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The End of Canadian Peacekeeping

Canada pioneered modern peacekeeping. What will the world look like without it?

BY WALTER DORN

In 1956, Canada invented the UN's first peacekeeping force. After the Israeli, British and French militaries descended on Egypt during the Suez Crisis, the United Nations faced a conundrum: it could call for peace, but it had few tools to implement and enforce it. Lester B. Pearson, then Canada's secretary of state for external affairs, proposed something new. Rather than relying on the small teams of unarmed military observers the UN had used before, he envisioned an armed international force deployed using full military units: thousands of troops with a mandate to control the ground between opposing armies.

The result was the United Nations Emergency Force, the first operation of its kind and the model for what would become modern UN peacekeeping. Canadian General E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns became its first commander, and the force helped defuse a crisis that could have spiralled into a wider war, including the potential use of nuclear weapons. In 1957, Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize for his stroke of genius. From then on, peacekeepers could serve as an impartial but armed presence with enough military power to help deter fighting and stabilize a conflict zone.

During the Cold War, Canada remained one of the world's most effective peacekeeping nations. Our personnel helped observe and verify the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s and implement peace agreements to end long-running civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Canadian troops also maintained peace along the Egypt-Israel border following the 1979 Camp David Accords. Even after the end of the Cold War, Canada built on this strong and proud tradition. At its peak in 1993, Canada had more than 3,300 personnel deployed under the UN flag. Canadian generals led nine UN peace operations during the 1990s.

But this past July, the Canadian government announced its plans to close out its contributions to almost all peacekeeping operations over the next year or so. The Canadian peacekeeping presence will be withdrawn in Cyprus, Kosovo, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Canada will also reduce its role in the multinational mission in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, including areas bordering on Gaza. After the withdrawals are completed, we'll be left with only four or five UN peacekeepers in the field.

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The government's reasoning is that it needs to "rebalance" its commitments given the changing geopolitical realities: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased pressure on NATO, where Canada has expanded its role, while it

also strengthens efforts to protect its Arctic borders and allies. But none that means Canadian peacekeeping should suddenly become obsolete.

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Since 2000, I've been a professor at the Royal Military College and the Canadian Forces College, where I teach military officers about peace operations and international relations. I've spent much of my career studying how peacekeepers prevent violence, protect civilians and help countries emerge from war. I find Canada's retreat deeply discouraging. Peacekeeping has long been one of the ways Canada could do tangible good in the world while advancing its national interests. But we are now on the verge of erasing it from our military presence entirely.

If that happens, we risk more than just losing a proud tradition. Peacekeepers are often crucial third-party eyes and ears on the ground in war-torn areas of the world. They verify ceasefires, mediate local settlements, monitor armed groups, oversee disarmament and demobilization of ex-combatants, protect civilians and, more generally, give peace initiatives a chance. Take the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Canadian peacekeepers have had a powerful impact. The country endured two devastating wars in the 1990s that killed millions of people.

Then the UN mission, in which Canadians served, helped prevent localized violence from escalating into a wider conflict on the previous scale by supporting negotiations, protecting civilians and, when necessary, confronting and combatting illegal armed groups.

The stakes are strategic as well as humanitarian. The Democratic Republic of the Congo possesses immense mineral wealth: Canadian mining companies have a major presence there, and Canadian citizens work in the country. Walking away jeopardizes Canadian lives and our interests in the region. It also creates a geopolitical vacuum. With over 1,500 UN peacekeeping personnel, China is the largest contributor among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. It has every reason to seek greater influence inside UN operations, particularly in resource-rich African countries. If Canada and other Western countries vacate that space, we should not be surprised when China fills it.

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There is also a cost inside our own military. Many Canadian officers I teach tell me that they want to serve on UN missions but are unable to because so few opportunities exist. Some have even stated that they joined the military because they wanted to become peacekeepers. Officers who have served on these operations often describe them as among the most meaningful experiences of their careers. It also builds their expertise of operating in war zones. Recently, an officer who had served in Lebanon told me about

his experience helping communities restore water supplies and facilitating ceasefires between warring factions—a hopeful but difficult endeavour. The unarmed UN military observers were operating amid active fighting, but they still saved lives and reduced suffering. These are skills we should cultivate and encourage our military personnel to pursue. Instead we’re allowing them to atrophy.

My hope isn’t to recreate our role as it was during the Cold War and early 1990s, when we were the world’s top peacekeepers. But we should once again become a serious contributor to these efforts. We can deploy well-equipped expert military personnel, police and civilians to conflict zones to monitor ceasefires and rebuild local institutions. We can contribute to disarmament, demobilization and the reintegration of former combatants. We can secure humanitarian convoys, air-drop supplies into remote areas and help reform security institutions in countries emerging from war. And when force is necessary, peacekeepers can participate in robust operations to protect civilians from armed groups committing atrocities. Canadian contributions in the hundreds of personnel are sustainable.

The obvious objection is that the world has changed. Russia and China are potential threats, and the [Arctic needs defending](#). Even our [relationship with the United States](#) now forces Canada to think more carefully about sovereignty and security. Why divert military resources toward conflicts thousands of kilometres away? But these projects aren’t mutually exclusive: the Canadian military can prepare for war fighting and peacekeeping at the same time. I see these responsibilities as two sides of the same coin. Armed forces must sometimes repel aggression and defeat enemies. But once wars end, peacekeepers have to create the conditions for a stable peace, or the fighting reignites. UN missions have demonstrated across dozens of conflicts that international forces can help do that work.

Many places currently call out for peacekeeping. Sudan is experiencing one of the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophes. If the war in Ukraine eventually reaches a ceasefire, an impartial monitoring force will be required, in addition to an allied deterrence force. Ceasefires in the Middle

East are also notoriously fragile. Third-party observers in the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, as well as in any ceasefire between the U.S. and Iran, could independently verify violations rather than leaving each side to trade accusations ad infinitum.

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In the Persian Gulf, for example, a UN naval peacekeeping mission could deploy ships equipped with sophisticated radars to monitor the Strait of Hormuz, determine when and where a ceasefire was breached, and provide an independent account of which side was responsible. That kind of presence would not eliminate violations, but it would make them harder to conceal and therefore more politically costly to carry out.

Peacekeeping is cheap compared to war fighting; it doesn't require the same quantity of heavy equipment, and the UN reimburses countries for a substantial portion of their costs. A Canadian contribution of two hundred peacekeepers would cost well under \$100 million a year—a small fraction of the tens of billions of dollars Ottawa is preparing to spend annually on new military capabilities. If Canadians are being asked to support a massive expansion of defence spending, they are entitled to expect more, not fewer, deployments from their armed forces.

Why should Canadians risk their lives solving problems that have nothing to do with us? Because in the modern world, that distinction is increasingly

artificial. Wars create refugees who often flee to our country and the shore of our allies in Europe and elsewhere. Disease spreads easily and rapidly across borders, as the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us. Regional conflicts can escalate into international ones that Canada eventually can't avoid. Stabilizing a crisis early is an ounce of prevention that can spare us a pound of cure later.

When ethnic cleansing, genocide or mass atrocities are taking place, Canada should not simply decide that the victims live too far away to matter. Fundamentally, peacekeeping is something Canadians are unusually well suited to do. Our armed forces are bilingual and multicultural, and Canadian personnel are accustomed to working across cultures and alongside allies. Many of them are also eager to deploy. Despite dwindling numbers of deployed personnel, peacekeeping remains part of our international reputation and how Canadians understand our country's role in the world. It also distinguishes us from larger powers, especially the United States, whose global influence is more readily associated with coercion than mediation.

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We do not have to choose between being capable of fighting wars and being capable of building peace. A serious country should be able to do both. The missions slated for closure have not yet ended, which means there is still time to reverse course. Canada helped create modern peacekeeping,

developed deep expertise over generations and earned enormous international goodwill through it. We should not discard that inheritance just as the world is becoming more dangerous.

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