, many of which will be with us for years if not decades to come?

The Euro-Atlantic vector has long featured prominently in Canadian foreign policy — and Russia's act of aggression demonstrates that Ottawa still cannot take the shape of Europe's security order for granted. Still, Canada must avoid spreading itself too thin. It needs to consider where its core interests lie when deciding which policy files to prioritize, whether within NATO or further afield.

Building on IPD's recent major paper '[True North: A Canadian Foreign Policy That Puts the National Interest First](#)' (co-authored by one of us), this compendium brings together scholars as well as current and former practitioners to deliberate how Canada should respond to a contested European security order, all while the international order remains in flux.

Aaron Ettinger kicks off the collection by arguing that an unfocused Canada should respond to its decline (and the decline of the U.S.-led order more generally) by ranking its most established foreign policy priorities more clearly. In order, these should be continentalism, Atlanticism and internationalism. Ettinger's analysis challenges those who insist that defending the "rules-based international order" should remain the loadstone of Canadian foreign policy. It also reveals that

the Arctic and Indo-Pacific — despite their rising importance — remain under-institutionalized in Canada's national foreign policy culture.

With Finland (and Sweden) joining NATO and relations with Russia in a deep freeze, Canadian policymakers and thinkers are also grappling with the extent to which Canadian defence policy in the circumpolar region should adopt a NATO-centric lens.

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IPD Young Fellow Alexander Landry sees the reality of limited resources as providing an opportunity for Canada to retool its engagement within NATO (in relative terms) away from military engagement in Europe, toward issues such as the Arctic and climate change. This would serve to align Ottawa's Atlantic policy more squarely with Canadian national interests. By contrast, Andrea Charron and James Fergusson view continental defence as a goal which remains distinct from Canada's contribution to the Atlantic Alliance. They argue that while NATO is increasingly setting its sights on the Arctic, the European and North American Arctic theatres should be distinguished from each other.

Andrew Rasiulis continues the collection of essays by reminding policymakers that Canadian engagement in Europe after the Ukraine war will centre not only on NATO and deterrence, but also on



diplomacy, reassurance, and confidence-building measures through the OSCE. This dual focus will be necessary to bring about a stable pan-European security order, which itself is a precondition for creating the space necessary for Canada to pivot its focus to the Arctic and Asia — theatres which may affect Canada’s national interests more significantly over the long term. Finally, Brian Job concludes the compendium by taking stock of Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy one year after its adoption, arguing that sustaining Ottawa’s focus on an Asian theatre of rising importance will require resources and resolve amid ongoing events in Europe and the pressures of diaspora politics.

We hope that this publication will stimulate reflection and debate on how to develop a balanced, dispassionate and realistic Canadian grand strategy — one that is laser-focused on the national interest and fit for twenty-first century geopolitics. We would also like to acknowledge the generous support of the Department of National Defence’s MINDS program, without which this group of essays would not have been possible.

## **About the Editors**

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A photograph of Justin Trudeau and António Guterres shaking hands in front of a United Nations backdrop. Justin Trudeau is on the left, wearing a dark suit and a green patterned tie. António Guterres is on the right, wearing a dark suit and a blue tie. The background features the UN logo and a blue flag.

# **Liberal Order in Crisis: Does Canada Still Have Global Interests?**

**AARON ETTINGER**



What are Canada's foreign policy priorities?

That question is harder to answer than ever. Since the end of the Cold War, Canada has cast about for international purpose. Experimentations with human security in the 1990s gave way to the war in Afghanistan and counterterrorism after 2001, which anchored Canada's international purpose for over a decade. After 2016, Donald Trump's presidency forced Ottawa to consider Canada's core interests when America came first. Then came Covid-19 and the anguished management of a global pandemic. In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine knocked the pandemic off the front pages.

Stand back and you can see a pattern: Canada's post-Cold War foreign policy has lurched from issue to issue without a clear **grand strategic aim**. Complicating the matter is the changing structural context of world politics. Since the end of World War II, Canada's foreign policy was conducted within the scope of the U.S.-led **liberal international order** — the system of interlocking institutions and norms that bound the "West" together. After going global in the 1990s, that order began to contract in the 2010s and is facing direct challenges in the 2020s.

Now Canadians must confront harsh realities about the country's place in the world. Chief among them is that Canada cannot pursue the expansive foreign policy it once sought. More to the point, Canada's economic and security fate **lies in North America** and its foreign policy should be prioritized accordingly.

This does not mean jettisoning Europe or the liberal international order, particularly when they are all threatened by Russia's war of conquest in Ukraine. Rather, it means establishing priorities focused first on the U.S., then Europe, then the international order. Sometimes the three will align; but when they do not, a clear hierarchy of

interests must prevail so the country can match its limited means with plausible goals.

## Canada's Declining Profile... and Increasing Lack of Direction

The reality is that Canada is not particularly important in the grand scheme of things. This upsets many of the public myths about Canada's role as a "good global citizen." Though it was present at the creation of NATO, the United Nations, the idea of foreign aid, peacekeeping and the International Criminal Court (among other things), the country's influence has **waned** considerably over the **decades**. The cold truth is that Canada is vulnerable in a world of great and emerging great powers, most of whom don't give Canada much thought at all — and when they do, find a country whose words do not always match its actions.

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For years, if not generations, Canada's leaders swaddled the country's foreign policy in generalities about the liberal international order and **feelgood myths** about **peacekeeping**, **middle-powerdom**, **foreign aid**, and "**punching above our weight**." Platitudes will no longer cut it. The global security environment is changing quickly, and Canada's role has been shrinking.



Consider three recent events.

The first occurred in October 2023 during the first month of the Israel-Hamas war. With little ability to contribute by way of regional diplomacy, Canada's Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly spent her time hustling around the Middle East arranging flights and busses out of the danger zone for Canadian citizens. This is hardly a heavyweight move in world politics. It is foreign policy as travel agency.

The second is the rupture in the relationship with India. In September 2023, Prime Minister Trudeau rose in the House of Commons to accuse India of assassinating a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil. The incident involved the murder of a Sikh independence activist in Surrey, BC, a man whom India regards as a terrorist. The [modest support](#) Canada received from its closest allies prompted foreign policy watchers to [observe](#) that "Canada is alone in the world."

The third is the handwringing over Canada's exclusion from AUKUS — an Indo-Pacific security agreement struck in September 2021. Its partners — Australia, the UK and the U.S.— formed the group to foster cooperation on emerging defence technologies. Not only was Canada [left out](#) but officials in Ottawa were [unaware](#) that negotiations were in progress.

The three foreign-policy issues have one thing in common, namely that Canada was excluded, marginal, or left twisting in the wind.

Perhaps "alone" is a step too far. After all, Canada is a full participant in the United Nations, NATO and other organizations that constitute the liberal international order. And on the principal transatlantic security issue — Russia's invasion of Ukraine — Canada is part of a multinational effort to [supply](#) Ukraine with the wherewithal to defend

itself. What comes after the war, and what Canada will contribute remains to be seen. For now, though, the unevenness of Canada's relevance and its capacity to act is striking.

Compare this to the war in Afghanistan, where Canada visibly made outsized contributions to the [NATO effort](#). But this was more the outcome of Ottawa's (eventual) [willingness](#) to accept risky missions and higher casualties than efficacious defence spending. It was also done out of an abiding need to be seen performing well alongside key allies. In any event, Kandahar now seems like a lifetime ago.

The end of Canada's Afghanistan war in 2014 removed what had been Canada's primary international project for thirteen years. Two years later, Donald Trump filled the gap and forced Canada to refocus on its most important relationship. The change since Trump left the White House has been remarkable. The clarity of purpose raised by his threat to Canada's economic security and its core international partners has been supplanted an inability to prioritize.

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Upholding the "rules-based international order" remains the Trudeau government's stated foreign policy but it is unclear if that goal is plausible, what exactly it entails or if Canada has the means



to achieve it. Nor has the government given much clear direction on its hierarchy of goals. Elected leaders need to think clearly about what Canada's goals are in the world and what can be reasonably accomplished with limited means.

## Four Orientations in Canada's Foreign Policy

In a [speech](#) to the Economic Club of Toronto in October 2023, Joly took the audience on rhetorical world tour. She asked the audience to imagine Canada's place on the world map, then she wheeled through the four cardinal directions, detailing Canada's interests and activities. Her account of the facts was fine. The problem for Canada is priorities.

In one sense, it is a good problem to have. [Core national interests](#) of security, autonomy, and prosperity have been stable throughout the country's history. Indeed, security and prosperity have always been secured by the advantages of geography and the hegemon of the day. Establishing purpose and priorities beyond that is the hard part. [To what](#) Canada's international engagement is oriented answers the question "what are Canada's foreign policy priorities?"

There are four basic orientations that guide Canada's global engagement.

The first is internationalism, an approach to world politics that is committed to global organizations charged with maintaining peace. How internationalism is practiced varies depending on the country, but there are common elements such as commitments to multilateralism and international institutions. In more practical terms, internationalism means working through organizations like the UN, the International Monetary Fund, as well as through mechanisms like the Paris Climate Agreement and the G20.

Though different prime ministers have shown variable enthusiasm, internationalism has been the guiding principle of Canada's foreign policy for nearly eighty years. Most recently, the country's commitment to internationalism was reaffirmed by then-Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland in 2017 at the outset of Trump's presidency. His "America First" agenda prompted her to make a clear [statement](#) in the House of Commons defending the prevailing order and declare the Liberal government's intention to stay the course. That speech was the clearest statement of Canada's strategic goals in over a decade.

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The second orientation is the transatlantic community, manifest most obviously in NATO. Institutionalized cooperation, including participating in security operations, offers Canada and other European states a valuable mechanism for acting collectively in the defence of the West.

Canada's most prominent military missions have been undertaken under the NATO flag in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya, while its ongoing support to Ukraine is undertaken in coordination with NATO partners. Within the transatlantic community, bilateral relationships with Britain and France have outsized influence on Canada's foreign policy. Indeed, one of the [main factors](#)



that determine whether Canada goes to war is the participation or non-participation of those two countries. Thus, NATO and the wider transatlantic community is an influential orientation point in Canada's foreign policy, sometimes even more so than internationalism.

A third, narrower understanding of Canada's foreign policy is entirely U.S.-centric. Continentalism is an orientation that understands the North American space to be the main site of Canadian political, economic, social, and cultural life. Accordingly, Canadian leaders regard the relationship with Washington as by far the most important in the world, a sentiment that is obviously not reciprocated. This leaves Canada the junior partner in North America.

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Indeed, the Canada-U.S. partnership is a complex bargain. Canada enjoys the security benefits of U.S. hegemony and access to its markets, but must also guard against intrusions on its own [autonomy](#) in many domestic policy areas. "[Sleeping with an elephant](#)" also leaves Canada's economy vulnerable to American political trends, like border closures after 9/11 and during Covid-19, or during periodic bouts of U.S. protectionism. Perhaps more telling of America's enormous importance to Canada was the "Team Canada" approach to the 2018 NAFTA renegotiations. It was remarkable

how little partisan bickering there was in Canada over the proceedings. Indeed, the matter was so serious that parties and other interests across the country aligned in support of the government's negotiations.

Domestic politics adds to the complexity. This fourth orientation denotes a range of factors including, among other things, diasporic activism. Indeed, diasporic activism in a pluralistic immigrant society is an essential part of Canada's political life. However, this implicates electoral politics in foreign policy.

In multicultural Canada, there are significant diasporic communities many of which are concentrated in electorally significant parts of the country. For example, Sikhs in BC, Ukrainians on the Prairies, and Jews in Montreal and Toronto often advocate on behalf of their respective kin states (or in the case of Sikhs, their potential independence from India). Thus, domestic audiences — and electoral implications — become an orientation point for leaders in the making of foreign policy. Even if a government resists the influence of diasporic interest groups, it cannot escape the appearance of a "[vote bank compulsion](#)" in foreign policy.

These four orientations are not mutually exclusive and sometimes, when the points align, it is much easier for governments to pursue certain foreign policy objectives. This was the case with Afghanistan in 2001 and Ukraine in 2022. But it is not always so; for example, in the run-up to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq or the 2023 Israel-Hamas war. In these latter cases, it is much more difficult for a government to take clear or consequential positions.

Herein lies the problem: these different orientations are all valid guides to foreign policy, but what is the order of importance? With multiple orientation points, Canada's overarching strategic



purpose is not clear. When everything is a priority, nothing is.

## Setting Priorities

Despite all the gesturing to internationalism, Minister Joly's speech might have said more than she let on; her tour around the cardinal points began with south. Whether or not this was intentional is not clear, but it was undoubtedly instructive. In the twenty-first century, Canada's security and economic fate is tied to the U.S. while Canadians' [self-conception](#) is still [internationalist](#). Fashionable or not, it is time to accept the reality that Washington should be Canada's principal orientation and maintaining healthy relations with the U.S. ought to be the point of Canada's foreign policy. Europe must come second and liberal internationalism third.

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Being secondary does not mean being unimportant. Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens all three external orientations in Canada's foreign policy. Therefore, Canada ought to provide material support to Ukraine until the war ends, whatever the outcome. Indeed, Canada should remain commit-

ted to the peace and stability of Europe. After all, Canada needs access to the European markets and NATO as a deterrent. Since Canada has [no plans](#) to meet NATO defence spending targets, it should commit what defence resources it can to the "front lines" of the continental and transatlantic realm — the Arctic and Eastern Europe.

However, what Canada should not do is just as important. This includes peacekeeping missions in areas that are outside of Canada's priority area — such as Mali where CAF members were deployed in 2018-2019, or Haiti where the government demurred. A reorientation of this sort would represent a considerable shift away from the post-Cold War foreign policy where Canada attempted to project its influence far and wide. Today, Canada's foreign policy leaders and Canadians more generally need to make a few concessions to reality. Canada may have global [interests](#) but not the means to pursue them. The time is now to set priorities in ways that policymakers have not done in the past.

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# The Green and Northern Stars: Opportunities for Reorienting Canadian Commitments within NATO

ALEXANDER LANDRY



Former Senator Raoul Dandurand is often famously quoted in international relations circles for likening Canada to a “[fireproof house](#), far from inflammable materials”. Delivering this speech in 1924, he spoke to the insulation provided by the nation’s geography and history from a world of conflict. Traditionally, this has allowed Canada to play a more selective role in its contributions to the international community, mostly in helping define the liberal order based on rules-based governance and establishment of multilateral institutions within the international framework. This conception of Canadian strategy has particular relevance for the country’s commitment to NATO over the past seven decades, as the Alliance has represented a [diplomatic bargain](#) of sorts: At the modest cost of selective contributions, NATO allows its smaller members to remain well informed about global developments, contingency planning, and the opportunity to inject opinions in time to influence great power politics.

*The return of hard power within the sphere of international relations, attributed by many to the failure of liberalism and the liberal order since the end of the Cold War, has altered the global security architecture. Notably, these changes are some that Canada is likely unprepared for.*

Yet today the bargain has changed. With conflict raging once more both in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the [return of hard power](#) within the sphere of international relations, attributed by many to the failure of liberalism and the [liberal or-](#)

[der](#) since the end of the Cold War, has altered the global security architecture. Notably, these changes are some that Canada is likely [unprepared for](#), as its national security approach has failed to keep pace with the challenges that now face us. In light of these developments, Canada should consider reorienting its NATO commitments in a fashion that aligns more evidently with the country’s natural interests, privileging the realms of climate and Arctic security.

### **Canada’s NATO Commitments in a Changing World: Changing Priorities?**

Questions surrounding Canadian contributions to NATO are not new. In fact, [extensive research](#) is published annually speaking to Canada’s role within the Alliance, mostly pertaining to the pledge of spending 2% of GDP on NATO defence and security commitments. However, debates on Canadian merit within the Alliance have resurfaced since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with more than half of Canadians recognizing as of today that [Canada’s military is lagging behind](#) in its contributions, further underlined by a sense that [Canada’s international reputation is severely in decline](#). One of the key issues remains the fact that a prolonged period of destitution has arguably left the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) with little ability to contribute more, even if it were to be [provided further funding](#). Subsequent announcements of [budget cuts of up to \\$1B](#) have certainly not helped the case.

On the security front, Canada’s key contribution to NATO at present remains its provisions as a framework nation to the enhanced forward presence (eFP) battle group in Latvia. This is part of the Forward Land Forces (FLF) initiative on NATO’s eastern flank within the overall deterrence posture against Russian aggression. As announced





at the 2022 Madrid Summit, the FLF posture has recently begun to grow in scope as NATO seeks to expand its presence from battle group to brigade level, a significant undertaking in terms of troop and assets contributions. This is notably occurring as NATO seeks to close the deterrence gap with Russia through “deterrence-by-denial” in preventing the temptation to seize land by force. Accordingly, Canada’s contribution along with the other framework nation allies within the FLF is quite important as part of this effort.

Yet although Canada has [published a roadmap](#) for this upscale, [concerns remain rampant](#) regarding the ability to execute such a feat effectively while concurrently balancing other security commitments, as mentioned by the Chief of Defence Staff himself [earlier this year](#). Worth noting here again is that this issue is not a new one, with Canadian commitments in Germany throughout the Cold War being questioned on the [notion](#) that “there have always been too many missions and not enough forces or resources to perform them all effectively.”

[Canadian contributions of troops in Europe](#) have been debated at length. Certainly, such contributions have always been tied to the political overtones and the symbolism of the presence rather than the strategic calculus of the resources, even during the Cold War. Nonetheless, the question is not if there is value in maintaining the eFP as a framework nation for NATO, but rather if Ottawa can continue to contribute effectively to the growing FLF initiatives while concurrently supporting Ukrainian armament, contributing to continental defence, and dealing with the security implications of other issues such as climate change moving forward. In other words, in an age of growing complexity and mounting security challenges, are there policy files and specific actions that should be prioritized by Ottawa and the CAF moving for-

ward?

## Climate Security

One such issue in this regard is climate change, to include the growing reorientation towards climate security and its considerations from a NATO perspective. At the Madrid Summit Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recognized once more climate change as “[the defining challenge of our time](#),” committing NATO to being at the forefront of understanding and mitigating the effects of climate change within the security framework. Considerations include the likes of forced migration, food security and extreme weather events plaguing the member and partner nations of the Alliance, all of which exacerbate existing security tensions and further impact nations’ ability to operate effectively in impacted areas.

Canada is no stranger to the effects of climate change, as the recurring domestic disaster responses resulting from climate change-induced weather events have [put a strain on already struggling defence forces](#) that sees the CAF tapped more or less as the default option for emergency response as of late. A strengthened focus on climate security provides an opportunity for Canada to assume a leadership role on a key topic of interest for NATO that neatly aligns with broader Canadian priorities.

Canada is well positioned to seize this opportunity, mostly considering its previous linkages within the climate security and environmental protection communities of interest. Since its own “[Canadian approach](#)” commitment to the 2015 Paris Agreement, Ottawa has sought to be at the forefront not only of climate change considerations, but also of their impact on the security framework within the Alliance. Accordingly, the CAF currently staffs the position of the Allied Command Operations



Environmental Protection Officer — notably the training authority for all environmental protection and climate-related training material within the NATO command structure. Further, Canada is one of the more involved nations within the NATO Environmental Protection Working Group, and has just recently moved forward with the founding of the NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (CCASCOE), [having signed the founding document](#) with eleven other nations at the recent Vilnius Summit.

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In considering the approach for [NATO's Climate Security Agenda](#), the Alliance offers a Climate Change and Security Action Plan that delineates lines of effort such as reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and energy transition. [Recent substantive results](#) have included the Compendium of Best Practices, the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Mapping and Analytical Methodology, and the newly announced [NATO Energy Transition by Design](#). Markedly, Canada has been involved with all of these efforts through various departments

within the public service including the Department of National Defence and Natural Resources Canada.

In assuming a leadership role on these initiatives, Ottawa can position itself to further postulate a message that is both compelling and relevant when it comes to climate change, specific to items such as prioritization, political will, and ensuring limited effect of any changes on military effectiveness. Overall, by seizing such a leadership opportunity, Canada would not only allow itself to rebalance its commitments in alignment with its climate change priorities; it also allows it to make a unique contribution to a less visible but nonetheless crucial area of NATO engagement, considering the place that Ukraine has occupied in the headlines for the past two years.

## **Arctic Security and Continental Defence**

The other key opportunity for Canadian policy re-orientation within NATO remains tied to a growing region of concern for the Alliance: the Arctic.

Arctic security has occupied a position of importance within the Canadian security paradigm since the [formation of the North American Air Defense Command](#) (NORAD) to deter against the threat of Soviet bombers. Evidently, Arctic security remains a priority for Canada considering the region's growing importance tied to free ice passage and Russian second-strike capabilities, yet it is arguably one of the least addressed regions within an alliance focused now on Eastern Europe.

China and Russia — defined by NATO as a challenge and a threat, respectively, as per the most recent [Strategic Concept](#) — have already demonstrated heightened ambitions in the Arctic, with challenges apparent from Russia in the near term and China in the medium-to-long term. Further



adding complexity is the fact that, although both are bolstering their Arctic capabilities, they pose different challenges in the region due to their respective interests. Whereas the Arctic remains central to Moscow's security interests given its key second-strike nuclear assets on the Kola Peninsula and new Arctic Command, Beijing's Arctic interests are mostly predicated on economic considerations. These include investments of billions of dollars into [energy, infrastructure, and research projects](#) in the High North, as well as plans for the procurement of the world's largest icebreaker vessel. Consequently, this precludes the ability to infer any uniformity in terms of the future behaviour of potential adversaries in the Arctic.

As with climate change, Canada has an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone in its security commitments when it comes to the Arctic. Renewed focus on continental defence symbiotically aligns with the requirements of [NORAD modernization and strengthening Canadian security and sovereignty](#). Through NATO, this can be done both militarily and through industry.

The former method can be pursued through participation in the Joint Force Command Norfolk expansion, currently taking place since the headquarters declared [initial operating capability in 2020](#). By reorienting staff provisions to Joint Force Command Norfolk, Ottawa has a rare opportunity to employ Canadian officers on North American soil for direct NATO purposes, almost in a bolstering the backyard mentality outside of the traditional European security architecture NATO generally addresses.

On the industry side, Canada has already committed to hosting the regional office for the NATO Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) in Halifax. Accordingly, as two of DIANA's [current priority challenges](#) are energy resilience and sensing & surveillance, there exists

further opportunity to align research efforts with early-warning NORAD developments, as well as tie in with considerations for climate and energy security as mentioned above. This includes through the NATO Energy Transition by Design efforts, which offers another leadership opportunity for Ottawa in corraling several entities within the same line of effort.

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However, to commit efforts to these initiatives in North America, there is a requirement to reorient resources accordingly from somewhere else. This may necessitate a reduced Canadian presence in Europe to address the emerging opportunities in other areas of Alliance activity.

## Conclusion

NATO provides Canada a venue to exert itself within the international community despite its isolated geography. Reciprocally, Canada has clearly contributed to NATO's framework over the past seven decades as one of its founding members — namely through its selective contributions and in supporting key operations when it has been previously called upon.



Nonetheless, questions remain concerning the efficacy of current Canadian contributions based on resourcing. It would be mutually beneficial for both Canada and NATO if Ottawa were to reorient its commitments and unique capabilities towards climate and Arctic security. These remain important areas that NATO seeks to address as part of its [2022 Strategic Concept](#), but currently does not do so fully, considering its engagement in the FLF initiative and the fallout thus far from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In considering initiatives such as the NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan, Energy Transition by Design, and the Joint Force Command Norfolk uplift, Canada can reorient its NATO commitments in line with its national priorities while simultaneously furthering less-addressed yet important areas for the Alliance.

*It would be mutually beneficial for both Canada and NATO if Ottawa were to reorient its commitments and unique capabilities towards climate and Arctic security. These remain important areas that NATO seeks to address.*

There is certainly some truth to Dandurand's century-old words considering Canada's distance from what seems to be an increasingly dangerous array of regions. Yet in modern times of power politics, it is worth remembering that fires do still happen in strange places, as climate change shows in [knowing no borders](#). As such, Canada cannot avoid the need to fireproof. The way to do so lies in a re-evaluation and reorientation of its foreign and security policies.

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# NATO is Not Needed in the North American Arctic

ANDREA CHARRON  
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By virtue of its location, the Arctic is an avenue of approach to North America, Europe and Russia. The Arctic, therefore, has always been strategically important. And yet strategic attention from NATO — and Canada especially — has waxed and waned.

A new, emerging world order of strategic competition in which formerly agreed rules of international behaviour are flouted, together with the desire for great powers to “command the commons”, particularly to exploit natural resources, have placed the Arctic back on NATO’s agenda. Because Russia is the most consequential Arctic state, its egregious and unprovoked attacks on Ukraine mean that the Arctic’s “exceptional peace” (i.e., cooperative activities among the Arctic, non-Arctic states and indigenous representatives on the [Arctic Council](#)) has been ruptured.

*The best way for Canada to protect its Arctic from military threats is to ensure the investments in the North American Aerospace Defence Command modernization are made irrespective of the pressure that Canada faces to contribute resources in other regions.*

Many [conclude](#) that the Arctic needs more NATO, and, as a NATO ally, Canada needs to shift its attention in the Arctic toward contributions to NATO, including in the North American Arctic. However, we argue that the best way for Canada to protect its Arctic from military threats is to ensure

the investments in the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) modernization are made irrespective of the pressure that Canada faces to contribute resources in other regions. Such insulation would represent a statement of strategic intent on the part of the Government of Canada and is [demanded by the U.S. government](#).

## **NATO’s Growing Arctic Profile**

NATO has increased attention to the Arctic of late. First, NATO has held two of its biggest exercises ever in the Arctic in 2018 (Trident Juncture with 51,000 personnel) and 2022 (Cold Response with 35,000 personnel), both organized by Norway and conducted in and near Norway. Next, NATO adopted a new Strategy in 2022 that references the “High North” (NATO speak for the European Arctic) [for the first time](#). It is important to recall that it was Canada that rejected a reference to the Arctic at the Kehl/Strasbourg NATO summit in 2014. Moreover, NATO has a new Joint Force Command based in Norfolk twinned to the U.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet with a mandate to surveil the North Atlantic and Arctic maritime approaches.

There is a long tradition in Canadian defence policies for successive governments, both Conservative and Liberal, to justify [Canadian contributions](#) to CANUS North American defence agreements as a NATO commitment. Indeed, Prime Minister Diefenbaker invoked the contribution to NATO as the reason for Canada to sign the binational agreement creating the [North American Air Defence Command](#) in 1958, and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau rationalized the Canada-United States’ Cruise Missile Testing Agreement in 1983 as a NATO commitment.

From the creation of NATO in 1949, however, North American defence agreements have always been operationally and practically within the sole



purview of Canada and the United States. As well, European NATO allies have shown little, if any, interest in North American defence until recently. After all, the United States was the world's military hegemon and was assumed to be providing its own homeland defence and ensuring continental defence. From either side of the Atlantic, NATO has been about European defence, notwithstanding the ultimately disastrous campaign in Afghanistan.

Two changes have occurred of late, however, that have turned NATO's attention to the Arctic, and both are direct results of Russian aggression elsewhere in the world, especially in its near abroad. First, NATO has recognized the Arctic as an avenue of approach to Europe and to North America. Russia's military presence and capability in the Arctic and its new missile technology that can threaten both North American and Europe requires attention to the Arctic. As such, the Arctic has emerged as the most direct route to threaten North America and Europe.

Second, with the accession of Finland, and soon Sweden, to the alliance, seven of the eight Arctic States will be NATO allies with only Russia outside the alliance. The NATO-Russia Council is all but moribund and, due to Western sanctions, official contact with Russian government officials has become decidedly complicated. This means that many of the Arctic fora, that include the eight Arctic states, can quickly resemble an Arctic-7 versus Russia.

### **NATO in the North American Arctic?**

For the alliance and certainly for national reasons, Canada directing its attention and defence investments to the Arctic appears reasonable and necessary. However, Canada's and the United States' primary focus is on the Arctic as avenue of attack

against North America, not NATO writ large.

*For the alliance and certainly for national reasons, Canada directing its attention and defence investments to the Arctic appears reasonable and necessary. However, Canada's and the United States' primary focus is on the Arctic as avenue of attack against North America, not NATO writ large.*

NORAD has always been focused on the North American Arctic's position relative to the Soviet Union/Russia. The Harper Government's Canada First Defence Strategy (2008) reignited a concerted Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) effort to orient toward the Arctic with the start of yearly Operation NANOOK in which individual NATO allies (such as Denmark and the United States) were invited to exercise in the Canadian Arctic. The Trudeau Liberal's 2017, Strong, Secure, Engaged, continued this trend but now Operation NANOOK takes place year-round in four tranches and NORAD's most important asset, the North Warning System, was earmarked for "renewal". This was followed by [significant investments](#) of \$38.6b over 20 years for NORAD Modernization, of which a significant portion is devoted to new Arctic and polar radar systems.

NATO Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg's visit](#) to Canada's Arctic August 24 — 26, 2022 (the first time a Secretary General has visited Canada's Arctic) served mainly as signalling, but the most



important for Canada was to highlight the government's attention to NORAD modernization. While Mr. Stoltenberg underlined the High North's strategic importance for Euro-Atlantic security, especially in the context of a rapidly warming climate and rising geostrategic competition, he visited some important NORAD sites such as Cambridge Bay to see an NWS radar and he visited 4 Wing at Cold Lake, Canada's busiest fighter base.

Stoltenberg's visit did not provoke or reflect a re-think of Canada's position on NATO in the Arctic nor Canada's Arctic posturing. It also does not signal that NATO's focus on the European Arctic will change. NATO remains focused on the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap, and the Arctic coasts of Norway, Finland, and Sweden (the High North). Rather, Stoltenberg's visit signals the importance of linking NORAD's Arctic efforts in North America to NATO efforts, including its large Arctic exercises off the coast of Norway, Norfolk Joint Force Command activities and the general solidarity of NATO allies to share information, and align strategic messaging, as well as capabilities and training opportunities.

*There is no indication that the United States wants more NATO in the North American Arctic other than certain Arctic-capable NATO allies to participate in their exercises.*

The United States has never ceded control of its security and defence to another country or combination of countries and is not likely to start now. There is no indication that the United States wants more NATO in the North American Arctic

other than certain Arctic-capable NATO allies to participate in their exercises. The United States relies on its 2<sup>nd</sup> Fleet, NORAD, USNORTHCOM, the U.S. Coast Guard's 17<sup>th</sup> District, and deterrence by punishment. In this respect, Canada and the United States are very much aligned: their focus is on integrating and coordinating efforts across [problematic U.S. combatant command seams and between NORAD and NATO](#) so that they are not stovepiped in their collective defence efforts. It is not time to put NATO in the North American Arctic; rather it is time for allies to work together.

To be sure, the investments in NORAD to protect the North American Arctic contribute to the defence of NATO as a whole, as [argued by Timothy Saylor](#). The last thing NATO needs is to come to the rescue of North America because it has undervalued continental defence given the very real pressure on NATO eastern flank. But great caution must be taken if arguing to increase the CAF's military footprint in Canada's Arctic or the need for NATO personnel in Canada's Arctic. The best way to defend Canada's Arctic and contribute to NATO is via NORAD modernization, investment in the Canadian Coast Guard, better coordination and sharing of domain awareness information, and exercising with the (soon to be) seven Arctic NATO states. Large, permanent bases in Canada's Arctic present more harm than help.

The NORAD modernization projects of most importance, therefore, are the Arctic and Polar Over-the-Horizon Radar Systems, upgrades to the Forward Operating Locations in the Arctic (Iqaluit, Inuvik and Yellowknife), and the Deployed Operating Base in Goose Bay, a space-based Constellation for enhanced surveillance and communication, and research and development in new technological solutions, including sensors for undersea surveillance. These assets will provide domain awareness that can be shared with NATO





allies, fulfill Canada's obligations to NORAD and mitigate pressure on the very limited infrastructure in the Arctic. With too few houses, old and limited septic systems, polluting power supplies, inadequate communication infrastructure and few essential services (like hospitals, social workers and schools that support military families), a large permanent military base in the Arctic will only deprive local communities.

## Canada's Arctic Defence Needs

The solution, therefore, is not more of Canada in NATO's high North or NATO in Canada's Arctic, but [more attention to continental defence](#). First, the Canadian government, via the Northern Policy Framework (ANPF) (2019) and NORAD modernization, is already committed to an enhanced military presence in the Arctic that is "persistent" (not permanent) with an ambitious, if not unrealistic, timeline for operational completion. While the ANPF was first to encourage a whole of government effort and discuss the potential multi-purposeness of future Arctic infrastructure, it is NORAD modernization that sees significant funds committed and concerted government consideration of civilian infrastructure needs in Canada's Arctic.

The idea for a permanent military base, whether for an enhanced Army and/or Navy presence in the Arctic, is problematic. In terms of an Army base, two already exist. The first is the base at Yellowknife, the home of Joint Task Force North, with detachments in Iqaluit and Whitehorse. The second is the CAF's Arctic Training Facility in Resolute Bay co-located with Natural Resources Canada's Polar Continental Shelf program. And of course, there is the very important presence of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Ranger Patrol Group. Expanding the Joint Task Force North or the training centre would be extremely costly and a strain on Can-

adian Army capabilities, especially given the commitment to the NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia with a planned increase from 800 to 2,100 troops. Furthermore, a larger permanent Army presence in the Arctic with southern soldiers poses potentially major implications for Army recruitment and retention, especially in terms of pressure on military families posted to the Arctic.

*It is NORAD modernization that sees significant funds committed and concerted government consideration of civilian infrastructure needs in Canada's Arctic.*

More importantly, there is no ground-based military threat for Canada that would necessitate a major, permanent Army presence, especially in mid-winter. Their purpose would be to assist with the logistical challenges that are Arctic exercises, providing support as necessary to territorial governments and to other government departments. The CAF has primary responsibility for aeronautical search and rescue, while the Canadian Coast Guard is responsible for maritime search and rescue. Land-based searches are conducted by police, local communities, and Parks Canada (in the national parks), although territorial and provincial governments can request CAF assistance. Moreover, whether at Yellowknife, Resolute, or some other Arctic location, such a base would place an immense burden on persistently strained local resources and infrastructure. Many local Arctic communities face, for example, a housing, drinking and grey water/sewer crises.

As for the Royal Canadian Navy's presence in the



Arctic, the Harper government commissioned a refueling station at Nanisivik (still not operational and not appropriate for winter use), designed to support the new Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships with first-year ice capability. Canada's Northwest Passage (claimed by the Government as historic, internal waters) has seen an increase in activity but not enough to require military support given unpredictable ice conditions, lack of navigational aids and the need for more bathymetric mapping of the seabed. The Northwest Passage is only navigable in the summer even to Canadian Patrol Frigates and future Combat Vessels, as well as allied ships.

By contrast, a permanent, year-round naval base at Nanisivik or Churchill, Manitoba, the only existing deep-water port in the Arctic, would also be problematic on several grounds and more likely to be needed for the Canadian Coast Guard, Transport Canada, RCMP, Ice Services and CBSA.

Churchill would certainly shorten travel times for the RCN, currently embarking from Halifax, but even so the distance is significant. In addition, although Churchill possesses other useful assets — for example, a long runway (operated by Transport Canada), an old rocket testing facility and a new University of Manitoba Churchill Marine Observatory — providing support and supplies to the town with no road connection would be via air or the rail line that is vulnerable to melting permafrost. Such upgrades would require additional federal and provincial funding, and both rail and port upgrades are a Transport Canada responsibility.

Finally, like the Army, a permanent year-round naval base in the Arctic is not required. There is no major naval threat to the Canadian Arctic and no real naval role, especially during the winter. Certainly, the AOPS are valuable to reinforce Canada's

presence, undertake surveillance and assist other government departments, especially the Canadian Coast Guard. The real naval threat is the potential use of the Arctic Ocean by submarines capable of launching missiles against North America. In that regard, the Department of National Defence (DND), through Defence and Research Development Canada has been experimenting with underwater sensors to track submarine movements.

Certainly, DND's Arctic investments as part of NORAD modernization will have a positive impact on the local communities, including the government's mandatory requirement that federal departments and agencies "[ensure a minimum 5% of the total value of contracts \[be\] held by Indigenous businesses](#)". The result, if properly coordinated with other government funding for infrastructure, could improve living standards in the Arctic, but this is not the focus of NORAD modernization nor within DND/CAF's purview to promise. For example, the planned space-based communications component of modernization could assist the local communities with improved communication, assuming a low (civilian) and high (secret) side to the infrastructure can be created.

## Conclusion

Increasing defence investment in the Arctic beyond what is planned for NORAD modernization is simply unrealistic. As for the NATO side of the equation, the alliance's attention to the Arctic is not the North American part. For Canada's European allies, the Arctic remains primarily limited to the approaches to the North Atlantic, especially the GIUK gap rather than the Canadian Arctic. As [we argue in our book](#) on NORAD, Denmark, as a function of its responsibility for the defence of Greenland, and Iceland are countries to watch for future partnering with the United States given their proximity to USNORTHCOM's area of



responsibility.

*for Defence and Security Studies at the University of  
Manitoba.*

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Depending upon the future of the alliance's relationship with Russia, Canada may face pressure to expand its forward military presence in Eastern Europe. This is likely to be the best predictor for an increase in defence spending. The danger, however, is that calls for more Canadian assistance in Eastern Europe will not come with an increase in spending, but a re-allocation of investments away from continental and North American Arctic defence.

In the end, the NATO 2% of GDP commitment does not differentiate between investments directly relevant to NATO's front line in Europe and other defence commitments or requirements. Canada can continue its tradition of legitimizing North American, national and Arctic defence commitments as part of its NATO commitment, but this will not get Canada to 2%, nor will it significantly change the operational reality of North American defence.

## **About the Author**

*Dr. Andrea Charron is the Director, and Dr. James Fergusson a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre*

A photograph of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Zelenskyy is on the left, wearing a dark green military-style shirt, looking towards Trudeau. Trudeau is on the right, wearing a grey suit and tie, looking back at Zelenskyy. They are standing in front of a row of flags, including the Ukrainian tricolor and the Canadian flag. The background is a light-colored wall with a blue curtain on the right.

# **The Russia-Ukraine Endgame and Europe's Post-War Security Architecture**

**ANDREW RASIULIS**



How will the Russo-Ukrainian war end?

As of late 2023, the war has dragged on as a strategically stalemated war of attrition, with February 2024 set to mark the two-year point of the war. To gauge its aftermath, it is necessary to examine the strategic objectives of both Ukraine and Russia to postulate the most probable outcome.

In undertaking such forecasting, Canadians should consider the likely shape of the post-war European security architecture, as well as the role that Canada should play within that architecture.

## The Endgame

Ukraine's military objective and only acceptable war outcome remains the expulsion of all Russian forces from its 1991 territory, including Crimea. To that end Ukraine launched in June 2023 a strategic level offensive to drive a wedge through the formidable Russian layered defence lines and push toward the Sea of Azov to break the Russian land bridge to Crimea. However, apart from tactical-level breakthroughs, Ukraine was unable to achieve this objective, although operations continue.

Ukraine is now faced with a possible stalemate and will continue to depend on Western material support in terms of equipment, munitions and financial assistance to bolster its army. U.S. support remains the keystone as without such support Ukraine would be unable to sustain its war efforts. Yet divisions in the House of Representatives, waning support among voters and the distraction from the Middle East and the migration problem at the southern border raise doubt about the sustainability of U.S. funding for Ukraine in 2024.

Nevertheless, assuming some measure of U.S. assistance continues to supply Ukraine with critic-

al amounts of ammunition and equipment, no amount of combined U.S. and Western support will assist Ukraine in meeting its most pressing demand in a war of attrition: namely the people power component of the military equation. Specifically, Ukraine needs soldiers to man the equipment and to conduct ongoing military operations.

With the war of attrition rolling into its second year, the significant Ukrainian people power losses by its armed forces will have a critical impact on Ukraine's capacity to conduct military operations. New technology and additional Western armaments such as F16 fighter jets are unlikely to alter the balance especially considering Russia's demonstrated potential to counter these effects. Therefore, while Ukraine may attempt to sustain some form of strategic defence, eventually it may be required to accept a ceasefire due to its inability to sustain offensive — or even or defensive — operations.

Russia's war goals may be classified as either minimalist or maximalist. The minimalist goal is to fully absorb the four oblasts of eastern and southern Ukraine that the Russian Duma formally incorporated into the Russian Federation in 2022: Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia, while retaining Crimea as well. Depending on the development of the war in 2024 and Russia's ability to sustain military operations, it may eventually return to its initial maximalist goal of regime change in Ukraine.

The maximalist goal includes conquering Ukrainian territory further along the Black Sea coast to at least Odessa, and possibly to Transnistria, linking up with Russian forces in that region of eastern Moldova. Such a scenario would leave Ukraine as a landlocked rump state. The present relative balance of forces between Russia and Ukraine makes this seem unlikely but could come into play if



Ukrainian forces suffer disproportionate levels of attrition and exhaustion.

That said, the diminishing people power pool available for military operations, particularly for Ukraine, suggests a probable outcome of a military stalemate in 2024. The strategic line along a 1,000-kilometre front has not shifted meaningfully since December 2022, suggesting more of the same in 2024. The Russians remain entrenched in strong defensive positions and demonstrate the capability to defend against a Ukrainian strategic breakthrough. Thus far, the variety of Western technology and equipment such as tanks, artillery and air defence systems have not been the “silver bullet” for Ukraine. The Russians have managed to adapt to increased levels of Western technological support Ukraine with their own countermeasures. This is likely to continue into 2024, including Russian ability to counter the expected presence of Ukrainian F16 fighter jets.

Therefore, a ceasefire determined by the point where the armies of either side become exhausted seems to be the most plausible outcome of the war. What may be politically unacceptable today by both Ukraine and Russia may become altered by military reality on the ground as time passes. How the conflict will freeze may be defined by military reality rather than political agreement.

## **The Post-War Architecture**

The post-war environment between Ukraine and Russia will be a hard peace. The military ceasefire will likely be broken episodically by exchanges of fire across the frozen frontlines. Nevertheless, both the bilateral and international post-war construct will aim for a form of armed coexistence. Initial steps will need to be taken to stabilize the military situation between Ukraine and Russia. This will involve bilateral actions between Ukraine and

Russia to agree to an exchange of prisoners of war, to regulate checkpoints along the frozen frontlines, and to coordinate demining to facilitate humanitarian corridors through them.

*Ukraine will perhaps obtain select bilateral security guarantees from the West to sustain an armed coexistence with Russia. This would be in lieu of the often-discussed NATO accession for Ukraine, on which there remains no consensus within the Alliance.*

In the broader context, Ukraine will perhaps obtain select bilateral security guarantees from the West to sustain an armed coexistence with Russia. This would be in lieu of the often-discussed NATO accession for Ukraine, on which there remains no consensus within the Alliance. Indeed, consensus for NATO accession amongst the Allied members may continue to be difficult to arrange even in the post-war context. More likely could be bilateral security guarantees of large powers such as the U.S., UK, France, Poland and possibly Germany. Russia may also be more willing to abide by such bilateral agreements, as any attempt to bring Ukraine into NATO — an outcome which Moscow sought to prevent in launching this war — seems unacceptable to Russia. The EU would likely figure largely in the post-war reconstruction schemes for Ukraine, but Kyiv’s ultimate accession to the EU would remain uncertain due to Ukraine’s lack of control over its own territory and its long history of reform inertia.

From a NATO perspective, the post-war security



environment would essentially take the form of a Cold War Redux with territorial defence as the core task, although with a more eastward border against a smaller adversary than the Soviet Union. This requires the Alliance to maintain a conventional force presence on eastern border strong enough to deny, and thus deter, Russian aggression or coercion. Much has already been accomplished in recent times to close NATO's deterrence gap vis-à-vis Russia, but some elements remain without clarification: permanent or rotating forces, the number of large-scale exercises conducted, and other forward-positioned military infrastructure. NATO's nuclear deterrent of course would underwrite this enhanced conventional defence.

In this context, NATO will continue a relationship with Ukraine focused on training, equipment support and diplomatic consultation. Ukraine would continue to receive Western support across the board, including reconstruction funding, but its status is likely to remain both outside of NATO and the EU for some time to come.

*The OSCE would need to be revitalized to play the important role it once had in the Cold War to manage armed coexistence through regional diplomacy. With the aim of negotiating a post-war security architecture... the OSCE should start with rebuilding the process of Confidence and Security Building Measures.*

With this backdrop in mind, the OSCE would need to be revitalized to play the important role it once had in the Cold War to manage armed coexistence through regional diplomacy. With the aim of negotiating a post-war security architecture within the OSCE space that would stabilize the peace beyond armed confrontation, the OSCE should start with rebuilding the process of Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs).

Prior to moving toward more formal documents, the tentative peace following a ceasefire would need to be secured through a process of ongoing dialogue. More formal confidence-building steps would follow the basic elements of establishing an atmosphere where peace replaces war. The initial post-war dialogue would need to address the basic elements of sustaining a ceasefire and gradually establishing a level of confidence that more formal agreements would enhance the fragile peace.

In due course, the various Vienna CSBM Documents that were negotiated at the end of the Cold War would need to be brought into line with the new security challenges. Force limitation agreements, such as the now-defunct CFE Treaty, would be addressed later in the process once a primary measure of military and diplomatic stability had been achieved. The essential challenge in the post-war security architecture would be to set out the diplomatic conditions in Europe that would dissuade further war between Ukraine and Russia and deter a potential NATO-Russia war with the attendant risk of global nuclear war.

To be sure, this would be a far greater challenge for the OSCE today than were the agreements reached following the Helsinki Accords in 1975. At that time the Cold War had entered a period of détente whereby there was a common spirit of achieving coexistence between the rival blocs of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The situation fol-



lowing a hard peace between Ukraine and Russia following several years of war would necessitate a longer-term effort towards a stabilized peace before moving on to attempts for more advanced collective security measures such as CSBMs and force posture limitations.

## **After a Ceasefire: Canada's Role in Europe**

Upon the war's end, Canada would be presented the opportunity to play an active role in both the NATO and OSCE contexts. Within NATO, Canada currently has the important responsibility of leading a Multinational Brigade based in Latvia, as part of NATO's new forward deployments. In the post-war context, this Brigade Group would continue to play a fundamental role in deterrence and defence of NATO territory. This role highlights Canada's profile within NATO internationally and is an important enabler to enhance Canadian diplomatic efforts in Europe. The fact that Canada would maintain committed ground forces in Europe would physically underline its commitment to the security of NATO's eastern border.

Finally, Canada's seat at the OSCE, coupled with its NATO commitment of deployed forces in Latvia, will open the door for traditional and pragmatic diplomacy to work much as it did in the Cold War to minimize the dangers of the Cold War Redux. Canadian efforts will continue along proven lines during Cold War 1.0 where Canada worked with the U.S. to flesh out the practicalities of confidence building measures. It was and remains a fact that great power dialogue occurs behind the scenes of international fora such as the OSCE. Such a dialogue in turn sets the stage for detailed negotiations based on agreed principles. Canada has the track record and potential for work in both these diplomatic dimensions.

*Canada's security interests will continue to be linked with those of Europe for the foreseeable future. Building a post-war security architecture following upon the most destructive war on the European continent since World War II is central to ensuring a secure and safe Canada.*

Notwithstanding how the Russo-Ukrainian war ends, Canada's security interests will continue to be linked with those of Europe for the foreseeable future. Building a post-war security architecture following upon the most destructive war on the European continent since World War II is central to ensuring a secure and safe Canada. In fact, ensuring stability in Europe will be a cornerstone for Canada's ability to focus on growing threats and challenges in the Arctic and Asia.

## **About the Author**

*Andrew Rasiulis is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and a retired public servant. His career at Canada's Department of National Defence spanned more than three decades.*



A group of men in suits are shaking hands in a line. The background is a large banner with the text 'ASEAN INDONESIA 2023' and the ASEAN logo. The men are smiling and appear to be in a formal setting.

ASEAN INDONESIA  
2023

# Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Sailing in Troubled Waters

BRIAN JOB



It has been a year since Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly announced Canada's [Indo-Pacific Strategy \(IPS\)](#), calling for a “generational Canadian response” in its repositioning towards Asia. Long overdue and much anticipated in light of ongoing regional tensions and domestic political controversy, the IPS gained national and international attention. The months following witnessed a flurry of prime ministerial and ministerial visits to Asian capitals and meetings, increased tempo and profile for Canadian naval operations, and the expectations raised by the IPS \$2.3 billion promised budget.

Not unexpectedly, the directions and feasibility of the IPS agenda have been scrutinized and critiqued, Ottawa's shift towards Asia [for some](#) having raised questions as to whether the IPS would draw attention and resources away from Canada's fundamental North American and Euro-Atlantic security priorities. However, any such concerns will likely be short-lived. With limited bandwidth at senior political and official levels, coupled with competition for fiscal and human resources, maintaining momentum for the IPS would have been challenging even under propitious circumstances.

*With Ottawa preoccupied with the crises of other regions, the Indo-Pacific is in danger of slipping to the backburner. This is reinforced by Ottawa's default stance of viewing Asia through a US and Euro-Atlantic lens.*

With Ottawa preoccupied with the crises of other regions, the Indo-Pacific is in danger of slipping

to the backburner. This is reinforced by Ottawa's default stance of viewing Asia through a U.S. and Euro-Atlantic lens — one that sees a world of confrontation of democracies vs authoritarians, strategic competition, and dependent on deterrence strategies. This lens, however, frustrates the goals and potential of the IPS, including Canada's pursuit of an independent and relevant regional role. The latter, in accord with key ASEAN states, Japan and South Korea is premised on multilateral engagement and dialogue, rather than exclusion, as captured by Minister Joly's recent call for [“pragmatic diplomacy”](#).

## **The Indo-Pacific Strategy: Agenda and Aspirations**

Compared to the majority of its partners, especially the United States, Canada came lately to transition from its previous “Asia Pacific” (emphasizing economic cooperation) to adopt an “Indo-Pacific” (emphasizing security) perspective. Representing a significant shift in both geographic scope and strategic mindset, advocates of the “Indo-Pacific” look to extend their horizon beyond East Asia and the Western Pacific to integrate the waters of the Indian Ocean and countries of South Asia, with India viewed as an emerging economic powerhouse and potential counterbalance to China.

The IPS presents a multidimensional agenda, pledging attention to advancement of Canadian values — human rights, humanitarian assistance, advancement of women, international law and protection of a rules-based international order. It addresses several goals: enhancement of economic growth through expanding trade and investment; restoration of Canada as an impactful contributor to peace, security, and regional stability; and promotion of a Canadian regional presence through people-to-people engagement and substantial investment in building infrastructure, sustainability



and a “green future”.

The IPS, as expected, looks to economic gains through attractive growth areas in Asian economies, targeting Southeast Asia and particularly India, and strengthening relations with Japan and South Korea. Building upon the multilateral Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is key, to be complemented by the negotiation of other free trade agreements and possible membership in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Trade and business promotion is facilitated through the profile appointment of a [Canadian Indo-Pacific Trade Representative](#), setting up of a Trade Gateway in Southeast Asia, organizing of Team Canada trade missions, and cross-ministerial attention to securing supply chain resilience.

However, the IPS also focuses substantially on peace and security, which comes in response to domestic and regional criticism that Canada has been an absent and diminishing contributor on these files. Ottawa therefore looks to reassert its presence as a regional player.

The IPS addresses security on two fronts. Overall, regional, security-based engagement is to be enhanced by augmenting the Canadian navy’s forward presence, increasing contributions to military capacity building and training, and devoting more resources to addressing cyber, AI, and space-based threats — these to be accomplished in cooperation with regional actors and regional institutions, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Five Eyes network.

Specifically, and independently, considerable attention is focused on China — this separate section of the IPS apparently a late appendage and in lieu of Ottawa’s producing a separate China strategy. Here the tone is quite different, indeed confrontational. China is [called out](#) as an “in-

creasingly disruptive state”, citing its disregard for norms and international law, coercive diplomacy, non-market trade practices, and aggressive actions and claims towards regional states.

*Canada is an outlier among its partners in not moving with incremental steps towards compartmentalizing and engaging with China — in contrast with Australia and the United States.*

Accordingly, the IPS sets out a catalogue of domestic, bilateral, regional and multilevel strategies to address potential Chinese actions. This is juxtaposed with the acknowledgement that “China’s size and influence make cooperation necessary”, pointing out the need for collaboration with Beijing on global issues including climate change, environmental degradation and pandemics. But, once stated, the IPS ignores China throughout the bulk of its agenda, referencing no specific policy steps to pursue collaboration with China on bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including through trade. Canada is an outlier among its partners in not moving with incremental steps towards compartmentalizing and engaging with China — in contrast with Australia and the United States.

In the immediate aftermath of the IPS announcement, the bulk of attention has been devoted to security matters, highlighted by deployment of an additional, third frigate to the region and the stepped-up participation of Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) vessels in bilateral and multilateral exercises. Strategic dialogues have been held with the U.S., India, South Korea and Australia, and the



relationship with ASEAN upgraded to Strategic Partnership. Canadian-Chinese encounters have occurred during Canadian navy transits through the [Taiwan Strait](#) and Chinese [harassment](#) of Canadian vessels and helicopters on patrol operations in the East China Sea.

## The IPS in Larger Context

The IPS needs to be viewed within the larger framework of Canada's efforts to define its role and interests in today's complex and international environment. With the centre of gravity of the global economy and strategic challenges shifting towards Asia, policies and principles advanced in the IPS have significant implications for Canada's relations beyond the Indo-Pacific. To appreciate the challenges and opportunities involved, Ottawa needs to reorient and expand its vision seen traditionally through a Euro-Atlantic lens. Accordingly, the IPS struggles with the traditional dilemmas that have prevailed in Canadian foreign policy, balancing confrontation and cooperation, and adopting alignment as a partner with allies in contrast to pursuing an independent role as a middle power promoting cooperative security.

*Regional states tend to see Canada as a policy follower of the United States and its deterrence-committed allies, in essence lacking an independent voice and regional strategy.*

The IPS has been characterized as “[sitt\[ing\] uneasily on \[these\] two pillars](#)”, one of which, in essence, advances a deterrence agenda aligned with the [United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), centered

on policies designed to constrain the rise of China, within the broader context of a values-based confrontation of democracies versus autocracies. Although not invited to the recently established minilateral associations of regional democracies, the Quad and AUKUS, Ottawa has said it is “[highly interested](#)” in joining the intelligence and technical sharing, non-nuclear components of the latter. Ottawa's reluctance to engage China is reinforced by antipathy towards its hostage diplomacy, coercive economic sanctions and alleged interference in Canadian domestic affairs. Minister Joly's omission of reference to China in her aforementioned foreign policy address is further confirmation of this attitude.

This hawkish stance places Canada out of synch with many Asian states, especially Southeast Asian states, who, while wary of China's intentions, cannot afford a break with their largest trading partner and increasingly dominant regional power. Instead, they look to hedging strategies to avoid taking firm positions with any single great power. They view security as advanced through dialogue, engagement rather than isolation, inclusion rather than exclusion, and consensus-building in multilateral institutions. [Critics](#) view Canada's alignment with U.S. Indo-Pacific policies as detrimental to its national interests and contrary to the overall effort of the IPS to establish a firmer regional footing. By positioning itself in this way, regional states tend to see Canada as a policy follower of the United States and its deterrence-committed allies, in essence lacking an independent voice and regional strategy.

That said, the IPS also seeks to advance security through cooperation — namely through the inclusion of relevant parties, dialogue, and consensus building in multilateral institutions. This view is prominently represented in the [ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific](#) and realized through practices



characterized as the ASEAN way. By acknowledging the centrality of ASEAN, the IPS commits to respecting its principles and to increasing and upgrading Canada's engagement in inclusive, multi-lateral regional fora. The IPS advocates programs addressing non-traditional concerns, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, increasing assistance for feminist programs, and promotion of good governance. Peace and security are enhanced by attention to increasing the wellbeing of Asian peoples. The IPS presents the challenge of sustaining a balance between the confrontational and cooperative, devising policies that see Canada as an effective ally, but at the same time articulating a distinctive, relevant regional role.

### **The IPS: Bandwidth and Sustainability**

With the above in mind, there remain questions concerning implementation and sustainability of the IPS.

Arguably, the most consequential and impactful results of the IPS will derive from its delivering on the promises of its people-to-people, development, environmental, humanitarian and governance agenda. One looks for these to be cemented as the priorities of the Canadian government over the five-year life of the IPS. Their implementation will face serious challenges, which must be addressed through careful, advance planning. Significant funding has been set aside, sufficient to launch, but in need of increase if programs are to be continued. Locating and mobilizing the required, expert human resources, and capable private and public actors in Canada and the region will be difficult. Programs will be spread across ministries and involve complex engagement with state and non-state actors. They will yield results over extended periods of time that will be difficult to measure.

The announcement of the IPS also provided no details of responsibility for their management and accountability, perhaps leaving these to the recently appointed [Special Envoy for the Indo-Pacific](#). If left to develop without clearly established oversight, the IPS runs the risk of diffusing its focus and becoming a target of recurring, incremental budget cutting. To be noted, the 5-year horizon of the IPS will be punctuated by a midstream federal election, raising the prospect of alteration — even abandonment — given the potentially different priorities of a new government.

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Provision of adequate programmatic funding remains a chronic problem for Canadian governments. The \$2.3b budget of the IPS, while possibly the single largest commitment to a foreign policy agenda, must be put into the context of competing demands for funding. Already the [RCN questions](#) its ability to fulfill its missions. Major defence procurement costs and NORAD and NATO security commitments loom. Canadian aid to Ukraine has [topped \\$9.5b to date](#) with more to follow; demands arising from the Middle East will burgeon. To prevent its budget being reduced and resources reallocated, it is critical that Asia and the Indo-Pacific not be allowed to slip to a backburner.

Ottawa's transient attention to the Asia-Pacific in past decades has created the problems that the IPS seeks to address. The IPS' sustainability is at issue



in terms of the difficulty of maintaining senior leadership attention at today's critical juncture. The concerns of Canadian citizens and Canadian diaspora communities preoccupy political leaders and overwhelm government capacities. Canada's [IPS has run aground with both India and China](#) — the two Asian major powers at its core, tensions recently having peaked over allegations of Indian government involvement in the killing of a Canadian citizen, a Sikh activist, in Vancouver. Relations with China remain in stasis.

The downturns in Ottawa's relations with Beijing and New Delhi reveal how the bandwidth of senior political figures and government officials is quickly exhausted in multiple crisis situations — this particularly so in Canada, operating understaffed and under-resourced. The larger policy consequences of this overload are a narrowing of attention, a fallback on established policies, a lack of innovation, and pervasive risk aversion. It therefore leads, by default, to viewing policy choices through a U.S.-focused, Euro-Atlantic lens, counterproductive to advancement of Canadian long-term interests.

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The IPS should be appreciated as a notable benchmark in Canada's dealings with today's [multiplex](#), complex world. It has the potential to make a significance difference, advancing Canada's engagement throughout the emerging Indo-Pacific for the mutual benefit of Canadians and their Asian counterparts. However, doing so requires focusing on "[actional outcomes over strategic ideologies](#)," developing programs that relate to the priorities of Indo-Pacific governments and populations, and pursuing strategies that strike a balance between confrontation and cooperation. The IPS provides the necessary whole of government blueprint. Its realization will depend on the consistent attention and careful management of resources with an eye to long-term payoffs, advanced by the "pragmatic diplomacy" called for by the foreign minister.

### **About the Author**

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## Acknowledgements

The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy (IPD) would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program of the Department of National Defence of Canada\*, whose contributions have helped to fund IPD's ongoing research on Europe's evolving security order.

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