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The Sovereign Imperative of Making Canadians Care About National Security

by Jordan Miller

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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The Sovereign Imperative of Making Canadians Care About National Security

Canada is facing interesting times, to say the least. The relationship with the United States is facing tensions over trade, tariffs, border security, and defence spending. The source of the tension appears to be American concerns over Canadian "free-riding" on defence and trade, and Canada posing a threat to American security. However hyperbolic some of the grievances, Canada is poised to act. Its defence spending is set to increase to meet the NATO target of 2% of GDP; the newly elected Prime Minister Mark Carney, made that commitment in his electoral platform – a commitment that all major parties running supported in their own campaign plans. The Parliamentary Budget Officer assessed the program of work outlined in *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSAF)* and confirmed it will bring Canada to 1.76% of GDP by 2029-30. This assessment does not include the additional cost of the planned Canadian Patrol Submarine Project which will likely bring Canada to the 2% target. For the border, the RCMP and the CBSA are implementing a series of measures on border security. The RCMP is using Blackhawk helicopters and drones to patrol the Canadian-American border in British Columbia, joint investigations are underway on opioids trafficking, and Canada has named a fentanyl Czar to coordinate the efforts to counter the drug.

The issue of defence spending has long been a difficult political issue, domestically. In terms of public priorities, some polling suggests that people are most concerned about the rising cost of living, the Canada-U.S. relationship, health care, and a range of other affordability issues with the threats from Russia and China ranking eleventh out of thirteen issues. Some public opinion polling shows that when asked an open-ended question about what concerns them most, Canadians identify defence spending as the third-least most important issue. The Canadian public is not as engaged on the issue of defence as other issues that impact them more directly, and the Government of Canada has not meaningfully engaged the public on either the importance of national defence to Canada's place in the world or the trade-offs required to surge defence spending. Eugene Lang wrote an article in the *Globe & Mail* in July 2024 that discusses the need for Canada to explain to citizens the effort and trade-offs that will be required in order to reach defence spending levels that meet 2% of GDP. Lang points out that Canadians are capable of hearing hard truths, as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, even if the Government is hesitant to do so on defence.

Prior to the recent escalation of Canada-U.S. tensions, national security issues tended to be neglected in the public debate; yet national security issues have more tangible impact on the daily lives of most Canadians. Foreign interference in our politics and disinformation campaigns undermines the integrity of national discourse and how Canadians govern themselves. Illicit financial flows and money laundering by criminal

enterprises and international networks undermines the integrity of our financial systems and impact the real estate market. This is significant because of the ongoing housing shortage in Canada. Violent extremism is a growing threat to Canadians, with an 83% increase in hate-related crimes between 2019 and 2022. These national security threats are more likely to have direct impacts to the lives of most Canadians than military commitments overseas. Somewhat paradoxically, some of the most direct threats often go unnoticed while hiding in plain sight. Malign foreign influence in our media spaces can appear the same as other media content; money laundering can appear as normal real estate buying and selling; and foreign interference in our politics can present as legitimate grassroots or community level organizing.

Defence spending and sustaining an effective military force is essential to protecting Canada's sovereignty and contributing to international peace and security. National security spending is increasingly about protecting Canada's *moral sovereignty* against foreign threats to Canadian institutions and against domestic threats against ordinary Canadians. Moral sovereignty is about Canadians making decisions about our politics, our economy, our natural resources, and our vision for the future without allowing unseen and/or unattributed foreign forces influencing our national discourse and economy. When sovereignty is discussed in Canada's *Arctic Foreign Policy*, the focus is on investing on intelligence and early warning capabilities to enable ships and aircraft from the Canadian Armed Forces and the Canadian Coast Guard to interdict threats or violations of Canadian territory, waterways or airspace. The discourse on *sovereignty* is often focused on the physical defence and protection of territory—essentially outward looking, to protect inward. Moral sovereignty is about the population in Canada making collective decisions about how it shall be governed domestically and about how it will engage with the world.

Canada is a trading nation and has many bilateral and multilateral relationships with other countries. Moral sovereignty is not about closing Canada to the world or ending those relationships; it is about ensuring that Canada's destiny is decided by Canadians, with foreign voices and interests clearly identified as foreign. It also about standing against transnational syndicates that operate in Canada, either for the purpose of financial gain or to spread hostile ideologies that contribute to violence and extremism. This is fundamentally about marshalling resources to prevent, detect, interdict, and otherwise act against malign forces that seek to influence Canada's politics, institutions, and way of life.

Spending on national defence and national security is not a binary choice. Canada must spend on both to contribute to global security and to on national security to protect our moral sovereignty. The challenge for policymakers is how to engage the public in a way

that makes them care more about the subtler national security threats and to press the Government to take action to make Canada safer over the long-term.

Blurring the Lines on War and Peace

Conventional notions of war and peace are no longer sufficient to describe and define the range of threats Canada and its allies face. Former U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation, Michael McFaul, referred to the last decades of U.S.-Russian relations as a "Hot Peace," in contrast to what came before: a Cold War. Peace defined simply as the absence of war does not account for the impact of non-kinetic threats using economic, legal, informational, cyber, space capabilities and the weaponization of other non-military means to gain advantage in international politics.

Some of the West's adversaries embrace the idea of using all tools of national power in competition, irrespective of war and peace as concepts. Two Colonels from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) wrote a book in 1999 called *Unrestricted Warfare* that states the boundaries between war and peace are no longer useful as concepts for international politics. Competition is about achieving political superiority over an adversary, irrespective of the means. The use of military power carries greater potential for retaliation and escalation toward nuclear confrontation; however, *Unrestricted Warfare* sees military power simply as a tool alongside the non-kinetic tools for the purposes of competition. Russian doctrine acknowledges that non-kinetic activities like psychological, political and subversive activities can be blended with military operations in the context of peace, war and competition below the threshold of war for the purposes of achieving strategic aims. These concepts do not align well to existing Western notions of war and peace, which means Western countries are generally not well suited to understand – much less counter – different and novel approaches to competition. This partly explains the difficulty in connecting these threats to a sense of urgency with the public. If governments do not have a good grasp of how to counter these threats, it is unrealistic to expect the public to be engaged on these issues outside of a major crisis.

Understanding the 'Other' Threats

For the first time ever, Canada has published an unclassified version of its national intelligence priorities. This document serves as a guide for how Canada understands threats – no matter whether it is a defence or non-defence department leading the effort to counter it – and prioritizes intelligence collection accordingly. Released in September 2024, this document outlines the intelligence collection priorities for all threats to

Canada's national security. The list of specific threats is long and includes foreign and malign influence; espionage and extraction of information; sabotage; cyber threats; activities to undermine the economy, harm food production, or harm Canada's trade position; threats to territorial sovereignty – including the arctic; violent extremism; transnational crime; illicit finance undermining the financial sector; and threats to border security and integrity. For violent extremism, Canada has a list of designated terrorist entities that includes a wide range of Islamist groups from around the world, white nationalist groups, communist revolutionaries in Latin America, the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo, a Tamil group, and an extremist Jewish group.

Violent extremism carries the risk of violence to the public, and the acts themselves are generally easy to understand. Things like the attack on our Parliament in 2014, the van attack in Toronto in 2018, the almost two dozen murders in Nova Scotia in 2020, and the truck attack in London in 2021 all easily understood and generally illicit fear and disgust in the minds of the public. The impacts of non-kinetic threats like cyber-attack, malign foreign influence, or illicit finance are typically harder to explain. Moreover, it is harder to explain the 'so what?' to the average person. Connecting acts to impacts is a major challenge when talking about non-kinetic action. The adage that "if it bleeds, it leads" for prioritizing press coverage illustrates this idea well. How to present images of money laundering or cyber-attacks in a way that connects with people emotionally and inspires people to act or demand it from their government? There is debate in terrorism studies as to whether terrorists want a lot of people watching (i.e.: lots of media coverage) not a lot of people dead, or lots of people watching *and* a lot of people dead. Whatever the case, violence brings immediate media attention to the public. While cyber-attacks and malign foreign influence do get media coverage, the average person is probably not directly impacted by these less-immediately-tangible events.

In the spring of 2024, the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) investigated foreign interference in Canada's election, including an unclassified redacted version for the public and a classified version for parliamentarians with the appropriate clearances. The unclassified redacted version outlined cases of foreign interference in Canada's political institutions – allegedly by China and India, and possibly others – seeking to use diaspora populations in Canada to mobilize those countries' preferences in Canadian elections. The report also included another significant allegation: the Chinese Communist Party operating alleged police stations to intimidate member of the diaspora population – with alleged threats against members of their families still living in Canada – in response to political views. These allegations strike at the heart of an earlier point about Canada's *moral sovereignty*. The ability to ensure free and fair elections, and the ability to exercise a monopoly over law enforcement within its own borders are both central tenets of any state's sovereignty and

legitimacy. These types of threats are likely invisible to most Canadians, and yet they strike at the core of our political institutions and traditions.

The release of this report was a significant media event, and Canadians took interest in making sure that parliamentarians were aware of the contents of the report and the specific nature of the threats to Canada. 66% of voters – across all party lines – wanted parliamentarians to read the classified version of the report, and 62% claimed to be following the issue and having at least some conversations with other about it. That was in June 2024. By July 2024, Canadians had apparently moved on, ranking cost of living (71%), affordability and accessibility (46%), health care (42%), the economy (33%), and immigration (27%) as their top issues. This tells us that Canadians seize upon national security issues, but only when they are big enough to garner days of media attention. In the absence of sustained attention on national security issues, Canadians are generally more concerned with the immediacy of daily life. This does not mean that national security issues are always a zero-sum game with all other political issues. The polling above shows that while people are *less engaged* on defence and national security issues, they are not completely unaware. The polling implies that defence and national security and "pocketbook" issues are not inextricably linked: only that issues that are further away from daily impacts will likely draw less public interest than issues that affect people's daily lives more directly

The tangibility of threats presents a massive challenge for policymakers. If Canadians are seized with national security issues only when they are severe enough to garner days of media attention, how to sustain attention on multiple issues before a crisis? Canada could publicize the activities of malign influence, illicit finance, violent extremism, or transnational criminal organizations more; however, doing so comes with major risks. First, disclosure could jeopardize the sources and methods for ongoing investigations and alert malign actors to change their own approaches in the future to avoid known methods of detection. In effect, disclosures could help the states, organizations and individuals seeking to harm Canadians to avoid detection. Second, disclosing the nature of threats creates risks in the information and communication space – specifically for malign influence. A review by Ontario Public Health after the COVID-19 pandemic showed that trust in public institutions was undermined by misinformation and disinformation, and that the public was susceptible to fatigue over constant messaging and compliance with a changing series of recommended behaviours. Communicating information about malign foreign actors using public messaging in the information domain is likely to make this domain more competitive, and risks further confusing Canadians and creating fatigue on the nature of the threat.

Based on the discussion above about pandemic messaging and polling: the government needs to communicate clearly and effectively about the nature of the threat in the most specific terms possible, with clear messages about the harm to people the threat poses without creating undue panic or communicating so often that fatigue sets in. This is a challenge because it requires both a commitment to accurate and timely messaging about threats but also avoiding confusion that could feed misinformation and disinformation—which could be counter-productive for raising public awareness and appreciation of the real threats to Canadians.

Why Should Canadians Care about 'Other' Threats?

Despite the challenge of engaging the public, this should be a government priority. First, threats to national security are not likely to go away. Adversaries are engaged in malign influence, either through information campaigns, interference in democratic institutions, or threatening diaspora population living in Canada – or some mix of all three. These are bold actions, and without being confronted, adversaries are likely to continue using these methods. Why would they not? If they are perceived as delivering value to the adversary at minimal cost, why would they stop? Second, Canadians should care about these threats because of the threat they present a threat to our *moral sovereignty*. Canadians have had many national debates, including about amending our constitution, national unity, and decisions to enter or avoid wars, and many more. These decisions were ultimately made by Canadians in our own context, without other countries seeking to influence our politics surreptitiously. Canada is a trading nation that is engaged with the world. It is normal for other countries to have interest in Canada's politics, as it may impact them. But those opinions should be expressed openly and attributably. Seeking to influence Canadian politics with hidden hands undermines Canada's *moral sovereignty* and that of its citizens. Decisions about Canada's future – with all their costs, benefits, and trade-offs – should ultimately made by Canadians.

Lastly, on the international front, Canadians should care about these issues because these threats are important to our closest allies. Allowing Canada to be a perceived as a safe-haven for money-laundering, criminal fundraising, extremist organizing, or a place where hostile powers can operate with impunity would be very detrimental to Canada's trusted relationships with the United States, with the Five Eyes, with NATO and others. The issue of border security and tariffs with the United States makes this very clear in the present moment. Canada's relationship with its allies is mutually beneficial for military cooperation, intelligence sharing, law enforcement against transnational threats, and treaty cooperation on things like extradition. Canadians should take threats to national

security more seriously because our allies expect it of us, and we expect it of them in return.

What to do about the 'Other' Threats?

There are many things that Canada can do to help address these threats. First and foremost, defining the threat and educating the public is important to making Canadians aware of the nature of threats and the harm they are creating today. The document *Canada's Intelligence Priorities* is an important first step in raising public awareness. More regular content and concerted effort by public officials to communicate the findings to Canadians and the tangible impacts (raising real estate prices; undermining elections, etc.) would be helpful. Second, Canada recently passed the *Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act (FITAA)*. The provides the legal framework for the requirements of foreign entities to register activities in Canada. There should be sufficient enforcement resources allocated to provide the public with confidence that provisions in the act are being reliably enforced. Otherwise, FITAA risks under-delivering on its ambitions.

Third, Canada should seek to recruit more personnel employed in national security. Canada's most recent defence policy *Our North, Strong and Free (ONSAF)* prioritizes recruiting more members into the Canadian Armed Forces to deliver on the missions contained in the policy. In 2025, the Canadian Armed Forces are apparently on target to reach their recruitment goal. However, these efforts need to be sustained over multiple years to ensure a constant flow of new recruits to build depth and resilience in the ranks. This is surely progress, and it must be sustained to address personnel shortages over time.

Similar efforts should be undertaken for the national security operations of the RCMP, CSIS, CBSA, FINTRAC and others – including uniformed personnel and civilians. *ONSAF* acknowledges that not all members of the defence team will be uniformed personnel. Cybersecurity operators and other specialists on the defence team do not necessarily need to be uniformed military personnel. Canada's national security organizations should consider a similar path, by recruiting both uniformed members to meet requirements and civilians with the key skillsets to address the non-kinetic national security challenges. Finding and keeping the right talent is essential – whether uniformed or not, depending on job roles.

Lastly, investments in technology are essential for detection, information management, and information sharing at the right level of classification. Defence programs are often in the hundreds of millions or billions of dollars and last a generation. Platforms like ships

and jets are expensive. National security requires some of those platforms, but generally speaking; the technology for national security is cheaper (per program); the capabilities reach obsolescence faster because the technology is constantly evolving; and most of it comes from commercial sector innovations. Cybersecurity hardware, digital detection and notification capabilities, visual surveillance systems, drones, space-based capabilities and other national security capabilities are often dual-use technologies that can be used for civilian or military application. Investments in these programs – including regular replacement and upgrades – is necessary to sustain Canada's defence against national security threats.

Conclusions

Canada has recently increased its commitment to defence spending, bringing it in line with NATO guidelines. However, non-kinetic threats to Canada's national security have not seen the same surge in commitment or sustained public interest. These threats are increasingly being used by adversaries as part of competition between states, and Canada is not immune from them. These threats are not going to go away; in fact, they are more likely to increase. Even if they sustain at the same pace, Canada needs to do more to counter foreign powers, organizations, and individuals from interfering in Canadian life and Canadian political institutions. The Government of Canada should be simultaneously explaining these threats to Canadians so they understand what they are and how they work, and then explain why additional government spending is necessary to improve Canada's ability to protect its moral sovereignty. Canadians deserve it, and allies expect it.

About the Author

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Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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