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Canadian public opinion and defence spending – Possible implications for continental defence modernization

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Talks to modernize continental defence institutions and infrastructures had begun to emerge before the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in North America. Military officials have recently pointed to the necessity to upgrade capabilities in place through the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) and the North Warning System (NWS). General O'Shaughnessy, US commander of NORAD, stressed that "improving our ability to detect and defeat cruise missile attacks is among my highest priorities", calling on a closer integration with allies and partners¹.

More recently, Commodore Jamie Clarke, Deputy Director of Strategy at NORAD and NORTHCOM, indicated that the NWS was obsolete vis-a-vis the Russian threat and that NORAD required three areas of improvement: "1) New and upgraded sensors or radars that operate across services and domain; 2) Improved command and control processes and capabilities, which includes implementation of the Joint All-Domain Command and Control System; 3) Developed and field advanced "defeat mechanisms" to maintain response capabilities²".

These possible acquisitions and upgrades will require additional investments from the Canadian government. We want to investigate whether there is an appetite for additional military spending in the Canadian populace. Furthermore, continental defence translates to advanced cooperation between Canada and the United States. It is also our objective to inquire whether Canadians hold favourable views of the United States: low levels of favourable views could make the selling pitch of strengthening continental defence by the Government of

Canada an arduous task. Finally, we will analyze polls investigating the preferred approach of Canadian respondents for the economic recovery period following the COVID-19 confinement measures.

Canadians and Military Spending

In recent years, few polls have assessed whether Canadians are supportive of additional military spending. However, two opinion polls by the Angus Reid Institute questioned respondents on their stance towards military spending³. These two inquiries reported similar core findings. For one, a majority of Canadians thought that the Government of Canada should not increase its current level of defence spending: 60% of respondents in 2017 and 57% in 2019 shared this opinion. It is also worthwhile to stress that evoking a price tag significantly increased the number of respondents in favor of decreasing the level of military spending. The 2017 survey did not mention any amount, only mentioning the 2% of the GDP figure in military spending; only 7% of respondents indicated that they would like Canada to spend less on defence. The 2019 survey presented individuals with precise figures: 17% of respondents expressed that they would like Canada to “spend less than the current \$25 billion per year” in national defence spending.

In both polls, support for increased military spending tended to be observed in respondents who had voted for the Conservative Party (58% in 2017, 63% in 2019), that were male, older or residing in Alberta (see table 1 for details).

	For increase in military spending (2017)	For increase in military spending (2019)
Male respondents	51%	51%
Female respondents	32%	36%
18-34 years old	30%	36%
35-54 years old	40%	46%
55+	48%	45%
Alberta residents	54%	56%
Quebec residents	29%	30%

Table 1: Distribution of opinions on military spending by gender, age and province of residence.

The partisan connection framed military spending as a predominantly one-party issue: the latter three socio-demographic (male, older and Alberta residents) were also strongly associated with the typical Conservative voter profile. Hence, this type of initiative mostly resonated with Conservative supporters. Respondents who voted for the Liberal party or the New Democratic Party (NDP) and were favourable to additional military spending represented a minority (37% and 35% respectively for the 2017 poll, 36% and 26% for the 2019 poll). As the Trudeau government emphasized on increasing diversity and holding consultations that include groups typically marginalized in the decision-making process, it is informative to look at what Indigenous and visible minorities’ respondents think about military spending. As can be observed in table 2, Indigenous respondents were close to the national average in supporting further military spending. Visible minorities’ respondents for their part were more reluctant to prefer such policy option.

	Increase military spending	Keep current level of military spending	Decrease military spending
Indigenous respondents (2017, n= 72)	38%	50%	12%
Visible minorities (2017, n=222)	27%	62%	11%
All respondents (2017)	42%	52%	6%
Indigenous respondents (2019, n=101)	47%	35%	18%
Visible minorities (2019, n=249)	38%	38%	24%
All respondents (2019)	43%	40%	17%

Table 2: Distribution of opinions on military spending for Indigenous and visible minorities respondents.

The 2017 poll points to another interesting finding; support for increased military spending correlated with a positive perception of the US administration. On this note, perceptions of the US partner have substantially evolved in the past four years.

Perceptions of the US ally

It is repeatedly stated in public discourse that Canada and the United States are the closest international partners, thanks to shared interests in domains such as security and trade. A 2019 poll by Nanos asked Canadians to rate their level of comfort with Canada having a beneficial relationship with different countries⁴. Only 33.7 % of respondents reported feeling most comfortable about Canada’s relationship with the United States; physical proximity (43.7 %), importance as a trading partner (17.6 %) and longstanding relationship (12.1 %) were respondents’ principal reasons for their choice. Europe in contrast was perceived most favourably overall by 47.9 % of respondents.

On whether its relationships with other countries are positive for Canada, Canadians equally (44 %) considered the relationship with the United States to be positive or somewhat positive and negative or somewhat negative. Ontarians (47.9 %), males (49.6 %), and individuals aged between 18 to 34 (48.2 %) were more likely to positively or somewhat positively view Canada’s relationship with the United States.

Similarly, a 2020 survey by the Angus Reid Institute shows that Canadians’ perception of the United States has fallen to a 40-year low: 38 % of respondents viewed the country positively in the survey, and 60 % held the

opposite opinion⁵. Only China (14 %) and Saudi Arabia (10 %) scored worse than the United States on the favourability scale with European countries representing again the preferred option. There is therefore a degree of dissociation between perceptions of how beneficial Canada’s relationship with the United States is and how comfortable Canadians are with this relationship.

Moreover, groups such as female respondents and Quebec residents, also predominantly held unfavourable views of the US ally (see table 3).

	Favourable view of the US (2020)	Unfavourable view of the US (2020)
Male respondents	48%	51%
Female respondents	29%	68%
18-34 years old	39%	58%
35-54 years old	36%	62%
55+	40%	59%
Alberta residents	57%	41%
Quebec residents	30%	68%

Table 3: distribution of opinions on US partner depending on gender, age and province.

Despite the steady decline in favourability assessments of the United States, 37 % of Canadians thought that Canada’s trade relationship with the United States should be strengthened over any other country compared with 28 % in November 2019⁶. The progress made towards the ratification of the CUSMA since then and wider-ranging suspicion towards China in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic may partially explain this rebound. Additionally, federal Conservative voters in 2019 were most likely (59%) to have a preference for Canada to develop closer ties with the United States. Overall however, 52 % of Canadians thought that Canada’s trade relationship with the European Union should be prioritized.

Canadians also appeared to seek more autonomy and perceive greater differences from the United States in other areas. In the wake of the Boeing 737 Max crashes in 2019 for instance, 62 % of Canadians reported in a Nanos poll of the same year that they would prefer Canada to conduct its own air safety work and certification instead of continuing to rely on the United States⁷. Females (73.6 %), Quebecers (68.3 %) and adults aged 55 and over (64.6 %) shared the same opinion. One other Nanos poll from 2018 showed that the United States were perceived as most similar to Canada by the fewest Canadians since 2005 in terms of human rights (14 %), family values (20 %) and business values (35 %)⁸.

Overall, Canadian perceptions of the US ally tended to follow a downward pattern: this is a warning sign for further military integration with the US. Furthermore, Canadians expressed the will to see their government adopt a more autonomous and independent approach or further integrate with European partners rather than the US. These preferences were more accentuated in specific demographics. Female and Quebec respondents were consistently less supportive of additional military spending and are less inclined to perceive the US positively.

Future continental defence initiatives will also depend on the type of economic recovery Canadians envision for the post-pandemic era.

Governmental spending in the COVID-19 era

The highly evolutionary nature of the pandemic and the low number of polls on governmental spending make generalizations on this front hazardous; however, a few observations can still be made.

For one, a majority of Canadians rejected the continuation of the status quo and a business-as-usual approach. According to an EKOS poll, 73% of respondents wished to see broad transformations to Canadian society in a post COVID-19 world⁹. Governmental spending was posited as playing a central role in this transformation. On this note, we observed a significant turnaround: if a Forum Research poll conducted in 2018 found that 61% of Canadians preferred their government adopting a balanced budget, the opposite is now true: 64% of respondents in May 2020 favoured their government spending “whatever is required to rebuild and stimulate the economy¹⁰”.

Health and environmental considerations were deemed priorities for the economic recovery. In an EKOS poll conducted in May 2020, security matters took a backseat for most Canadians. A recent Abacus data survey also pointed to a desire to further national autonomy: reducing Canada’s reliance on global markets for basic necessities was considered the greatest priority for Canadian respondents.

Conclusion

In light of the considerations reviewed in this quick impact statement, it is important to note that the Canadian government will have to articulate a coherent, clear and sustained political messaging campaign to convince Canadians of the merit of modernizing continental defence institutions and infrastructures. The Canadian populace tends to prefer the status quo in its military relationship with the American partner; a revealing example of this emerged in 2017, at the height of tensions and antagonistic rhetoric between the US and North Korea about the latter’s nuclear weapon program.

The confrontational logic certainly left an impression on Canadians; the proportion of Canadians who thought that the threat of nuclear war was very or fairly serious went from 36% to 55% in a one-year timespan. A majority of respondents also believed that the tensions between the US and North Korea were Canada’s problem. Yet, only 29% perceived that the solution was to join the US ballistic missile defence system. More alarming still, this low level of support did not result from the perceived utility of the initiative: 40% of respondents agreed that the US ballistic missile defence system would make Canada safer...

This is a cautionary tale that the Canada-US cooperation should not be taken for granted and that, now more than ever, the Government of Canada needs to justify clearly and coherently why the Canada-US relationship must be strengthened. This is particularly important given that specific groups such as women, Quebecers and younger people, are reluctant to support additional military spending or seek further integration with the US.

This effort will prove to be crucial to ensure social acceptability as the data suggests that Canadian trust towards the US partner has eroded in the past few years.

¹ Terrence O’Shaughnessy. NORAD and USNORTHCOM Commander SASC Strategic Forces Subcommittee Hearing. April 3 2019, available at : <https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/Speeches/Article/1845843/norad-and-usnorthcom-commander-sasc-strategic-forces-subcommittee-hearing/>

² Peter Rayls, Ramesh Balakrishnan and Daniel Chrobak. Modernizing North American Defence. Conference report, Canadian Global Affairs Institute, March 2020 : 1. Available at : https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cdfai/pages/4334/attachments/original/1584639630/Formatted-MNAD_2020_Conference_Report.pdf?1584639630

³ A summary of findings for these two surveys can be found on the website of the Angus Reid Institute. The first, entitled “Half of Canadians say Trump right on increased NATO spending”, was conducted from February 16 to 22 2017 and is available at the following: <http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017.03.13NATOsending.pdf>

The second poll, entitled “Venerating our Veterans”, was conducted from October 29 to November 4 2019 and is available at the following: http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019.11.07_RemembranceDay.pdf

⁴ The survey can be accessed using the link: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.47/823.910.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-1411-Atlantik-Brueke-Populated-Report-w-tabs.pdf>

⁵ This survey can be found at the following: <http://angusreid.org/covid19-china/>

⁶ This survey can be found at the following: <http://angusreid.org/covid19-china/>

⁷ The poll on air safety is accessible at: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.47/823.910.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2019-1397-CTV-March-Airplane-safety-Populated-report-w-tabs.pdf>

⁸ Results about perceived value gaps between Canada and the United States are provided at:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.47/823.910.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-1233-CanAm-Populated-Report-with-Tabs.pdf>

⁹ For more details, consult the EKOS poll at the following link: <http://www.ekospolitics.com/index.php/2020/05/a-future-history-of-the-covid-19-crisis/>

¹⁰ Find the details of the Forum Research poll at the following link: <https://poll.forumresearch.com/post/2834/federal-budget-2018/>. For the 2020 poll, details can be found at the following: <https://abacusdata.ca/what-kind-of-recovery-broadbent-institute/>