

Canada: Liberals repackage Harper's aggressive foreign policy

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In the two months since Canada's Liberal government took office, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his closest allies have made clear that their much vaunted "real change" to Canada's foreign policy will be almost entirely of a cosmetic character.

The Liberals, who, during the long period in which they were the ruling elite's preferred party of government, became associated with a "multilateral" approach to foreign affairs, are chiefly concerned with repackaging the aggressive militarist policy of Stephen Harper's Conservative government so as to diffuse popular opposition at home and advance Canadian imperialist interests more emphatically abroad. The cornerstone of this policy is a drive to expand Ottawa's strategic partnership with the United States, an initiative which gained momentum last week with the announcement that Trudeau will attend a state dinner at the White House on March 10—the first for a Canadian prime minister in 19 years.

During the federal election campaign, Trudeau sought to exploit popular opposition to the Mideast war, repeatedly pledging that a Liberal government would end Canada's "combat mission" in Iraq and Syria by recalling the six CF-18 fighter jets now bombing the two countries. But from the morrow of the Liberals' victory, they have been beating a retreat from this pledge.

Trudeau initially refused to name a timetable for the withdrawal of the fighter jets, and Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has now indicated they could remain in place for months beyond the March 31 deadline set by Harper. The government is now considering a series of options to expand Canada's involvement in the US-led war coalition, including stationing special commando forces in Iraq and sending regular army units to train Kurdish and Iraqi national army proxies. As was demonstrated graphically last month, when the 69 Canadian Special Forces already deployed in the region engaged in a 17-hour battle with ISIS militants, these personnel are involved in combat in all but name.

In just the first two days of the New Year, the six CF-18s flew three separate bombing missions, striking Islamic State targets near Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq.

Whatever the ultimate fate of the Liberals' CF-18 recall pledge, Trudeau and his government are determined to maintain Ottawa's close alliance with Washington in its drive to bolster US predominance in the world's most lucrative oil-producing region.

Support for US imperialist aggression

Trudeau has also made clear that his government will align itself with the US in its other major military-strategic offensives around the globe. In so doing, the Canadian government will be intensifying collaboration with the most aggressive and destabilising force on the planet, which, under

Obama as Bush, has resorted to wars of aggression, targeted assassinations, mass surveillance, rendition and torture to uphold US global hegemony.

In Eastern Europe, Trudeau is continuing his predecessor's belligerent anti-Russian stance over Ukraine and has vowed to increase support for the pro-western regime in Kiev. At a meeting with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on the sidelines of the Paris climate summit in early December, Trudeau committed to implementing a free trade agreement finalized by Harper and Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk in July. The Liberals have endorsed the continued presence of 200 Canadian troops in western Ukraine to train Ukrainian army and National Guard units, and are maintaining Canada's prominent role in NATO's aggressive deployments targeting Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic.

Trudeau held his first face-to-face meeting with Obama in November on the sidelines of the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The US and its allies used the occasion for bi-lateral talks on escalating their drive to isolate China through economic, geostrategic and military means. The Liberals are in favour of Canada adhering to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, the economic arm of Washington's anti-China "Pivot to Asia," but for domestic political reasons are holding back from declaring this publicly.

In the Middle East, Trudeau has vowed to uphold the Conservatives' staunch support for Israel and its brutal treatment of the Palestinian population. The Liberal government is also determined to maintain the close ties the previous government forged with the despotic Gulf regimes, which constitute a critical source of support for US imperialist interests in the region. This was demonstrated by the Liberals' reassertion of their support for a \$15 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia—an announcement made just days after Riyadh carried out the provocative beheading of 47 prisoners, including the dissident Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

During a recent trip to Britain, Egypt and Iraq, Sajjan met with the defence minister of the blood-soaked al-Sisi dictatorship in Cairo to discuss increased military-security collaboration. They reportedly discussed the possibility of Canada deploying additional "peacekeeping" troops in the Sinai. Following the meeting, Sajjan told reporters that in combatting the Islamic State it is necessary to look beyond just Iraq and Syria.

Canada's defence minister has also floated the possibility of deploying Canadian forces to Libya, where Islamic State forces have gained control of areas around the town of Sirte in the wake of the country's descent into civil war, triggered by the 2011 NATO "regime change" war. "There certainly seems to be movement with respect to some sort of peacekeeping force or training force to emerge in Libya," said George Petrolekas, a former Canadian Armed Forces' general who served in the Balkans.

The new government is hoping to use the climate change agreement reached last month in Paris to develop lucrative opportunities for Canadian corporations and advance strategic cooperation on the environment and energy with Canada's North American neighbours.

Trudeau has urged the United States and Mexico to come together with Canada to develop a “continental” energy strategy in order to strengthen North America’s ability to control and compete in the international energy market and uphold the countries’ interests on the global stage.

This strategy has the support of significant sections of the US ruling elite. In 2014, a paper produced by the Council on Foreign Relations, co-authored by retired General David Petraeus, called for a joint continental energy strategy, arguing that it would be an important means of projecting US power around the globe.

Creating a more “agile, better equipped” military

To ensure the Canadian bourgeoisie has “global reach,” the Liberals have committed to significant military spending increases. They have adopted the Conservative government’s plan to hike defence spending over the next decade by 10 percent, and intend to undertake a multi-billion dollar procurement program that will include new fighter aircraft, naval ships, and helicopters.

A defence review is set to take place, the first since the Conservatives outlined their priorities in 2008. In their Throne Speech, the Liberals pledged to create a “leaner, more agile, better equipped military.” The review has won the support of the chief of defence staff, General Jonathan Vance, a veteran of the Afghanistan war, who previously worked closely with Sajjan, who served in Afghanistan as a CAF intelligence officer.

A recent *Toronto Star* editorial shrilly complained that Canada’s military spending, at around 1 percent of GDP, falls far short of NATO’s 2 percent target. The Liberal-aligned daily wrote, “Given Canada’s responsibilities as a partner in the defence of North America, a NATO member and a strong UN supporter, Canada’s military should be a modest but genuinely robust fighting force, interoperable with our American and other allies, rather than a lightly armed constabulary geared chiefly to patrolling our skies and coasts.”

This outlook reflects that of the military’s top brass. During the election campaign, it emerged that General Tom Lawson, the former chief of defence staff, had met repeatedly with his US counterpart in 2013 to consider the establishment of a joint intervention force made up of military personnel from both countries capable of deploying anywhere around the globe.

The Liberal record

The Liberals have a long record of cloaking predatory imperialist foreign policy aims in “progressive” rhetoric, and a brief examination of this history reveals that the recent change of tone will bring about no substantive shift in Canada’s aggressive role around the globe in alliance with US imperialism.

In 1999, the Liberal government of Jean Chretien led Canada into the NATO war on Yugoslavia on the pretext of protecting civilians. Two years later, the Liberals funded the creation of the International Commission on State Sovereignty, a UN-backed body which formulated the ideological justifications for the “responsibility to protect” or R2P doctrine, under whose banner one devastating imperialist intervention after another has been launched on largely defenceless countries over the past decade. Just months after the commission concluded its work, the Liberals deployed Canadian troops to invade Afghanistan. In 2004, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin ordered Canadian troops to Haiti to

support the ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

These policies paved the way for the Conservatives to adopt an even more aggressive and openly militarist agenda when they took power in 2006. The Harper government oversaw an expansion of Canada’s participation in the counterinsurgency and neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan, the air bombardment of Libya in 2011, which killed tens of thousands, the deployment of troops, aircraft and warships to Eastern Europe to support Ukraine against Russia, and the current intervention in Syria and Iraq. While in opposition, the Liberals embraced this agenda in all its essentials, repeatedly backing the extension of the Afghanistan deployment, the Libyan war, and the aggressive anti-Russian provocations conducted by NATO. Although Trudeau’s party voted against the sending of the CF-18 aircraft to Iraq and Syria, the Liberals always insisted that Canadian troops should be present on the ground to ensure Canadian involvement in the new scramble for dominance in the Middle East.

In certain aspects of foreign policy, the Liberals are preparing to use different methods to realize their goals. Trudeau has appointed University of Ottawa Professor Roland Paris, an advocate of greater involvement in the UN and other multilateral bodies, as his chief foreign policy adviser. Prior to last October’s election, Paris penned an open letter to the incoming prime minister in which he called for Canada to deepen ties with the United States, abandon its outlier opposition to any action on climate change, and negotiate a free trade deal with China. He previously argued, in line with a growing section of the ruling elite, that the Conservatives helped to marginalize Canada in international affairs by failing to make effective use of diplomacy to achieve Canadian interests.

Paris is also an outspoken advocate of increased military spending. In September, he authored an article entitled “Canada’s disappearing military budget” in which he complained that Canada’s military spending as a percentage of GDP is among the lowest of NATO members. Those behind the growing clamour for further military spending hikes hope that a renewed rhetorical focus on peacekeeping and diplomacy and a slightly increased intake of Syrian refugees will enable the Liberals to sell this policy to an overwhelmingly sceptical public. As the recent *Toronto Star* editorial put it, Defence Minister “Sajjan’s challenge will be to develop a credible vision for Canada’s military role, to explain that vision to a public that tends to recoil from sticker shock, and to fight for the funding to implement it.”



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