



Prime Minister Mark Carney at his campaign office in Nepean, Ont., on March 29, 2025. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

What Canada needs now is more robust, visionary diplomacy, not more military spending

As the present front-runner in the election race, Mark Carney has a special responsibility to straightforwardly pledge support for a global recommitment to international cooperation based on respect for international law as the urgent security imperative for our time.

Ernie Regehr & Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—In their election campaigns, Canadian political leaders are sidestepping the real issue of this country's security by insisting that more military spending will guarantee our safety. But more arms

have rarely—if ever—advanced durable peace. What we urgently need is more robust and visionary diplomacy.

According to the polls, Mark Carney could well be prime minister for the next four years. He needs to prepare Canadians now for what he would do in what he has called a “new economic and security relationship” with the United States. His economic agenda is coming into focus on the tariffs question. But, aside from promising to boost Canada's military spending to two per cent of GDP by 2030, he has not spoken about the wide agenda for peace that sweeps far beyond military measures.

All the leading contenders in this election keep referring to increased military spending as a primary response to threats to our sovereignty and changing security conditions in the Arctic. As an effort to placate a mercurial American president, this is a fool's errand and, more importantly, it ignores the true foundations on which durable global peace and security are built.

The call on Canada to rally around the old shibboleth “if you want peace, prepare for war” is persuasive only if you ignore what contemporary war most often produces. The Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan, Ukraine, and Gaza tell the story. The one thing these wars have not brought is peace. In all those devastating conflicts, it is

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when the fighting finally stops that peace can begin to be built.

Of course, it should be acknowledged that the Canadian Armed Forces do face some equipment deficiencies and recruitment challenges, which is leading to important corrective measures. Reconsidering the F-35 fighter aircraft purchase and improvements to Arctic patrols and situation awareness in all domains, as well as emergency response capacity, make eminent sense to the extent they respond to Canadian-defined needs. But concentrating only on increased military spending ignores the funds and initiatives needed for equitable human development and peace-building at home and abroad.

Sadly, Canada has now abandoned peacekeeping. Furthermore, the diplomacy, peacebuilding, development, and climate action side of this country's security ledger continues to be woefully under-funded. And the new calls for increased military spending, with no specific commitment to restoring peacekeeping, will further reduce our ability to be a significant player in the much wider agenda for peace.

The UN Agenda for Peace, the Canadian-inspired institution of UN peacekeeping, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, peacebuilding programs around the world, and the UN's 2024 Pact for the Future all point a constructive way forward,

and to the truth that if you want peace, you have to build it. But without exception, all those initiatives are grievously underfunded while global military arsenals are lavished at the rate of over \$2.5-trillion each year.

When the Cold War ended, the major powers explored ways of meeting mutual security interests. Canada played key roles in fostering peacekeeping, the Landmines Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the Responsibility to Protect, disarmament diplomacy, and by staying out of the Iraq war and declining to join the unworkable Strategic Defence Initiative of then-U.S. president Ronald Reagan.

Those Canadian initiatives and actions were concrete achievements that helped to build peace and a stronger world security order, and thus a stronger Canada—but all that has faded from our collective memory. At this hinge moment in world affairs, leaders need to detail their visions for our country once again becoming a strong diplomatic player in building the conditions for peace.

These four pillars of a reconstructed peace architecture need Canada's support:

- Equitable economic and social development built through more public and private financial support for the UN Sustainable Development Goals;
- Measures to cut carbon emissions and drive investment towards sustainable energy to defend against catastrophic climate change and mitigate consequences;

- Arms control to rehabilitate a failing infrastructure, challenge the U.S., Russia, and China to pursue mutual restraint, promote the “denuclearization” that U.S. President Donald Trump has advocated, and renew disarmament diplomacy and sign on to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons; and

- Human rights protection—notably of the peoples of Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and other war-torn places—through international peace forces operating under international law and vigorous multilateral peace-building.

In the Pact for the Future, endorsed by virtually all world leaders, states have agreed to address the root causes of conflicts, and to accelerate commitments to human rights. This is where Canada needs to invest its diplomatic and soft-power strength. In doing the right thing, our nation will also be strengthened to meet the challenges coming our way from our erstwhile continental partner.

As the present front-runner in the election race, Carney has a special responsibility to straightforwardly pledge support for a global recommitment to international cooperation based on respect for international law as the urgent security imperative for our time.

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