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Canada should invest in diplomacy, instead of spending more on defence

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The Globe and Mail
September 17, 2024

Powerful voices are driving Canada toward meeting NATO's arbitrary target of spending 2 per cent of GDP for defence, but this singular focus on military expansion is not the path to a secure and peaceful future. Instead, Canada needs to get off the defensive and launch a new initiative for peace – one that boosts diplomacy as the surer route to global security.

Donald Trump, who is on the campaign trail as the Republican nominee for president, has promised to up the ante if he is elected by pressing NATO to reach a new military spending target of 3 per cent of GDP. NATO's assistant secretary-general for defence policy and planning, Angus Lapsley, was quick to voice his support, calling the 2 per cent

target the “floor” and insisting that spending “will have to rise considerably above” it. The U.S.’s annual spending on defence already represents 3.4 per cent of its GDP.

The world is clearly moving to more and more confrontation in international relations. The relentless Ukraine war, the attacks on Israel and the extraordinary toll of human suffering in Gaza, the breakdown of U.S. and Russian arms-control agreements, and China’s growing nuclear arsenal are tilting the world toward chaos and existential threats that have been unseen since the Second World War.

In this new surge of militarism, diplomacy has been pushed aside, at our collective peril. Without robust diplomacy, sharp increases in military spending lead inevitably to mutual escalation and reduced security. The way out of that self-defeating spiral is strategic dialogue, direct engagement with adversaries, and arms control – in other words, diplomacy.

Canada needs to stop apologizing for its supposedly meagre military efforts and launch an offensive campaign with like-minded countries to put teeth into peace diplomacy and the United Nations’ New Agenda for Peace.

Ottawa should act on two fronts. First, it must debunk the myth that Canada doesn’t carry its weight in military matters. It is already NATO’s seventh-highest military spender by dollar amount, with our \$30.5-billion putting us within the top 20 per cent of Alliance military forces. Canada consistently ranks as 15th- to 17th-highest in military spending in the world, well within the top 10 per cent. Canada is also taking timely and sustainable steps to beef up domain awareness and defences through NORAD in the Arctic, and it leads NATO’s multinational battlegroup in Latvia.

Simply repeating the complaint that Canada fails to meet NATO’s 2-per-cent benchmark is not a security strategy. A GDP-linked spending target amounts to a money-making slogan for the defence industry and a formula for perpetually expanding military budgets.

The \$10-billion to \$15-billion (and counting) of additional annual military spending that it would take to move fully to 2 per cent of GDP, let alone beyond that, would mean starving the already underfunded health, housing, and other social and climate mitigation programs on which Canadians rely.

Second, Canada has the credentials to help invigorate the international system to better understand the underlying drivers of conflict, to renew efforts to build support for more effective collective security responses, and to take meaningful steps to manage emerging

risks. In other words, Canada should move to a holistic approach to conflict and peace. Unfortunately, NATO doesn't do holistic peace.

Last year, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres laid out a comprehensive set of measures for global security in A New Agenda for Peace. He called for the elimination of nuclear weapons, preventative diplomacy to head off wars, more support for the Sustainable Development Goals to address the underlying causes of violence and insecurity, the reinforcement of climate action, and expanded peacebuilding efforts.

Mr. Guterres's proposed approach is the right one, but he can't be heard amid today's clamour for more military spending. For Canada to move beyond the simplistic 2-percent formula would require vision and initiative from its political, military, and diplomatic leaders. Instead of playing catch-up in NATO, which is already spending 10 times more than Russia on defence, Canada should advance security by boosting diplomacy, peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts. That is what the world needs – not more arms.

Canada has a history of sparking creative initiatives, including the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the International Criminal Court, and the Responsibility to Protect pledge. We can summon that creativity again, but only if we refuse to be intimidated by myopic demands by NATO and the U.S. for ever more military spending.

Ernie Regehr was the founding executive director of Project Ploughshares. Douglas Roche was a senator and Canadian ambassador for disarmament.