

Canadian defence minister vows to build stronger military

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Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has given the strongest signal yet that Canada's Liberal government will announce major and ongoing military spending increases following the release of its new defence policy later this month.

The policy is the outcome of a defence policy review that the Liberals initiated shortly after coming to power in November 2015 so as to lay the political groundwork for a more aggressive assertion of Canadian imperialism's predatory global interests. The Liberals had planned to release their new defence policy early in 2017, but held back its release as they sought to establish a close working relationship with the Trump administration.

In a speech last week to the Conference of Defence Associations (CDA) Institute, one of the country's leading military-security think tanks, Sajjan claimed that Canada's military is in desperate need of new weaponry and the funds to acquire them. "We are now in the troubling position where status quo spending on defence will not even maintain a status quo of capabilities," said Sajjan. "Current funding has us digging ourselves into a hole. ... A hole that gets deeper every year. As a percentage of our GDP, we are spending less on defence today than we were in 2005."

Sajjan pointed to serious equipment shortfalls in all three major branches of the Canadian Armed Forces, the air force, navy and army, and argued that unless swift action was taken, Canada would not be able to meet its international obligations. The billions planned for the purchasing of 65 new fighter jets to replace the air force's aging fleet of CF-18s would only be a down payment, said Sajjan. "If we want to fully meet our commitments to NATO and NORAD simultaneously—and we do—then 65 jets would not be a full fleet. It would only be a fleet for risk managing our requirements, not meeting them."

He went on to claim that Canada's naval capabilities are at a 40-year low, due to a lack of destroyers and

supply ships, adding that this has left Canada's fleet reliant on the US and other allies to fulfill its mandate.

Referring to the army, Sajjan stressed the need for new ground air defence systems, logistical supply vehicles and heavy support vehicles like bulldozers and forklifts. He also decried what he termed a quarter-century of underfunding of the army reserves, saying that they require new equipment and better training.

During the question-and-answer session that followed his speech, Sajjan declared that the "defence investment" the Liberals will make is "going to be significant. It's going to be significant because of the hole that we need to come out of."

Nobody should be under any illusions: the program outlined in Sajjan's speech and which will be developed in the new defence policy is a program for Canada's involvement in military aggression and wars around the world, including potentially conflicts involving major nuclear powers. Canada's ruling elite—and this is exemplified by its strong support for Trudeau's wooing of the Trump administration—is determined to aggressively assert its interests on the global stage and be a major player in the repartition of the world, just as it was in the world wars of the last century.

Over the past two decades, Canadian imperialism has participated in virtually every US-led war around the world. Successive governments, both Liberal- and Conservative-led, have strongly supported Washington's military-strategic offensives against Russia and China and joined in repudiating the nationalist myth that Canada is a "peacekeeping" nation, with a view to acclimatizing the population to Canadian troops waging war and shedding blood.

A key driving force in the Canadian elite's war preparations is its determination to expand its close strategic partnership with Washington so as to shore up the world position of the US, with which Canadian

imperialism's own interests and ambitions have been intertwined for the past three-quarters of a century.

Since coming to power with his "America first" protectionist and nationalist agenda, Trump has repeatedly demanded that the US's NATO allies invest more in their militaries. While Trump has not explicitly called out Canada for not meeting NATO's target of military spending of at least 2 percent of GDP, Obama did when he addressed Canada's parliament last year.

During a trip to Washington in February, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged to expand military cooperation with the US, including through "modernizing" the North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) pact. Trudeau also committed to increased Canadian collaboration in US imperialism's key offensives around the world, including in the Middle East, where Washington is seeking unbridled control over the world's most important oil-exporting region, and in eastern Europe, where Canada is playing a leading role in NATO's drive to strategically encircle Russia.

The Liberals' new defence policy is expected to initiate a push for Canada to join the US ballistic missile defence (BMD) shield. Its name notwithstanding, the BMD is aimed at giving the US the means to wage a "winnable" nuclear war.

Canada's involvement in such a war is no mere abstract possibility. Just last month, Sajjan baldly asserted that Canadian troops could be sent to the Korean peninsula if a war broke out between the US and North Korea.

The defence policy review was also tasked with considering Canada's role in other parts of the world, including the Arctic, where Ottawa has competing territorial claims with Russia, the United States and Denmark. Military think-tanks have long been calling for Ottawa to make major investments in Arctic military infrastructure, including ice-breakers.

Sajjan did not provide any dollar figures in his speech. But there is no question that to pay for Canadian imperialism's war plans, the trade-union-backed Liberal government will make further cuts to vitally needed public services.

Nonetheless, much of Canada's political and military establishment is critical of the Liberals for not immediately moving to meet the NATO military spending target of 2 percent of GDP. This would require doubling Canada's defence budget to more than C\$40 billion per year.

Summing up the general reaction to Sajjan's speech, Richard Fadden, who served as national security adviser

to former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, said that while the defence minister's remarks were welcome, "I'm going to hold my vote until I hear the policy and in particular whether the funding commitments are next year, five years, or 25 years (from now)."

On Monday, a Senate Defence Committee report urged the Liberals to move ahead rapidly with purchases of new submarines, armed-drones, armoured vehicles, attack helicopters and warships.

In recent weeks, the military has whipped up a political scandal to pressure the Liberals to be more supportive. A story by veteran journalist Matthew Fisher, who has close ties to senior figures in the armed forces, revealed that Sajjan, a former military-intelligence officer, had exaggerated his role in a 2006 military offensive the Canadian army conducted in Afghanistan. Fisher's article led to claims that Sajjan has betrayed the military's code of honour and insulted the armed forces.

The Conservative Official Opposition and the New Democratic Party eagerly seized on the accusations, charging that Sajjan had dishonoured those who "defend" Canadians' "freedom" and otherwise boosting the military as a great national institution.

David Perry, a senior defence analyst, acknowledged that the outcry over Sajjan's comments, which included calls for him to step down, has been aimed at increasing pressure on the Liberals to move ahead with additional support and funding for the military. Perry told the *National Post* that the military's reaction to Sajjan's remarks was bound up with concerns about the defence policy review: "It's behind schedule, and it's delayed, and there's a lot of concern that it's not going to deliver much."



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