

Canadian Peacekeeping: An Examination of Canadian National Identity

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On October 29, 1956, Israeli, British and French forces formed a military alliance in an attack on Egypt, fearing the significant economic loss that would result from the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Sensing a potentially bloc-based conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Canadian Under-Secretary for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, designed a plan to replace the invading British and French forces with UN forces, one-sixth being Canadian. This would create a buffer between Israeli and Egyptian forces.^[1] His plan not only diffused a potentially dangerous situation, but it became widely known as the creation of modern peacekeeping.

Peacekeeping as a practice has become synonymous with the Canadian Forces. This connection is not accurate today, even though the idea still persists. In this paper, I will provide a brief history of early Canadian peacekeeping operations, succinctly outlining major Canadian contributions. Next I will look at the idea of Canada primarily as a “peacekeeping” nation. Finally, some suggestions will be offered as to why the conception persists of peacekeeping as Canadian national identity.

Early Canadian Peacekeeping Efforts

According to the United Nations peacekeeping FAQ, “peacekeeping is a way to help torn countries create

conditions for sustainable peace.”^[2] To accomplish this, UN peacekeepers monitor and help to implement peace processes and agreements that have been previously signed by the conflicting parties.^[3] Canada has been involved in this process for many years; it has been through Canada’s continued support and contribution to this process that the idea of Canadian soldier as peacekeeper has been cemented in the minds of the national and international community. Notable examples of Canada’s commitment to peacekeeping efforts include significant contributions to missions in Egypt (UNEF & UNEF II), Cyprus (UNFICYP), Somalia (UNOSOM II), Syria (UNDOF), and the Balkans (UNPF).^[4] During the Cold War Canada was a chief peacekeeping contributor, providing ten per cent of all troops (more than any other nation) in 1988.^[5]

Many view the conflict in the Balkans as a watershed event in peacekeeping practices. It was here that the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) “proved ineffective, as ceasefires were constantly violated while ‘ethnic cleansing’ and mass slaughter raged on.”^[6] In 1995, an unarmed Canadian peacekeeper was captured and subsequently chained to an antenna at a Serb ammunition bunker, strengthening the perception of helplessness and futility.^[7] How could soldiers practice peacekeeping when there was no peace to

actually keep? After the events of the Balkans, many countries, including Canada, felt the need to rethink the idea of “peacekeeping” as it was understood during the Cold War.

The Canadian National Identity

Today Canada enjoys the distinction of being perceived as a peacekeeping nation, however erroneous this may be. After all, it was a Canadian diplomat who inspired modern peacekeeping and Canadian forces have been extensively involved in peacekeeping missions worldwide, including notable international conflicts such as those in the Balkans and Somalia. The ideas of the Canadian soldier and the Canadian peacekeeper have become almost interchangeable in the eyes of the general public. Quoting *The Economist*, “Canadians have embraced the idea that their armed forces exist to keep the peace rather than to wage war. Canadian soldiers wearing UN blue berets have become as central to the national self-image as hockey and maple syrup.”[8]

But are we really a peacekeeping nation? Since the mid-1990s Canada has not been involved in any notable peacekeeping efforts. As of September 30, 2006 Canada was placed 59th on a list of military and police contributions to UN operations. In fact, Canada’s total worldwide contribution is currently 124 members, over half of whom are stationed in Haiti.[9] Canadian troop numbers have been dwarfed completely by contributions from developing countries. For example, Pakistan currently ranks first in the world, contributing 9,760 members to UN peacekeeping forces while Nigeria is currently ranked ninth in the world, contributing 2,412 members.[10](See Figure 1. in Appendix A.) One can see a clear disparity between public perception

and reality. Bill Graham, Canadian Minister of Defence, states that the Canadian military has a “sophisticated set of skills and instruments, including combat capabilities, negotiation and diplomatic skills, and a willingness to help others rebuild their institutions in a way that is culturally sensitive to their distinct local needs.”[11] Given this extensive list of skills, it is obvious that Canada is not fulfilling its full peacekeeping potential.

Changing Priorities

Recent Canadian peacekeeping contributions to operations in Africa have been completely lackluster. As Brewster reports, “Throughout all of Africa there are 64 Canadian staff officers, ceasefire observers and military trainers serving in three operations – a contribution that was termed ‘a disgrace’ by Liberal Senator Peter Stollery.”[12] The lack of peacekeeping support in Africa, as well as in other nations, can be attributed to Canadian involvement in the US-led ‘War on Terror’. As of September 2006, the bulk of Canadian overseas forces are in Afghanistan, some 4,000 troops.[13] This deployment patterns represents a fundamental shift in Canadian priorities. A 2005 speech by Canadian Minister of Defence Bill Graham stated that Canada is actively pursuing new foreign and defence policies. His speech emphasized the shift to a more proactive Canadian military that will intervene in failed and failing states because “the suffering and denial of human rights challenges basic Canadian values.”[14] Graham explained that the skills traditionally used by Canadian troops in peacekeeping operations are a perfect fit for military operations such as those in Afghanistan. The speech is an important discourse,

signaling an important shift in Canadian military contributions to overseas conflict. Yet, it appears that this obvious shift in Canadian military prioritization has not significantly changed how public perceives the Canadian soldier.

The Perpetuation of the Myth

As Denis Stairs, a political science professor at Dalhousie University writes, it is clear that “our rhetoric is way out of whack with what we’re actually doing...if you actually look at the numbers, our contribution is rather spotty.”^[15] How then does the myth perpetuate itself? As has already been mentioned, Canada did have a long and prominent history of peacekeeping contributions to international missions; this history seems to be emblazoned in the minds, and hearts, of Canadians. This sentiment remains true even after our peacekeeping contributions have disappeared. Some observers believe that Canadians have “peacekeeping in their DNA” and that “because we are a nation of immigrants, who have had to resolve differences of opinion... Canadians are inherent peacekeepers.”^[16] Perhaps we Canadians hold to these perceptions because they represent key values and morals that we would like to associate with ourselves. Alternative explanations have been explored as to why Canadians engage in peacekeeping efforts worldwide. These perspectives can be helpful in understanding contemporary views.

General John de Chastelain, the 1995 Chief of Defence Staff of the Canadian Armed Forces feels Canadian peacekeeping is fueled by a desire to “establish a more stable world environment.”^[17] He adds, “Canada’s contribution to peacekeeping is still rooted in the fundamental belief – call it a premise of Canadian security policy –

that a stable international order sustained by a multilateral consensus is critical to Canada’s peace and security and wellbeing.”^[18] This realist idea directly ties Canadian peacekeeping efforts to the well-being and security of Canadian citizens. In this scenario, it is not because of nobility or a natural propensity toward helping others that we ‘keep the peace’, but rather, because of a desire for national security.

Another notion, admittedly more abstract, comes from Sherene Razack in “Those Who ‘Witness the Evil’.” Here, Razack proposes that as sophisticated, intelligent, and civilized “Northerners,” “morality requires that we intervene to stop the evil” from the “barbaric South.”^[19] By her account, we believe it is our natural duty to ‘keep the peace’. As she states, “Peacekeeping offers an imperial personhood and statehood, and ultimately membership in the family of civilized nations.”^[20] In specific relation to Canada, peacekeeping allows us to “prove [our] grown-up status and earn [our] place on the world stage.”^[21] Canadians cling to the idea of peacekeeping as their natural God-given “duty” and propensity because it separates ‘Us’ from ‘Them’ while allowing us to make our mark on the world. Perhaps these alternative reasons are why Canadians still believe that Canada is primarily a peacekeeping nation. The truth remains: Canadians are still misinformed as to what the Canadian military is actually doing in relation to peacekeeping efforts.

Conclusion

Canada has enjoyed a history of prolific international peacekeeping. In recent years, however, Canada has not been as engaged in providing peacekeeping support and is now ranked at 59th on a list of military and police contributions to

UN operations. Even so, public perception of Canada as primarily a peacekeeping nation continues. In order to understand why this view endures we must understand why we engage in peacekeeping in the first place. The ideas that I have listed are merely a sample of the many interrelated reasons why Canadians potentially engage in peacekeeping. These reasons offer insight into general Canadian perceptions. By understanding these perceptions we can begin to change them or begin to alter our reality to fit them. If, as Canadians, we truly value peacekeeping, and continue to place it on such a prestigious level, then we owe it to ourselves to practice what we preach.

Appendix A

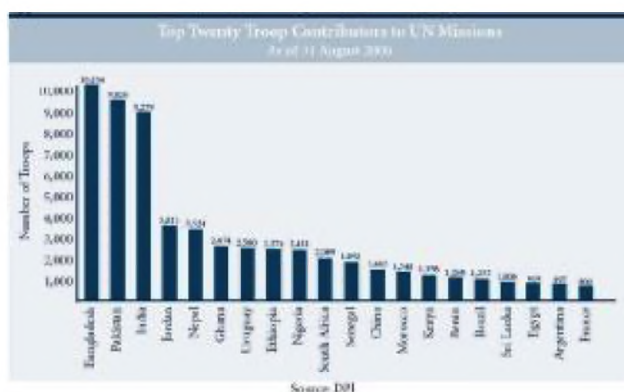


Figure 1.

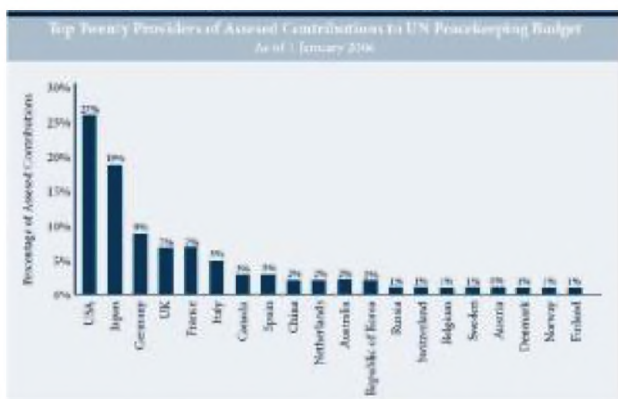


Figure 1. Tables showing the top ten contributors of troops and assessed contributions to UN peacekeeping budget respectively.

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Endnotes

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[18] Maurice Marnika, “Reports and Reviews,” 21.

[19] Sherene Razack, “Those who ‘Witness the Evil’,” *Hypatia* no.1(2003): 207.

[20] Sherene Razack, “Those who ‘Witness the Evil’,” 208.

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