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**Elbows Up: Getting Dead
Serious About National Security**

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A Conversation at 80 Wellington Street

Prime Minister: “You can’t be serious. You cannot be serious. I thought we had put this back in the box. But I just turned on CNN today and I see the President talking this 51st state nonsense again. What is going on here?”

Clerk of the Privy Council: “We have to recognize that the Venezuela operation changes everything and is underpinned by a formal [national security strategy](#) that claims the western hemisphere is theirs. I want to read you a quotation from it: “The National Security Council will immediately begin a robust interagency process to task agencies, supported by our Intelligence Community’s analytical arm, to identify strategic points and resources in the Western Hemisphere with a view to their protection and joint development with regional partners”. They are calling this new posture the “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, which they say they will “assert and enforce”.

And the Homeland Security Advisor has also now said the formal position of the US federal government is that [Greenland should be part of the United States](#), and they say that using the military is always an option. Our European allies are taking these threats seriously. The Danes have said that an attack on Greenland would mean [the end of NATO and therefore the end of the post-second world war security.](#)”

Prime Minister: “Do we realize the magnitude of what we are contemplating here? The country which we have deliberately, over many decades, become dependent on for both our economic prosperity and our national security is now a serious threat to both? Are we really saying that and staring into that abyss?”

Clerk of the Privy Council: “Prime Minister, the short answer is we don’t know. In fact, we don’t know what we don’t know. We need a lot more intelligence and analysis on what is going on in Washington and in Trump’s head. But we should not be complacent. Just look at what he is doing in his own country. Every [norm, convention, law](#) and even the [US constitution](#) seems to be on the table down there these days. If he can do and get away with that kind of thing in his own country imagine what he can do to us and get away with. I was at the [Halifax International Security Forum](#) this year and the main discussion in the corridors among Europeans, Canadians and Americans was the failed American democracy.”

Prime Minister: “I read Thomas Homer Dixon’s piece the other day in the Globe. I think he over-states it, I don’t think Trump will go as far as mobilizing troops on the border to coerce us. But it would not surprise me if he wants Canada to become his version of Belarus, a vassal state in all but name, and that he will do things on trade and other fronts to bring that about. I also worry that he will do and say things to undermine national unity in this country, possibly intervening in our elections in destabilizing ways, trying to fragment the country to serve his interests.

Clerk of the Privy Council: “I don’t disagree with anything that you say.”.

Prime Minister: No one is ready for this. Canadians aren’t ready for this, the business community isn’t prepared for this, my Cabinet isn’t ready for this, and no offence, but I see little evidence the [federal public service](#) is up for this either”.

“Where, in your view, do we go from here?”

Clerk of the Privy Council: “One thing you and I both know is that predating the Trump thing, the international security, public health and international economic environment has changed radically in the past few years. And to be honest Prime Minister, Canada has been sleepwalking through these historic changes, hoping they are ephemeral, hoping the “rules based international order” we have benefitted so much from can be saved, and we can go back to the status quo ante.

But we can’t go back to 1999 even if we wanted to. Canada must take its national security seriously in a way it has not in at least half a century. To me, Prime Minister, that is where your government must be, though as you imply, I am not at all sure that is where the Canadian public or even your own colleagues are at. But that is where we need to get to as a country.

The historic boost in defence spending you have authorized is an important step down a new road, but it is just a start. How and on what all that new funding is spent in the years ahead needs to be a big part of this conversation because that remains an unsettled question”.

Prime Minister: “I don’t disagree. But this requires serious thinking and analysis inside the government, not to mention convincing the public we need a new path. It probably means very big trade-offs in priorities, in spending choices, even in taxes. It seems to me to mean a paradigm shift in the [role of the federal government](#).”

Clerk of the Privy Council: “Yes, Prime Minister, that is probably what it means”.

Prime Minister: “But how do we even begin going down that road?”

Clerk of the Privy Council: “We begin down that road by pulling together a national security strategy that meets the moment and is fit for the foreseeable future. It has been more than twenty years since any government made the effort to put down on paper its best assessment of the threats and risks to this country, and some kind of coherent response or plan to meet them.

That must be the starting point-- to bring our best intelligence, analysis and thinking to the National Security Committee of Cabinet and for Ministers to be clear headed about what the real risks and threats are and how Canada should try to respond to them”.

Prime Minister: “That will also require a huge effort on my and my ministers' parts to communicate this new world to Canadians and how we intend to “meet the moment,” as you say. Don’t underestimate that challenge and don’t forget we are a minority government. But I agree; this is where we need to go. Start the process to get us there. And make sure it somehow deals with the elephant in the room.”

What is National Security?

The first page of Public Safety Canada’s website--titled “National Security--” asserts “[the first priority of the Government of Canada is to protect the safety and security of](#)

Canadians both at home and abroad". Canadians can be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

The Speech from the Throne (SFT) is the chief expression of government priorities, yet over the past two decades national security has rarely made the SFT cut. The Harper government mentioned national security five times, in two of their five SFTs. The Trudeau government's four SFTs failed to mention national security once. The Carney government similarly did not mention national security a single time in its 2025 SFT. In other words, in this span of twenty years and some seven parliaments, national security has rarely featured as a stated priority, notwithstanding new and heightened threats that have emerged over that time frame.

But what are the main risks and threats to Canadians both at home and abroad that can lead to a useful definition of national security and can ground a national security strategy?

National security risks can be defined narrowly or broadly. Early conceptions were concerned mainly with military threats to the nation state and conventional espionage. With the emergence of domestic and international terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, so-called non-state actors began to be seen as significant threats to national security. In recent decades, the concept of national security has broadened to incorporate a wider scope of threats and vulnerabilities reflecting growing concern about human security and non-traditional threats such as climate disasters, public health crisis and technology-based risks.

This broader concept of national security is recognizable, for example, in the membership of the United States National Security Council, which is chaired by the President and includes the Secretaries of the Treasury, Defence, Energy, Homeland Security, the Attorney General and the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Canada's new National Security Committee of Cabinet has an even broader membership, chaired by the Prime Minister and including the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Defence, Industry, the Attorney General, Energy and Natural Resources, Public Safety, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship, Transport and Canada-US Trade.

All of which makes understanding and addressing national security threats and risks an extremely complex undertaking for any government. National security is not the mandate of one department and minister. Rather, it involves many different departments, agencies and actors. Meaning those departments, agencies and actors must cooperate and coordinate horizontally in assessing and addressing risks. This is very challenging to achieve in Canada's Westminster system of government with its vertical structure and accountabilities.

The New World Disorder and the Risks We Face

The government of Canada last published a national security policy in 2004, titled [Securing an Open Society: Canada's National Security Policy](#). The impetus for that policy was the 911 terrorist attacks and an imperative to reassure Washington that

Canada was not a security risk to the United States. Since then, the breadth, complexity and technological sophistication of national security risks/threats have altered fundamentally.

For more than a decade, national security experts have been calling on Ottawa to develop and publish a new national security strategy. The government has committed to doing so, and to refreshing that policy every four years, recognizing the domestic and international threat landscape is constantly changing.

The list of national security risks/threats that Canada faces today and for the foreseeable future is long and daunting, and includes, *inter alia*, the following:

Russia, China and the Return of Great-Power Rivalry

One manifestation of increasing global insecurity is the re-emergence of great-power rivalry.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered any remaining illusions about a stable post-Cold War security environment. Even before then, Moscow had been pursuing a revanchist foreign policy, both in Ukraine, from the largely unimpeded 2014 annexation of Crimea and destabilizing of eastern regions of the country, to well beyond, weaponizing energy, undermining democratic elections abroad, and flooding the information space with disinformation. Russia's actions represent [a direct challenge to Western interests](#) and values, breathing new life into NATO and member states to rethink fundamental assumptions about deterrence, military readiness, and alliance solidarity. For Canada, vigilance is required not only in Europe but also in the Arctic, where Russia's militarization and increased cooperation with China pose long-term risks to sovereignty and stability.

China presents an even more complex, strategic challenge. Its extraordinary political, economic, military, and technological rise has redefined geopolitics over the last several decades. In the past ten years in particular, China has become increasingly assertive—regionally and globally—often at the expense of the rules-based international order. Through major initiatives such as the [Belt and Road Initiative](#), Beijing has expanded its influence while simultaneously seeking to weaken competitors. China is watching developments in Ukraine closely, indirectly supporting Russia in the way, and will draw lessons about Western resolve as it advances its own interests, including in the Indo-Pacific, most especially vis a vis Taiwan.

Other revisionist regional powers, including Iran and North Korea and even Saudi Arabia and India, also engage in coercive tactics that impact Canadians and Canadian interests. India, for example, was accused [in 2023](#) of assassinating a Canadian national on Canadian soil.

American Hyper-Nationalism and Trumpism

No national security threat is as politically sensitive or as structurally inescapable for Canada as the rise of American hyper-nationalism, which has been accelerated, normalized and entrenched in American foreign and domestic policy by Donald Trump's

return to the White House. A more unilateral, unpredictable, and inward-looking America, that increasingly has a 19th century view of its role in the Western Hemisphere, presents strategic challenges of a magnitude Canadians have barely begun to grapple with. The new [US National Security Strategy](#), for example, explicitly revives the Monroe Doctrine: a 1823 policy asserting American dominance in the western hemisphere up to and including a rationale to invade states in the pursuit of US national and economic interests.

The United States remains Canada's [dominant economic partner and security counterpart](#)—a function of decades of deliberate policy choice in Ottawa as much as it is born of geography, history or culture. But Canada's relationship with the United States is now, for the first time in more than a century, a source of instability. Trump's approach to foreign relations is [transactional and frequently predatory](#), targeting allies as readily as adversaries. The Canada–U.S. border has become a recurring source of political anxiety, and new trade barriers—tariffs, Buy America restrictions, or sudden regulatory shocks—heavily affects Canada's export-dependent economy.

At the same time, Canada cannot simply “diversify away” from the United States. Geography and economic integration make that impossible. Canada's natural resources, NORAD contributions, border cooperation, and defence-industrial ties remain important to U.S. interests, giving Ottawa some potential for leverage—but only if used strategically and backed by credible capability.

The challenge, therefore, is twofold: to manage an increasingly erratic and predatory United States while rebuilding Canada's foreign policy capacity, strengthening alliances beyond North America, and forging a more resilient posture that reduces vulnerability to U.S. instability. In short, American hyper-nationalism is no longer merely a diplomatic irritant; it is a core national security risk

[Mercantilism and Economic Security](#)

Mercantilism—once considered a relic of pre-liberal economic history—has [re-emerged](#) as a defining feature of the global economic environment. The pandemic triggered calls for self-reliance in essential goods, accelerating already emerging trends in several countries, most influentially the United States, towards a broader embrace of protectionism and economic nationalism. Actioned through strategies such as on-shoring, export controls, tariff escalation, and interventionist industrial policies, US trade increasingly advantages domestic firms at the expense of foreign competitors. The result is weakening multilateralism, rising geopolitical competition, and retreat from institutions that once upheld open trade.

For Canada, an export-dependent economy deeply intertwined with the United States (in 2023 [77% of Canadian exports](#) went to the US), this shift presents significant national security risks. U.S. trade hostility, unpredictable tariff policy and unreliable adherence to existing trade agreements, join dispute settlement paralysis at the increasingly irrelevant World Trade Organization, and growing economic coercion by authoritarian states, to collectively erode the rules-based trading system. At the same

time, major powers are turning inward. The United States now links trade, technology, migration, and national security under an “[America First](#)” framework; China is expanding its economic statecraft; and the European Union is debating measures to defend itself from economic coercion. The risk for Canada is a global protectionist spiral with devastating economic impacts.

Mercantilism also has domestic security implications. Economic dislocation, deindustrialization, and declining living standards in parts of the United States helped fuel the populist upheavals that laid the groundwork for Donald Trump’s election. The old industrial heartland, once dominated by trade unionists and reliably Democrat, has shifted decisively toward Trump. This same region is the most economically entwined with Canada.

As protectionist impulses over supply chains, manufacturing, and border controls take hold in Washington, Canada becomes increasingly vulnerable to sudden economic shocks made more complex by their uneven and shifting impact across different sectors and provinces. In this context, economic security must be understood as national security. Mercantilism abroad, if unmitigated, becomes instability at home.

[Climate Change and Environmental Instability](#)

Climate change occupies an unusual place in the national security landscape. It is fundamentally an environmental and public health issue, yet its cascading effects—on infrastructure, public order, migration, geopolitics, and military capacity—are now sufficiently severe that it must be understood as a core [national security risk](#).

Canada is warming at roughly twice the global rate. This trajectory will intensify extreme weather events: more heatwaves, drought, forest fires, floods, and coastal erosion. These hazards place mounting pressure on critical infrastructure—energy grids, transportation networks, water systems—and [increase reliance on the Canadian Armed Forces](#) for emergency response. They also directly affect Canadian communities, particularly in the North, where melting permafrost, changing wildlife patterns, and disappearing ice threaten livelihoods and already precarious social and economic conditions.

Internationally, climate change is deeply entangled with [geopolitical competition](#). As Arctic ice recedes and waterways become increasingly navigable, interest in the region’s energy resources, minerals, and strategic sea routes is intensifying.

Climate change is also a [driver of global instability](#)—fueling displacement, food insecurity, economic shocks, and state fragility. These dynamics increase migration pressures and create fertile conditions for the emergence of new diseases, the spread of extremist ideologies, and intensified great-power rivalry. Environmental degradation of this scale is not merely a backdrop to national security challenges; it is a catalyst.

[Migration, Refugees and Border Governance](#)

The impact of rising global [migration has a clear national security dimension](#). In 2024, the UN estimated there were [304 million](#) international migrants worldwide, a figure that

has nearly doubled since 1990. Increased mobility has contributed to prosperity both globally and in Canada, but has also strained public resources, border management, and social cohesion.

The COVID-19 pandemic was revealing. At one point, [over 90 per cent](#) of the world's population lived in countries that had suspended most non-essential international arrivals. While these measures were justified as public health tools, they also reinforced a broader trend toward securitizing migration—treating mobility primarily as a risk to be contained rather than as a reality to be governed. In Canada, the pandemic exposed the precarity of migrants whose work is, paradoxically, essential to national resilience. Temporary foreign workers in agriculture and food processing, migrant health-care workers in long-term care facilities, and international students sustaining key sectors all found themselves on the front lines of the crisis with limited access to protections and supports.

Post-pandemic, migration surged again, accelerated by global instability including the impacts of climate change, conflict, and economic collapse. Many of these conditions are driving new waves of displacement and irregular migration that increase pressure on borders far from Canada and have direct implications for Canadian security and foreign policy. How Canada manages migration—who is admitted, on what terms, with what rights and protections—will shape social cohesion at home, Canada's reputation abroad, and our ability to respond to future crises.

Domestically, high post-pandemic immigration rates [caused strain](#) to the already beleaguered healthcare system, and the critically inadequate and unaffordable housing market. As a result, some public opinion surveys now suggest that Canada's enviable immigration consensus is eroding. The government has responded by rapidly tightening immigration levels. This policy shift has complex implications for Canadian prosperity—almost all labour force and population growth in recent years is attributable to immigration.

In a national security context, migration itself is not the threat. Risk arises from unmanaged movement, the exploitation of precarious migrants, and inadequate security screening.

Arctic Security and Sovereignty

Arctic security has moved from a long-term strategic concern to an immediate national security priority. [Climate change](#) is accelerating the transformation of the region: receding sea ice, improved navigation technology, and expanding commercial interest are transforming Canada's Arctic waters. A surge in maritime traffic [raises the risks](#) of unauthorized access, illegal activities, environmental incidents, and conflict over resources.

Yet Canada's ability to monitor and safeguard its Arctic remains limited. Many vessels are not required to use digital tracking systems, and those that are can simply disable them. Canada is reliant on a patchwork of aging equipment—satellites approaching end of life, aircraft and icebreakers nearing retirement, and offshore patrol ships supported by deteriorating infrastructure. No single federal organization is [responsible for Arctic maritime surveillance](#), and the five departments with primary roles—Transport Canada,

Fisheries and Oceans, the Canadian Coast Guard, National Defence, and Environment and Climate Change Canada—have [repeatedly identified gaps](#) in domain awareness without taking coordinated action to address them.

These capability gaps carry geopolitical consequences. Russia has dramatically expanded its Arctic military presence and icebreaking fleet, while China has declared itself a “near-Arctic state” and is investing heavily in dual-use scientific and satellite infrastructure across the circumpolar region. Meanwhile, the United States continues to assert that the Northwest Passage is an international strait rather than internal Canadian waters, complicating Canada’s diplomatic position and indirectly opening space for other states to challenge Canadian sovereignty. President Trump’s open musing about “buying” Greenland, heightens concern about U.S. ambitions in the region, particularly with respect to valuable emerging critical mineral deposits.

Arctic security is therefore not a future problem. It is a present test of Canada’s ability to defend its territory, uphold its sovereignty, and adapt to a rapidly changing strategic environment.

[Pandemics, Global Health and National Security](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear that global health is not simply a domestic policy file but a core national security concern. [COVID-19 caused 60,000 Canadian deaths](#), widespread disruption, and economic and social costs which will reverberate for years. The pandemic also revealed how quickly a health crisis can spill over into other national security domains: public order, economic stability, democratic trust, and international relations.

Income, race, gender, age, disability and migration status shaped who could protect themselves, who bore the brunt of exposure, and who suffered most from lockdowns. Long-term care facilities, where more than 80 per cent of Canada’s early COVID-19 deaths occurred, highlighted how neglect in low-priority sectors of the health system can [become a national emergency](#).

Globally, COVID-19 exposed deep flaws in health governance. Underfunded multilateral institutions like the World Health Organization were pulled between great-power politics and philanthro-capitalist agendas. Vaccine access, supply chains, and intellectual property rules reflected market logics more than a shared commitment to collective security. For a country like Canada who is dependent on global supply lines for medical goods and on multilateral cooperation to detect and respond to emerging threats, this represents a major [national security vulnerability](#).

At the same time, the pandemic triggered isolationism and technological dependence: border closures, biosecurity reflexes, and an over reliance on technological fixes (apps, AI, pharmaceuticals) arguably at the expense of robust public health systems and community-based care. These policy decisions have complex and long-lasting implications. In a world of accelerating zoonotic spillover risks and climate-driven disease emergence, pandemics may become recurring stress tests of our national resilience and national security.

Cyber Threats and Emerging Technologies

Cyber threats now sit at the centre of Canada’s [national security landscape](#). As the economy, government services, and critical infrastructure have become increasingly digitized, vulnerability to cyber-attacks by hostile states, criminal organizations, extremist movements, and lone actors has expanded dramatically. The same technologies that improve efficiency and connectivity also expose Canadians to new security risks. The 2022 “Freedom Convoy” demonstrated how encrypted messaging platforms and digital fundraising tools can rapidly scale domestic mobilization. Internationally, cyber operations have become routine instruments of statecraft, used for espionage, coercion, sabotage, and geopolitical competition.

Canada faces a persistent and [growing volume of cyber-attacks](#) targeting hospitals, banks, governments, energy systems, and supply chains. These incidents range from ransomware strikes to sophisticated intrusions aimed at undermining critical services or extracting sensitive data. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, and quantum computing will deepen these risks by making it easier to automate attacks, evade detection, and break currently secure encryption systems.

The research and innovation ecosystem is particularly exposed. Foreign actors, including state-linked companies, have made strategic investments in sensitive sectors, often obscuring their ownership or cultivating research partnerships that can serve dual-use military purposes. Chinese national security legislation obliges individuals and institutions to cooperate with state intelligence authorities, [creating risks for Canadian researchers](#) working with Chinese partners in fields such as AI, quantum computing, genomics, and photonics. Canadian universities rank among the world’s most frequent collaborators with Chinese military-linked institutions, raising the possibility that Canadian innovations could inadvertently advance foreign military capabilities.

Cyber threats therefore cannot be treated solely as technical challenges. They are questions of economic security, intellectual integrity, democratic resilience, and national sovereignty.

Ideologically Motivated Extremism

Canada’s most immediate security challenges increasingly originate not from foreign battlefields but from domestic environments shaped by ideological grievance, polarization, and eroding trust in institutions. Ideologically motivated extremism—whether emerging from far-right, religious, or anti-government movements—has become a more visible and volatile threat.

The 2022 “Freedom Convoy” protests demonstrated how domestic grievances, when channeled through online ecosystems of disinformation, transnational ideological spillover and support networks, can escalate rapidly into blockades, economic paralysis, and constitutional stress. Canadian far-right groups operate within a broader ideological ecosystem, drawing from American media, political figures, and social movements. The January 6th attack in Washington, D.C. illustrated the speed with which [extreme political movements can metastasize](#) into mass violence.

Similarly religious extremism remains a persistent and evolving national security threat in Canada. Religious extremism is not confined to any single faith tradition; it emerges when ideological interpretations are weaponized to justify violence, intolerance, or authoritarianism. Sectarian conflicts and identity-based polarization contribute to the risks of religious extremism in Canada and abroad. International events can have direct domestic consequences. Conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of Africa generate narratives that can resonate in diaspora communities and online subcultures in Canada.

Across these forms of extremism, the digital environment plays a central role. Social media enables extremist groups to mobilize supporters, coordinate actions, and overwhelm public discourse at little cost and with limited traceability. Extremists may intimidate journalists, target minority populations, and threaten elected officials and public servants. The [blurred boundary between lawful protest, civil disobedience, and criminal extremism](#) complicates law-enforcement response and heightens the risk of politicization. Police and intelligence agencies face the difficult task of distinguishing constitutionally protected dissent from coordinated efforts to undermine democratic institutions. In some cases, extremist groups have even sought to infiltrate police and military services—an [especially dangerous trend](#) that risks eroding the legitimacy of state-sanctioned forces.

Domestic terrorism represents a violent expression of ideological extremism. Lone actors and loosely affiliated networks are [increasingly willing to resort to violence](#). These actors operate without clear organizational structures, making detection exceptionally difficult. Again, cross-border ideological linkages compound the problem. Movements in the United States, Europe, and Australia share narratives, tactics, symbols, and digital networks with Canadian actors, accelerating radicalization and providing validation to those contemplating violence.

Disinformation, Polarization and the Erosion of Democratic Resilience

A major emerging threat to Canada is the battle over facts, narratives, and legitimacy. Disinformation is pervasive and destabilizing: a constant stream of falsehoods, manipulated content, conspiracy theories, and hyper-partisan propaganda that undermine trust in democratic institutions and corrode social cohesion. The proliferation of digital platforms has dramatically lowered the cost and complexity of gaining influence, making it easier to manipulate public opinion at scale and with unprecedented speed, often faster than governments can respond.

Disinformation can fuel radicalization, encourage hostility and undermine trust in government. It weakens the legitimacy of democratic processes and can [provoke crises like the “Freedom Convoy”](#) that carry repercussions for Canada’s economy and societal cohesion. That movement reflected not only pandemic-era frustration but a [deeper malaise](#): polarization, institutional distrust, economic anxiety, and perceived inequality—conditions that disinformation exploits and intensifies, creating fertile ground for societal fracture. Widening inequality and growing mistrust of elites provide fertile ground for narratives that delegitimize institutions and reduce citizens’ willingness to accept factual information. As trust erodes, compliance with public health directives, emergency

orders, and lawful protest boundaries declines. In such an environment, even small crises can escalate into national disruptions with economic and diplomatic repercussions.

Within Canada's multicultural landscape, [disinformation can exacerbate social fractures](#) and thus may be weaponized by disruptive actors to exert influence in this country.

Canada must navigate the threat of disinformation in a moment of when illiberal movements are eroding the normative foundations of the rules-based order. [Anti-democratic trends](#) have taken hold in countries such as Hungary and Brazil, and, increasingly, even within the United States. Authoritarian governments deploy cyber tools, covert influence operations, and state-aligned media to influence ideology, sow distrust in electoral processes, and discredit public institutions. The goal of disinformation is rarely to persuade; it is to polarize, confuse, and erode citizens' confidence in the very idea of objective truth. It poses both a security threat and a governance challenge. It is challenging to reinforce democratic resilience in an era when truth itself is contested terrain.

Transnational Violence and Crime

Canada is vulnerable to a wide spectrum of threats originating from non-state actors beyond its borders. Non-state hostile actors exploit the openness of global systems to operate across borders with unprecedented speed and agility.

Canada's geographic position, high-value markets, and relatively open financial systems [make this country an attractive hub for criminal operations](#) involving narcotics, human trafficking, money laundering, cyber based fraud, and the illicit movement of goods and capital. Money laundering undermines the integrity of financial systems. Drug trafficking fuels public health crises and violent crime. Human trafficking targets vulnerable populations and strains social services. Criminal infiltration of critical sectors such as construction, transportation, and ports, raises concerns about corruption and national resilience. Because organized crime networks routinely [exploit jurisdictional gaps](#), fragmented enforcement efforts within Canada and between Canada and its allies create opportunities for expansion.

Modern criminal networks function less like street-level syndicates and more like multinational enterprises. They leverage encrypted communication platforms, offshore financial structures, and global supply chains to diversify revenue and evade detection and diversify revenue streams. In some regions, criminal groups have formed opportunistic alliances with extremist organizations or authoritarian states, blurring the line between profit-driven and politically motivated actors.

Although large, centrally coordinated attacks have declined since the height of ISIS's territorial control, the underlying drivers of international terrorism including state fragility, regional and [ideological conflicts](#), and transnational grievances, remain. Terrorist groups continue to adapt, increasingly recruiting, radicalizing, and operationalizing through decentralized networks, dispersed cells and online propaganda. At the same time, geopolitical instability—including climate shocks, migration crises, and civil wars—creates fertile conditions for recruitment. Canadians radicalized by foreign organizations

abroad and online may attempt attacks at home, underscoring the permeability of these movements.

Canada's participation in global coalitions and its diplomatic presence in fragile states [expose Canadian personnel and interests to targeted violence](#). Meanwhile, Canadian companies, NGOs, and citizens operating abroad face continued risks in conflict-affected regions. Terrorism is increasingly intertwined with organized crime, cyber operations, and disinformation, enabling hostile actors to raise funds, launder assets, and mobilize sympathizers with ease. International terrorism may be less centralized than in the past, but it is no less global.

Weapons of Mass Destruction and Espionage

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, biological, and radiological) remains one of the most consequential and least predictable national security threats facing Canada. Russia's increasingly assertive nuclear signaling, Iran's continued nuclear ambitions, North Korea's expanding missile and warhead capabilities, and China's rapid strategic build-up collectively point to a global arms-control regime under severe strain.

Canada, as a non-nuclear power, relies on multilateral mechanisms to prevent proliferation. Canada is a founding member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and a strong supporter of chemical and biological weapons conventions, but these deterrence mechanisms are eroding, as verification tools weaken and diplomatic channels are strained. From a national security perspective, Canada's exposure is both direct and indirect. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction increases the risk of regional conflicts involving allies, threatens global supply chains and energy markets, and raises the possibility of coercive nuclear diplomacy affecting Canada's economic or military deployments abroad.

Foreign Espionage

Espionage represents a second major vector through which hostile states [challenge Canada's security](#). Unlike earlier eras, when intelligence collection primarily targeted government institutions, today's intelligence activities are directed at a much broader array of targets including [universities](#), research institutes, private companies, critical infrastructure, diaspora communities, and individual Canadians.

Actors may seek to obtain sensitive technologies, influence public opinion, undermine democratic processes, or compromise Canada's economic competitiveness. Hostile states—most notably China—use a range of tools to acquire Canadian intellectual property and strategic knowledge. At the same time, conventional espionage continues to be a concern. Attempts to influence public servants or gather intelligence on Canada's alliances—including NORAD and NATO—carry direct implications for national sovereignty and alliance credibility.

Development Retreat and Drivers of Instability

A paradox of the current security environment is that rising military spending, especially among democratic states—intended to deter conflicts through deterrence—may instead be deepening the very global instability that threatens Canada. In 2024, global military spending rose 9 per cent to reach an unprecedented \$2.7 trillion, the steepest annual increase since the Cold War. UN projections warn that, if trends continue, annual defence expenditures could climb to \$4.7–\$6.6 trillion by 2035, diverting resources away from peacebuilding, diplomacy, and sustainable development.

Amongst NATO nations, there is enormous pressure to meet defence spending targets. The fiscal strain of doing so requires tradeoffs: raising taxes, tolerating higher deficits, or cutting programming. Cuts to foreign programming are often politically easier than domestic cuts. As Canada rapidly increased defence spending to meet NATO's 2% target this fiscal year, \$2.7 billion was cut from foreign aid. Earlier in 2025, the United States shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), dismantling the world's largest foreign aid agency in a move already linked to rising infectious diseases and malnutrition. According to one epidemiological estimate, by November 2025 the collapse of USAID had already caused 600,000 deaths worldwide, two-thirds of them children. The U.S. and Canada are far from alone: Germany and the United Kingdom have also sharply cut aid this year. 2024 and 2025 will probably mark the first time in more than sixty years that the world's four largest donors (America, Britain, France and Germany) cut bilateral aid. As donor states pivot resources toward defence, the global system designed to prevent conflict, strengthen institutions, and reduce inequality is being hollowed out.

The strategic risk is clear. As the UN emphasizes, “there is no sustainable peace without development, and no sustainable development without peace”. Military expenditure can deter aggression, but it cannot resolve the underlying forces that drive instability—poverty, inequality, corruption, weak governance, environmental degradation, food insecurity, conflict over scarce resources, and lack of access to justice. When development systems erode, extremist groups, criminal networks, and authoritarian actors exploit the vacuum. Development investments, by contrast, reduce grievances and strengthen institutional legitimacy, economic opportunity, and social cohesion. They remain among the most cost-effective tools for lowering the probability of violent conflict.

For Canada, the consequences of a development retreat are indirect but profound. As a trading nation with deep diaspora ties, global instability reverberates economically, socially, and strategically. Instability abroad is felt at home through irregular migration, supply-chain and economic shocks, humanitarian crises, global health emergencies, and the expansion of hostile non-state actors.

The choice is not between defence and development; it is between short-term deterrence and long-term security. A national security strategy that neglects development risks treating symptoms while allowing the conditions for future crises to metastasize. Development spending is not charity; it is security policy by other means and an essential pillar of Canada's national security in an increasingly interconnected and volatile world.

Your Task: Towards a New National Security Policy

The Prime Minister has mandated the development and publication of a new national security policy. That policy is to be focused and strategic, addressing the most **acute** and **urgent** national security risks and priorities facing Canada today and over the next four years (recognizing the strategy will be refreshed every four years).

You are members of a Privy Council Office task force of officials. Your task is to develop the focus and priorities for a new national security strategy, to be briefed to the National Security Committee of Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister.

In your brief (deck not to exceed 15 slides excluding annexes) please:

- Identify 3-4 core national security priorities on which the new national security policy should focus
- Make a clear, concise, and compelling argument as to why the 3-4 priorities you have chosen should be the focus of the new national security policy
 - Include analysis of national security expert literature, government reports/documents and available data on the incidence and severity of national security incidents in Canada in recent years
- For each of the priorities you select, propose at least one substantive policy intervention that can help mitigate the risks in that domain.
 - Be specific about the policy instrument and authority being proposed (e.g. legislation, regulation, program, organizational change etc.);
 - Discuss implementation feasibility and challenges, including communications challenges;
 - Provide a rough order of magnitude cost for each proposal and a possible source of funds.
- Provide a title for the new national security strategy that captures the essence of threats and the government's response to them.

Useful Resources

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