

From

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Canada: The Once and Future Peacekeeper

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On the night of his election victory, Justin Trudeau declared that Canada is “back” on the international stage and said that, “if there’s any country in the world that can live up to our collective expectations, it’s this one.” He continued to set high expectations in his Mandate Letters to the Ministers of National Defence and Foreign Affairs, tasking them to re-engage Canada in UN peacekeeping. This re-engagement – being “back” – would be a major undertaking since Canada has had an illustrious history in peacekeeping.

During the Cold War, Canada was the leading contributor to peacekeeping, providing the most peacekeepers of any country (about 10% of the total) and being the only country to have participated in every UN peacekeeping operation. For a period after the Cold War, Canada remained the top contributor, providing at its peak 3,300 uniformed personnel in July 1993. However, when the number of UN peacekeepers in the field surged in the twenty-first century from 20,000 uniformed personnel in the year 2000 to 100,000 by 2015, Canada did not contribute to the surge (except briefly in 2000-01 for the mission in Ethiopia-Eritrea, the last time Canada rotated military units in UN operations). Instead it kept constant the number of peacekeepers at 200–250. In 2006, the newly elected Harper government withdrew Canadian peacekeepers from the Golan Heights, where Canadian logisticians had been stationed since 1974. That brought the numbers of Canadian peacekeepers down to about 50, which were further reduced to around 30 for most of the Harper government. Thus the Canadian contribution was a mere shadow of what it had once been. And when US President Barak Obama co-chaired a leaders’ summit on peacekeeping at UN Headquarters on 28 September 2015, Canada offered nothing. That same evening, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau complained about this in an election debate with Prime Minister Harper, saying: “The fact that Canada has nothing to contribute to that conversation today [in New York] is disappointing because this is something that a Canadian Prime Minister [Lester B. Pearson] started, and right now there is a need to revitalize and refocus and support peacekeeping operations.”

But for the past two years, following the 2015 election, Canada has not increased its peacekeeping contribution. The numbers of uniformed personnel in the field actually decreased.

Canada found that it would be excluded from the defence ministerial on UN peacekeeping in September 2016 in London unless it made a concrete pledge beforehand. So in late August 2016 in Saguenay at the time of a Liberal caucus meeting, Canada pledged “up to” 600 troops and 150 police. It also offered to host the next ministerial, scheduled for 14-15

November 2017. The Vancouver pledging conference aims to obtain new pledges and to take stock of the old ones made in New York and London. Much to Canada's embarrassment, in the year since the London ministerial, Canada has not even made good on its own pledge. As of August 2017, Canada was contributing only 29 military personnel and 41 police, a historical low for the once prolific peacekeeping nation!

Prime Minister Trudeau and his Minister of National Defence Harjit Sajjan insist that they want to get the peacekeeping deployment "right" but the dithering has diminished the Canada's status and contribution. It has also reduced Canada's chances of being elected to a UN Security Council seat, which it seeks for 2021-22. From the 1950s to the 1990s, Canada could use its consistent peacekeeping contribution as a strong reason to be elected to a two-year seat every decade on the UN's most prestigious and important body. But by 2010, this rationale no longer held and Canada lost the election. Now, as an attempt is again made, the government dithering weakens its chances to win the election in 2020, over 20 years since it last won such an election.

Even if Canada were to provide the entirety of its pledge of 600 troops and 150 police it would still be a comparatively small contribution to the 100,000 uniformed personnel the United Nations has in the field. But even with relatively low troop numbers, Canada can make a significant difference on the ground by providing key enablers (e.g. heavy-lift aircraft, expert medical units, and advanced technologies for monitoring). The United Nations needs experienced and well-trained troops, which Canada has, although not yet experienced in UN missions or trained on them. Most importantly, it needs nations eager to deploy.

Two years after Trudeau claimed on election night that Canada was back (a claim he reiterated in his 2016 UN General Assembly address), we have yet to see the peacekeeping promises fulfilled. So emphatic advice is needed:

Action, not simply words.

Accountability, not simply pledges.

Impact, not simply contributions.

Example, not simply hosting.

Rapid response, not simply political analysis.

Humanity's collective interest, not simply national and sectarian interest.

Put humanity first! Make the UN better!