

Canada “at war” with Russia, high-level Ottawa conference told

Roger Jordan
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Leading Defence Ministry officials and Canada’s military top brass used a Canadian Defence Association Institute (CDAI) conference in Ottawa last week to press for tens of billions of dollars in additional military spending to prepare for future wars.

Held under the title “How to position Canada in a world of great power plays,” the conference focused on the strategic threat Russia and China represent for Canada’s ruling elite. To counter this purported threat, speaker after speaker called on Ottawa to expand its already vast, global military-strategic partnership with US imperialism, and in particular for the “modernization” of the Canada-US joint North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD).

Canada’s Chief of Defence Staff, General Jonathan Vance, invoked a nightmare scenario in which Canada is forced to deal with attacks launched by Moscow or Beijing with hi-tech weaponry that NORAD’s current radar systems, which were last upgraded during the Cold War, are incapable of coping with. “We’re facing new, more advanced conventional missiles that can be launched from further away, travel faster and are more maneuverable,” said Vance. “More importantly, they have the potential to hold North American decision-making hostage in a period of conflict, let alone threaten our force generation capacity and critical infrastructure. Even a modest attack could hamper or cripple Canadian response to crisis—or harm Canadians or critical infrastructure.”

Vance’s drastic warnings were echoed by almost every other speaker, with general agreement among those present that conflict with Russia has already begun. “This is not an interwar period. The war is on,” asserted Frederick Kagan, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. “The principle challenge is our own failure to recognize we are involved in a great scale conflict with Russia.”

The Trudeau government already dramatically intensified Canadian imperialism’s preparation for great-power conflict when it tabled a new National Defence Policy in 2017 that motivated a 73 percent increase in military spending by 2026. In an address to Parliament introducing the new policy, then Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, a notorious anti-Russia war hawk, placed great emphasis on Canada’s participation in the two imperialist world wars of the first half of the twentieth century. She proclaimed that this history shows that “hard power,” i.e., the ability to wage war, has always been part of Canada’s foreign policy and must remain so in the future.

The new military spending is being used to purchase a new fleet of fighter jets, upgrade Canada’s submarines, construct a new fleet of warships and obtain other modern weapons systems, including armed drones. This massive rearmament program is supported by the entire political establishment, including the social-democratic New Democrats, which waged an election campaign last fall based on the need to spend tens of billions of additional dollars on the armed forces.

In addition, the Trudeau government has further integrated Canada’s armed forces into US imperialism’s aggressive military operations around the world, from the ongoing war in Syria and Iraq to the huge NATO-led military build-up against Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, and the expansion of naval operations in the Asia-Pacific aimed at encircling and isolating China.

However, the discussions now underway go far beyond what has already been implemented. Speakers at the conference made clear that the modernization of NORAD, which they argued was unavoidable, had not been costed in the 2017 military spending hike and would require tens of billions of dollars in additional investment.

Deputy Minister of Defence Jody Thomas spelt this out most clearly, declaring that the 2017 national defence

policy was now obsolete. “The world is changing faster than first projected when we presented our defence policy,” she remarked in her speech to the meeting.

Thomas’ statements were backed up by Lieutenant Gen. Christopher Coates, deputy commander of NORAD. “North America is no longer a sanctuary,” stated Coates. “Russia and others are engaged in an uncontrolled race for dominance across a variety of domains... Russia’s actions and capabilities are a large part of what’s driving that need for change.”

Last week’s conference marks the culmination of a long-running push by top US and Canadian military and defence policy figures for unprecedented financial resources to be made available to the armed forces. At last November’s Halifax International Security Forum, leading US defence policy officials, including Trump’s National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, bluntly demanded that Canada immediately move towards the NATO target of allocating 2 percent of its GDP for military spending. O’Brien also warned Canada about the consequences of failing to maintain a hard-line stance towards China when he stated that any involvement of China’s tech giant Huawei in Canada’s 5G network would result in a downgrading of intelligence sharing between Washington and Ottawa.

In a conference on the future of NORAD hosted by the Canadian Global Affairs Institute in late January, Commodore Jamie Clarke, the deputy director of strategy for NORAD, underscored that the planning for a war with Russia has reached a very advanced stage. Addressing the specific capabilities of NORAD’s North Warning System, a chain of radar stations located in Canada’s Arctic, Clarke said, “Currently, the North Warning System cannot identify and track Russian long-range bombers prior to their missile-launch points or their overflights of the Arctic region. Yet this system, entering its fourth decade of service, is the system we rely on each and every day.”

Vance also focused on the theme of continental defence in his speech to last week’s CDAI Security and Defence Conference. Stressing the importance of Canada’s role in the Arctic, he said, “What I am increasingly concerned about is the Arctic as an avenue of approach. The Canadian Armed Forces are mandated to deter and defeat threats to North America that would travel through the Arctic waters and airspace in the years to come. We must be able to ensure Arctic security be it a region, a place, or an avenue of approach. This requires strengthening inter-agency and multinational partnerships, increasing

surveillance and military capabilities, and improving our ability to base, project, and sustain forces in the North. It requires new approaches to sovereignty assurance that accounts for the very real pan-domain nature of conflict.”

Taken together, the comments of Canada’s leading military personnel and Defence Ministry civil servants amount to a plan for a vast program of rearmament that will make the tens of billions of dollars in new spending unveiled in 2017 look like little more than a modest down payment. This will also entail revisiting Canada’s participation in an upgraded version of the US-led Ballistic Missile Defence shield, an initiative that is aimed at creating conditions to wage a “winnable” nuclear war.

This mad war drive, which puts the lives of billions of people around the world at risk, is being sold as a crusade for human rights. Speakers at the Security and Defence Conference repeatedly referred to Canada’s commitment to “the rule of law,” a euphemism for the US imperialist-dominated world order that emerged from World War II and which Ottawa is determined to uphold with military force.

The ruling elite intends to advance its predatory interests at home and abroad by savaging what remains of workers’ social rights and public services, so as to divert society’s resources into rearmament and further massive tax cuts for big business, the rich and super-rich.

This is why the Trudeau government, citing the need for “national unity”—the same justification used by the bourgeoisie everywhere to demand support for aggressive militarism and war—is aligning itself ever more openly with Canada’s most right-wing provincial governments in decades. Doug Ford’s Progressive Conservatives in Ontario, François Legault’s Coalition Avenir Québec, Jason Kenney’s United Conservatives in Alberta and Scott Moe’s right-wing government in Saskatchewan have been tasked with saving tens of billions of dollars through austerity measures so the funds spent on education, health care and social services can be redirected to purchasing armed drones, missiles, fighter jets and warships.



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