

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

A PIVOT ON FOREIGN POLICY

Poll results indicate Canadians believe Ottawa needs to focus on friends and allies so as to build greater economic and security resilience

OPINION

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A mile wide and an inch deep is one way to describe Canada's current foreign-policy strategy. Since 2015, Canada has been balancing a range of priorities and initiatives. It has been working to build trade relationships and deliver on security commitments while also advancing progressive politics around the world.

Our self-perceived position in the world is one of a middle power with a legacy shaped by the golden diplomatic age of the postwar period. Canada had been a significant military contributor to the Second World War, and under prime minister Lester B. Pearson, we were a country of peacekeepers and an active United Nations partner.

These days, however, Canadians don't feel great about their place on the world stage: Only 3 per cent of Canadians believe our international reputation has improved in the past year, while only 10 per cent believe it has somewhat improved. This is the lowest positive score on record since Nanos started tracking this measure. (On the other hand, 39 per cent of Canadians say our international reputation has not improved.)

It hasn't helped that Canada has had strained relations with China and awkward encounters with the Modi regime in India, while having to manage a relationship with the United States during a time when the Americans are much more focused on nativist domestic politics.

Since Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister in 2015, Canada's foreign policy and international dealings have been mostly conducted through a progressive lens. See, for instance, Canada's push to rebrand what eventually became the Comprehensive and

Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or, when meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni at the G7 summit in 2023, Mr. Trudeau's criticism of the state of LGBTQ+ rights in Italy. (One could only imagine how Canadians would have responded if another major Western democracy saw fit to lecture the Canadian Prime Minister on social issues.)

The impact of this approach on our international standing has been mixed. Efforts to get elected to the United Nations Security Council failed, while Canada was left out of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership.

Most Canadians would support a pivot toward a more

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strategic approach focused on deeper, stronger ties with key countries.

A new study that tracks opinion on foreign-policy issues shows that Canadians consider the U.S. (59 per cent) and Europe (30 per cent) as the top ranked regions for mutually beneficial relationships. Key factors driving perceptions of the U.S. were proximity (36 per cent) and trade (19 per cent). For Europe, positive impressions were a result of the view that it shared common values (29 per cent) and was trustworthy/stable (22 per cent).

More than eight in 10 Canadians hold a positive or somewhat positive view of Britain (83 per cent), followed by Germany (76 per cent), France (74 per cent) and the U.S. (71 per cent).

At the bottom of the list came China, with only 10 per cent of Canadians holding a positive or somewhat positive view of the country.

When it comes to security issues between Canada and Europe, 83 per cent want strong co-operation. This parallels a survey for Bloomberg News Canada that suggests that, despite Canadians being worried about inflation, the economy and the rising cost of housing, about six in 10 people support strategies (ranging from cutting spending on social programs to raising taxes) to ensure Canada meets the terms of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) agreement that allies spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence. (Twenty-six per cent do not want defence spending to increase, while 13 per cent of respondents were unsure.)

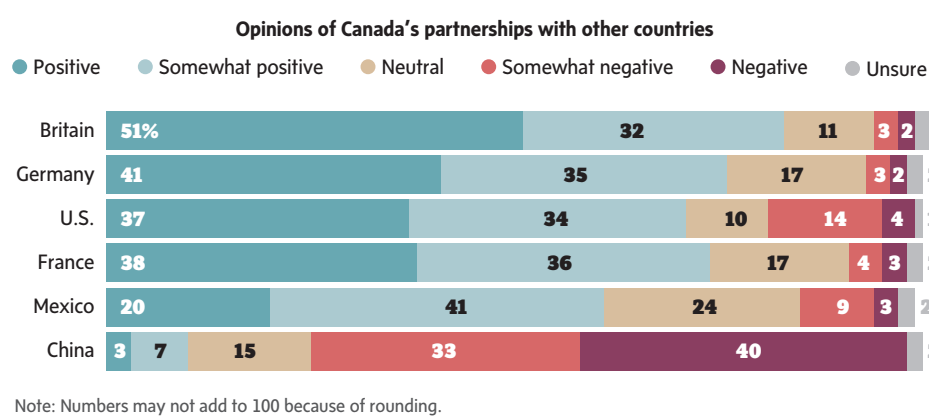
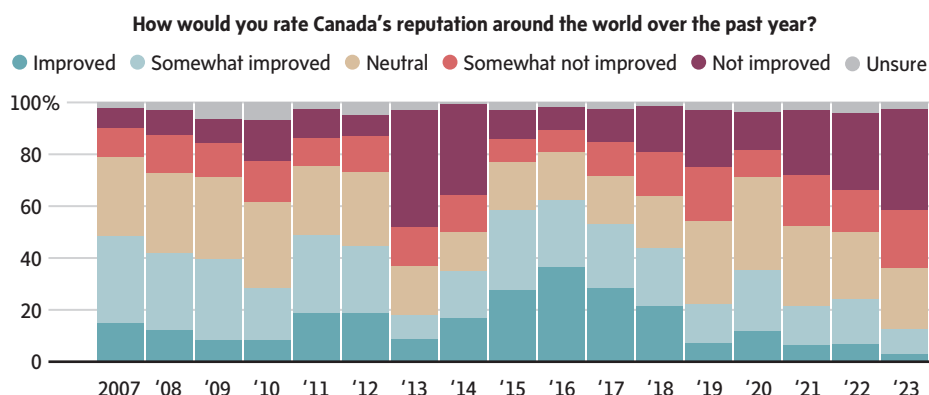
The world is grappling with both security and trade disorder. On the one hand, conflicts between Ukraine and Russia and between Israel and Hamas are rewiring security partnerships. On the other hand, the economic cold war between the U.S. and China threatens all bystanders as they deal with the fallout of industrial and trade policies between the two biggest economies.

The reality is that all governments need political licence to move policy solutions forward. Back in 2015, with the election of a new Liberal government in times when the economy was stable and Canadians were more hopeful for the future, adding a progressive lens to our trade and foreign relationships made more sense.

In 2024, sentiment suggests that Canadians would welcome a pivot in our foreign-policy strategy: first, to focus on key allies such as the U.S., Britain and Europe; second, to renew our defence capability to build credibility within NATO; and finally, to focus on security and trade.

Instead of our foreign-policy strategy being a mile wide and an inch thick, Canadians believe we need to focus on friends and allies so as to build greater economic and security resilience.

Foreign affairs



Note: Numbers may not add to 100 because of rounding.

MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

Canada's military needs to prepare for war

ROLAND PARIS

OPINION

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Canada's plan to buy 12 new submarines, announced during the recent North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in Washington, may have eased the pressure on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau amid criticism from Canada's closest allies that it has become a freeloader in the alliance.

Going into the summit, Canada was the only NATO member without a clear plan to meet its commitment to spend 2 per cent of its economic output on defence. While the Trudeau government has taken important, if belated, steps toward this goal, Canada is still years away from reaching the target – the goal is by 2032, Mr. Trudeau said on Thursday – unlike the 23 NATO members that will do so in 2024.

We find ourselves in this awkward position because successive Canadian governments have neglected our military capabilities since the end of the Cold War. After the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, the prospect of Canada becoming involved in a major war between advanced militaries seemed remote, if not unthinkable.

Today, however, such a war is increasingly plausible – and not in the distant future.

Poland's Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, has warned that Europe has entered a new "prewar" era because of the threat that Russia poses to the continent. The head of the British army has similarly described young Britons as a "prewar generation" who may

have to prepare themselves to fight against Russia. The commander of the Swedish military has bluntly warned: "There could be war in Sweden." Germany's Defence Minister has called for his country to become "fit for war," a striking departure from Germany's postwar pacifism.

These leaders recognize the danger that a newly aggressive Russia poses to peace in Europe. Since first becoming President 24 years ago, Vladimir Putin has transformed from a technocrat into a tyrant intent on restoring Russia's imperial greatness, including its power over nearby countries.

In an essay published in July, 2021, seven months before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he explained why Ukraine should not be considered a sovereign state. Ukrainians were not really a distinct people, he argued, and large swaths of Ukrainian territory had previously been part of Russia.

He once called the demise of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century, and more recently he has lamented the loss of "the lands of historical Russia" at the end of the First World War. Prior to that war, Russian territory included parts of what is now Poland, Finland and the Baltic countries, although Mr. Putin insists that he has no designs on those countries.

Speaking to a group of young Russian entrepreneurs four months after the invasion of Ukraine, he offered yet another distorted but revealing history lesson, recounting Russian czar Peter the Great's conquest of Swedish territory on the Baltic coast in the early 18th century. "On the face of it, [Peter] was at war with Sweden taking something away from it ... [but in fact he] was not taking away anything – he was returning." Nor did it matter, Mr.

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Ukraine with the long-term support it needs to regain the upper hand against Russia's invasion, by effectively deterring Mr. Putin from threatening NATO members, and by rapidly rebuilding the military readiness and capabilities of all its members. The old Roman aphorism – "if you want peace, prepare for war" – applies in this case. Mr. Putin must know in advance that further imperial forays will end in Russia's defeat.

Such a strategy can only be sustained, however, if Western publics and their leaders, including in Canada, recognize that the peace of Europe and future of NATO are now at stake. The main barrier to responding to the Russian challenge is as much psychological as it is political or budgetary. Settled assumptions about the durability of peace are not easily shaken after decades of relative stability.

The tendency to underestimate dangers and their possible consequences, and to believe that things will continue to work the way they normally have, is called "normalcy bias," and history is replete with examples.

When British prime minister Neville Chamberlain turned his back on Czechoslovakia in 1938, he described it as a "quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing" – a phrase that still haunts his legacy. But in the same speech he revealed a deeper psychological failure: "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks," he said, referring incredulously to the emergency war preparations under way in London. Chamberlain was not alone in failing to understand the very real threat facing Britain and Europe. The British public largely cheered on his appeasement policy until just months before the war broke out.

Although many Canadians

may view Russia as a distant problem, Canada has a compelling interest in the security of Europe's democracies, which are among our closest allies and partners in an increasingly unfriendly world. Authoritarians elsewhere are watching closely. Some are quietly, and others not so quietly, supporting Russia's war of conquest in Ukraine. And let us not forget that Russia is our neighbour across the Arctic, a region that China is also eyeing.

Canada must awaken from its long, comfortable slumber. While mounting criticism from our allies may be the jolt we need, a new sense of urgency and resolve must ultimately come from within – from our political leaders and from Canadians themselves.

For decades, Canada's defence policy has been "miserly," as The Economist put it, because most Canadians, seeing no immediate threats to Canada, apparently wanted it that way. Some observers criticized this approach as "immature," but it was a pragmatic strategy for its time: Canada spent just enough to maintain its key alliance relationships with the United States and NATO.

Now, however, the threat is serious, and Canadians must face a difficult truth: The familiar world in which peace could be taken for granted is already gone, and there is no alternative in this new world but to prepare our military to fight in a large-scale modern conflict – frightening as that may sound.

Here is another hard truth: The price of rebuilding our military will be enormous. But failing to do so could be substantially more costly. If Mr. Putin's Russia is not deterred and contained, Canadian troops may end up fighting in a major war that could have been prevented.

This is the "fantastic, incredible" reality that we cannot afford to ignore.