

Canadian military preparing for new role in Syria, extension of Ukraine mission

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Canada's Liberal government is set to unveil the extension and possible expansion of two of its foreign military deployments. Announcements are expected in coming days on extending the Canadian Armed Forces' mission in Ukraine, where 200 soldiers are training Ukrainian Army units to fight pro-Russian separatists in the country's east, and on continuing Canada's role in the Mideast war and possibly expanding it into Syria.

The latter move would be made in conjunction with an anticipated decision by US President Donald Trump to drastically increase the US military presence in Syria and Iraq.

According to the *National Post*'s Matthew Fisher, a veteran correspondent with close connections to the upper echelons of the military and Defence Department, the Canadian military is discussing various options for a mission to Syria. Canada was previously involved directly in the Syria war with CF-18 fighter jets, but these were withdrawn last spring by Trudeau, at the same time as his government extended and expanded Canada's military intervention in the Middle East.

Eight hundred Canadian troops are currently involved in the war in Iraq and Syria, including a contingent of some 200 Special Forces troops who have provided training and frontline direction to the Kurdish Peshmerga. Some of the Canadian Special Forces are active on the Iraq-Syria border alongside Kurdish forces, attempting to block ISIS fighters from leaving Mosul. Canadian reconnaissance and refueling aircraft also still operate in the region in support of the US-led coalition's air war.

Fisher suggested in his February 27 piece that one potential option could see Canada being asked to contribute "boots on the ground" to defend so-called "safe zones" in Syria. Trump has indicated his support for such an option, which would necessitate the deployment of a substantial number of soldiers to the country and amount to a dramatic escalation of the US war for regime

change against the Assad government in Damascus.

It would place Canadian troops on an increasingly fractious front line as a growing number of regional and major powers compete for influence. The potential for this conflict to spiral into a much wider war was underscored earlier this week when Washington accused Russia of bombing one of its Syrian proxies, with US embedded troops only two miles away.

Since coming to power in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made clear that his main foreign policy goal is to deepen military-strategic and economic ties with the United States, so as to shore up North America's global dominance and enable Ottawa to intervene more aggressively around the world to uphold Canadian imperialist interests.

When Trudeau met Trump in their first face-to-face meeting at the White House last month, he renewed Canada's pledge to enhance military and security cooperation with Washington and signaled Ottawa will support Trump's efforts to create a more aggressive North American trade bloc, whether through a renegotiated NAFTA or a new pact. The joint statement issued by the two leaders at the conclusion of their February 13 meeting proclaimed the Canada-US partnership to be an "indispensable alliance in the defense of North America and other parts of the world, through NATO and other multilateral efforts."

Trudeau and Trump also committed to expanding NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command), which was created during the early stages of the Cold War and continues to be largely aimed at Russia, including in the Arctic.

Over the past week, Canadian Armed Forces troops and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) special forces have been carrying out "sovereignty exercises" in the Arctic, aimed at asserting Canada's territorial claims in the Far North. Operation Nunavut began February 23

and runs until March 10. Around 200 armed forces personnel are involved in the exercises, which have included underwater dives by demolition and reconnaissance experts.

A recent article published by the MacDonald-Laurier Institute under the provocative title “Why is Russia getting ready for war in the Arctic?” urged Canada to step up its activity in the Far North and make preparations for a potential clash with Moscow.

Canada has been in the forefront of NATO’s anti-Russia offensive in Eastern Europe and the Baltic. News reports say that the government will formally announce an extension of the Ukraine training mission next week. Trudeau’s Liberals have maintained the virulently anti-Russian stance adopted by the Harper Conservatives, continuing Canada’s role as one of Ukraine’s most important international allies. The Trudeau government has also committed to lead a NATO battalion in Latvia, one of four NATO “forward deployed” battalions in the Baltic States and Poland designed to menace and encircle Russia. This will involve 450 Canadian troops being stationed in Latvia indefinitely.

In a further indication of the Liberals’ determination to stick to a firmly anti-Russian line, Trudeau appointed Chrystia Freeland as foreign minister in January. Freeland is on a Kremlin blacklist that prevents her from traveling to Russia because of her outspoken support for the ultra-nationalist regime that came to power in Kiev as a result of the February 2014, US-orchestrated, fascist-led coup against the country’s elected, pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich.

Speaking to the *Globe and Mail*, an anonymous senior government official left no doubt about the deployment’s extension. “Canada understands that Ukraine, and everybody who is a stakeholder and supporter, really wants mission renewal,” the official said.

Ruling circles in Canada have seized on pronouncements by Trump and other top US officials demanding that NATO member-states hike their military spending to the equivalent of at least 2 percent of GDP to intensify pressure on the Liberals to increase military spending. An ongoing Defence Policy Review is considering a wide range of options for the military, including Canada’s participation in the US anti-ballistic missile defence shield.

On Friday, the *National Post* reported that its sources had revealed that a recommendation Canada join the defence shield was sent to cabinet this week. Contrary to its name, the shield is aimed at developing the capacity to

wage a “winnable” nuclear war.

After attending a NATO defence ministers’ meeting in Brussels last month, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan sent the strongest signal yet that major spending increases will be implemented at the conclusion of the policy review. “We knew that spending by the previous government was low and the defence policy review allowed us to do a thorough analysis of what was required,” he stated. “Yes, this will require defence investments.”

The Liberal parliamentary secretary for defence, John McKay, indicated that the hike in defence spending could come as early as the 2017-18 budget, which is to be tabled in the next few weeks. At present there is a built-in \$600 million annual increase in Canada’s military spending.

Because of their determination to forge close ties with the Trump administration, Trudeau and his Liberals have delayed implementing a planned deployment of 600 soldiers to Africa as part of a UN-managed “peace operation.” In truth, such a mission would be anything but peaceful or altruistic. As is openly admitted by the military, it would involve Canadian forces in an Afghan-style counterinsurgency war. And it would be aimed at securing Ottawa greater geopolitical influence and at protecting Canadian imperialism’s substantial economic and business interests on the African continent.

However, the Trump administration’s lack of enthusiasm for UN operations, coupled with the prospect of increased demands from Washington for greater military commitments from Canada elsewhere, have resulted in the Liberals postponing the deployment. The most likely candidates for such an intervention are Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo—countries where Canadian mining companies have extensive investments.



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