

OPINION

Canada can do better than more defence dollars and the Golden Dome

The government could adopt and promote a broader common security framework for national and international defence.

Earl Turcotte



Opinion

Since assuming office, Prime Minister Mark Carney has made two of the most potentially consequential and profoundly disturbing announcements ever made by a Canadian prime minister—both with little or no consultation, nor evidence of the support of the Canadian electorate. The first, that Canada agrees with a 150-per-cent increase in defence spending by NATO states to five per cent of GDP by 2035 from the long-standing target of two per cent, which Canada will meet for the first time this year. The second, that Canada may participate in United States President Donald Trump's "Golden Dome" missile defence system, which will accelerate the arms race, lead to the weaponization of space, and increase the risk of nuclear war. In addition to being tragically ill-conceived, the resource implications of both endeavours appear excessive in the extreme.

According to the 2025 Annual Report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, global military expenditures in 2024 rose to US\$2.718-trillion, a 9.4-per-cent increase over the previous year, and the steepest year-on-year increase since the Cold War. NATO military spending alone totalled US\$1.506-trillion, 55 per cent of the global total, almost five times that of China at US\$314-billion and more than 10 times that of Russia at US\$149-billion. That NATO must increase military spending by an additional 150 per cent over current levels to defend member states defies reason.

Consider the opportunity costs. Current global military expenditures are already 13 times the US\$214-billion the world dedicated to Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2024 according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—down six per cent from 2023, which the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates has already resulted in 1.8 million unnecessary deaths. OCHA anticipates that, when the numbers are in, ODA will have fallen by an additional nine per cent through 2025, and the downward trajectory will continue.

Trump's Golden Dome initiative—effectively reviving the Strategic Defence Initiative, or "Star Wars," announced by then-president Ronald Reagan in 1983—is conceived as a comprehensive ground- and space-based system to intercept and destroy incoming ballistic nuclear missiles, which is technology that was ultimately deemed not feasible.

Missile-delivery technology has only become more sophisticated since. Russia's Avangard, for example, has various counter measures to evade radar, is manoeuvrable during flight, and is purported to reach speeds of up to Mach 27, i.e. 32,400 km/h. The RS-28 SARMAT, appropriately nicknamed "Satan II," with similar features, has a range of 16,000 kilometres at lower altitudes, and up to 35,000 kilometres with a sub-orbital flight path. It literally can strike any point on Earth from any direction, including over the South Pole to attack North America's vulnerable southern border. Each missile can carry 16 independently targeted and manoeuvrable nuclear warheads, each with its own counter measures and a combined explosive yield of up to 12,000 megatons—800 times that of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in 1945.

Also of great concern are hypersonic missiles that can be launched in large numbers from nuclear-powered submarines that are almost impossible to detect, and can remain submerged off the coast of perceived adversaries for months at a time. Just one American Ohio-class sub can carry 192 strategic nuclear warheads with a combined explosive yield up to 6,000 times that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Several other nuclear powers have similar capabilities.

The simple and terrifying fact is that it may be impossible to protect against a concerted attack with hypersonic, nuclear-armed missiles that can evade radar systems. The only truly effective defence against nuclear weapons is to eliminate them entirely, as has been done with chemical and biological weapons.

Carney's forthright and unapologetic remarks in Davos, Switzerland, were heard around the world. It's been suggested that they marked the beginning of a new era in geopolitical affairs: the rise of the middle powers.

That this prime minister can provide international leadership to resist those who wield raw power for their own purposes, and to help restore the rules-based international order is not in doubt. One wonders, however, how far he is prepared to go in challenging the status quo.

While still achieving a robust military capacity to defend our nation and to fulfil our legal and moral obligations to help combat aggression abroad, Canada could renounce the outrageously disproportionate new NATO defence spending target, and refuse to engage in Trump's Golden Dome initiative. Canada could adopt and promote a broader common security framework for national and international defence. One that also places a premium on diplomacy to prevent and resolve conflict, on international development to assist the forgotten millions who struggle daily for their very survival, more aggressive measures to combat climate change, and on bold action to rid the world of the scourge of nuclear weapons. In combination, these investments could generate far greater returns for Canadian and global security.

Earl Turcotte is chairperson of the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.
The Hill Times