

Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau pledges “responsible” approach to Mideast war

Roger Jordan
24 October 2015

At his first press conference since winning Monday’s federal election and becoming Canada’s Prime Minister-designate, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau began backtracking on one of his major election pledges—the withdrawal of Canada’s CF-18 fighter jets from bombing missions in Iraq and Syria.

Asked when this would take place, Trudeau avoided answering the question directly, noting merely that his government would act in a “responsible” manner. He proceeded to make clear that even if the Liberals’ pledge is carried out, Canada’s military would remain a key part of the US-led coalition that is fighting ISIS forces, but whose ultimate goal is the replacement of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with a government more compliant with Western interests.

The Liberals have always tied their call for an end to the Canadian Armed Forces’ Mideast combat mission to a vow to significantly expand the Canadian military’s training of proxy forces in Iraq, as well as increased funding for “humanitarian” purposes.

Canada-US relations emerged as the dominant theme in Trudeau’s half-hour press briefing. The Prime Minister-designate emphasized that he had already held a friendly telephone discussion with President Obama, and that strengthening ties with Washington would be a major priority of his government.

Trudeau’s unwillingness to commit to a timeframe for ending the bombing mission comes in response to unease within the ruling elite over any suggestion that Canada’s role in the Mideast war could be diminished. The *Globe and Mail* published a sharply worded editorial Thursday urging Trudeau to explain his reasoning behind the pledge to withdraw the CF-18s.

US Ambassador to Canada Bruce Heyman made clear that the Obama administration has not given up hope of persuading Ottawa to continue its participation in air strikes. “I don’t actually want to presume an outcome here,” Heyman told CBC anchor Peter Mansbridge. “He hasn’t formed his government and we’d like the opportunity to come in and sit down with the government and talk about the broad aspect of the coalition and what we’re trying to get accomplished.”

Significant sections of the Canadian ruling elite rallied behind

Trudeau and his Liberals during the election campaign because they were concerned that Stephen Harper’s decade of austerity and promotion of social reaction had made his Conservative government a lightning rod for growing social opposition. They were also increasingly frustrated by the Harper government’s failure to achieve key elements of their agenda, including protecting and expanding Canada’s “special relationship” with Washington.

Since 1940, the United States has been Canada’s most important military-strategic partner. Canada played a major role in founding NATO and under the 1958 NORAD pact it agreed to the full integration of the two countries’ air defence systems.

In the 1980s, in response to the collapse of the post-war boom, the growth of protectionist sentiment in the US, and the development of regional-based trading blocs, Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative government, with the backing of the most powerful sections of Canadian capital, abandoned Canada’s traditional “National Policy” and forged a free trade pact with the US.

Under the last Liberal government in the 1990s and early 2000s, Canadian-US cooperation was strengthened in several areas. The first years of Jean Chretien’s government saw the implementation of NAFTA, bringing Mexico into the Canada-US free trade regime. Chretien’s Liberals ordered Canada’s military to fight in the US-led wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

In the wake of 9/11, the Liberals also oversaw a vast expansion in cross-border collaboration between Canadian and US spy agencies. Canadian intelligence was further integrated into the NSA-led global spying network and actively participated in American torture-rendition programs.

This process of deepening collaboration continued unabated under Harper. His government increased cooperation between the intelligence services, while positioning Canada as the US’s closest ally in its economic, geopolitical and military offensives around the world: in Eastern Europe against Russia; in the Asia-Pacific against China; and in the Middle East.

However, recent years have seen mounting concerns within the ruling elite over Harper’s failure to exert influence with Washington and his perceived needless grating of the Obama administration, including by echoing the positions of the

extreme-right Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, over Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian “peace process.”

The most frequently cited example of Harper’s failure to advance Canada’s strategic interests was his inability to secure US approval for the Keystone XL oil pipeline. Harper has been criticized for adopting a belligerent tone, including declaring approval of the pipeline “a no-brainer,” and for his unwillingness to provide any political cover to the Obama administration by subjecting Canada’s oil and gas industry to climate-change limits .

Strained relations were expressed no less starkly on issues of trade and the armed forces. The announcement by the Obama administration that it had struck a deal with Japan on auto manufacturing during the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations without Canada’s knowledge provoked unease within sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie over the ability of the Harper government to defend the “gains” Canada had secured under NAFTA. Over the past two years there was also a growing din of criticism over the government’s failure to procure new fighter jets, search-and-rescue aircraft, warships, and navy supply ships. All of this equipment is seen as essential to modernize the Canadian Armed Forces’ capacity to intervene in alliance with the US around the world.

A key theme of Trudeau’s election campaign was the need to reinvigorate Canada-US ties. While making a very limited and hypocritical appeal to popular opposition over Canada’s participation in the Mideast war, the Liberal leader seized every opportunity to make clear his support for the US-led NATO campaign against Russia. Imitating Harper in this regard, Trudeau declared that he would tell Putin to his face that he is a “bully.” At the leaders’ debate on foreign policy, Trudeau urged the strengthening of Canada’s military presence in the Arctic, where Ottawa has competing territorial claims with Russia.

At the same time, the Liberals, like all the other parties, kept completely silent on the CBC’s stunning revelation that in 2013 Canada’s Chief of the Defence Staff, Tom Lawson, had held a series of meetings with US military head General Martin Dempsey to discuss the possible complete integration of the two countries’ armed forces. Another option was establishing a permanent joint foreign intervention force. That the Liberals did not see fit to raise the implications of this development during the election campaign testifies to their fundamental agreement with the further integration of Canada in US imperialism’s global offensive, as well as their recognition that the prospect of ever widening war is firmly opposed by the mass of the population. (See: “Why are Canada’s politicians mute about the Canada-US military integration plans?”)

The need for Ottawa to adopt a different approach to Canada-US relations has long been a topic of discussion in foreign policy circles. Trudeau delivered an important speech in June to an event organized by Canada 2020, a “progressive” think tank. In it, he laid out his party’s agenda for “real change” in Canada-

US relations. He made a point of explicitly distancing himself from the legacy of his father, Pierre Trudeau. Prime Minister for all but a year from 1968-84, Trudeau took a more independent stance on some foreign policy questions and imposed limits on US investment in Canada, leading to a cooling of relations with Washington, especially when Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan occupied the White House.

To help repair the reputed damage Harper’s government has caused, Trudeau said he would establish a committee within his cabinet to oversee relations with Washington. Although Trudeau is in favour of Keystone XL, he said it should not be so central to Canada-US relations as it became under Harper.

Trudeau also made an appeal for greater continental policy coordination within North America, particularly on issues of energy and climate change. This, he argued, would enable the three NAFTA countries to better exploit their abundant energy resources, as well as to develop a joint negotiating position on greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental concerns. Behind the rhetoric, the direction of such policies is clear: to leverage North America’s energy “independence” in global geo-politics; advance the interests of Canadian and US big business in the expanding renewables and clean energy markets; and fashion a climate-change policy that disadvantages China and other rivals.

Trudeau indicated his intention to press ahead with such an approach when he pointedly noted at his maiden post-election press conference that his first international phone call came late Monday from Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Trudeau’s call for a North American strategy has adherents both in Canada and the US. In a report authored for the Council of Foreign Relations by retired US General David Petraeus and Robert Zoellick, a former World Bank official, entitled “North America: time for a new focus,” the benefits to Washington were laid out. “It is time to put North America at the forefront of U.S. policy. The development and implementation of a strategy for U.S. economic, energy, security, environmental and societal cooperation with its two neighbors can strengthen the United States at home and enhance its influence abroad,” the authors declared.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact