



# Canada and the Changing World Order

## A New Era for Canadian Defence Policy

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Edited by  
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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

# Introduction

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As the United States retreats from being a unipolar power, the prevailing global order is at a crossroads.<sup>1</sup> For Canada, it's time to start thinking about what comes next and what it means for Canadian policy. The shifting balance of power—marked by the rise of China, renewed assertiveness from Russia, the growing influence of regional actors, and a more belligerent United States—requires Canada to reassess its alliances, trade relationships, and defence commitments. This transitional moment presents both risks and opportunities, demanding a more proactive, strategic foreign policy. Canada must consider how to uphold its values, protect its interests, and maintain relevance in a multipolar world where old assumptions may no longer apply.

The Centre for Civic Engagement is publishing a new essay series to grapple with these seismic changes and offer a new clear-headed direction for Canadian foreign policy. This edited volume considers the future of Canadian defence policy.

<sup>1</sup> Sean Speer and Taylor Jackson, "With America actively choosing decline, it's time for Canada to adapt to a changing world order," *The Hub* (2025, February 15), <https://thehub.ca/2025/02/15/sean-speer-and-taylor-jackson-with-america-actively-choosing-decline-its-time-for-canada-to-adapt-to-a-changing-world-order/>.

# Canada's Place in the World Is as Uncertain as Ever – Here's How the Next Government Can Secure It

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RICHARD SHIMOOKA

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The upcoming federal election is already underway. While the writ has yet to be officially dropped, unofficially, the contours of the campaign are shaping up. Unsurprisingly given the context of the moment, foreign and defence policy will be some of—if not the—biggest issues defining the contest.

Historically, foreign and defence policy have languished as, at best, tertiary election issues. But with an unwelcome threat to our sovereignty being reiterated on a near-daily basis from our closest neighbour, and with an international order that is destabilizing by the day, Canada's place in the world is a question the candidates looking to lead the country cannot afford to ignore.

To date, the three front-runners to be either the next PM (via the Liberal leadership race) or the one after that (via the federal election) have begun to release policy plans on this front, each in varying degrees of detail.

## Pierre Poilievre

- Expanding the Iqaluit forward operating location into a full base with permanently deployed fighters and other capabilities.<sup>2</sup>
- Acquiring two Polar Icebreakers and two lighter Arctic icebreakers, to be delivered by 2029.<sup>3</sup>
- Double the size of the 1st Patrol Group of the Canadian Rangers, from 2,000 to 4,000 Rangers.<sup>4</sup>
- Finding cost savings in the \$15.5 billion foreign aid budget to fund these promises.<sup>5</sup>

## Mark Carney

- Defence spending to reach 2 percent of GDP by 2030.
- Focus defence spending away from American programs to domestic ones.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Murray Brewster, "Poilievre promises new military base in Nunavut as part of Arctic defence plan," *CBC News* (2025, February 10), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/poilievre-arctic-defence-plan-1.7455187>.

<sup>3</sup> Poilievre's Part I of "Canada First Plan" To Take Back Control Of Arctic," *Conservative Party of Canada*, <https://www.conservative.ca/poilievres-part-i-of-canada-first-plan-to-take-back-control-of-arctic/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Poilievre promises a military base in Iqaluit, would cut foreign aid to pay for it," *CTV News* (2025, February 10), <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/article/poilievre-says-the-conservatives-would-build-a-permanent-military-base-in-iqaluit/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ashley Burke, "Mark Carney commits to 2% NATO defence spending benchmark by 2030," *CBC News*, (2025, February 5), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/liberal-leadership-contender-mark-carney-defence-spending-1.7450718>.

## Chrystia Freeland

- Defence spending to reach 2 percent by 2027.<sup>7</sup>
- Exclude procurements from the Canadian International Trade Tribunal review.
- Expanded use of Urgent Operational Requests.
- Increase personnel salaries by 50 percent.<sup>8</sup>

### The perils of promising too much

While Canadians clearly want to see their next leader taking foreign and defence issues seriously, there is plenty of potential peril for candidates and the military in making grand campaign promises. What might seem like relatively innocuous decisions can have severe repercussions if actually implemented.

Two historic cases come to mind: Chrétien's promise to cancel the Sea King helicopter replacement, the EH-101, and Justin Trudeau's promise to cancel the F-35 and buy an alternative more suited to Canada's needs, with a plan to reinvest any savings into the shipbuilding program.

The motivations behind promises like these are evident: try to distinguish oneself from the failing of the incumbent and provide bold new policy ideas. It's an attempt to put something, anything, in the shop window to provide even a minimal amount of credibility on the file.

Yet there are intense risks involved with tinkering with defence programs, as they operate fundamentally differently than any other area of government policy. Procurements for example take years, if not decades, to identify requirements, establish a competition, and implement the selection. Similarly, military personnel policy has similarities with demographic pyramids—it inducts individuals in their late teens, the number which then gets whittled down through attrition over their decades of service. It is extremely difficult to bring new individuals into service later in life.

Domestic policy programs like a tax cut or new benefits scheme, by comparison, are a relatively straightforward process for a government—some policies can be implemented in months if not weeks. Even large civil infrastructure projects do not entail nearly the same risk as defence projects. Program managers planning a bridge do not have to worry about how adversaries' technological development may impact its utility to the public, or the potential electronic warfare updates required in a decade or two's time.

Both Chrétien and Trudeau described the programs they wished to cancel as unaffordable and not aligned with Canada's needs. Chrétien famously described the EH-101 as a "Cadillac purchase" and promised to cancel it "with a stroke of his pen."

For whatever reason, newly elected governments feel as if they have to then follow through with these campaign promises, no matter how poorly thought out they come to realize they were. Both Chrétien and Trudeau came to deeply regret their election promises. The failed replacement of the aging Sea King led to years of embarrassing accidents that made it the poster child for the dysfunctional state of the CAF in the 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Boutilier and Mercedes Stephenson, "Chrystia Freeland to set aggressive timeline for 2% defence spending by 2027," *Global News* (2025, February 6), <https://globalnews.ca/news/11006537/chrystia-freeland-aggressive-timeline-defence-spending-2027/>.

<sup>8</sup> Murray Brewster, "Freeland announces she'd meet NATO spending benchmark by 2027," *CBC News* (2025, February 6), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/freeland-nato-defence-spending-announcement-1.7452372>.

Similarly, the decision to cancel the F-35 purchase in 2015 would haunt the Trudeau government for years to come. It resulted in the abortive purchase of 18 Super Hornets, followed by the indignity of acquiring surplus Australian Hornets, and then the ultimate humiliation of re-selecting the F-35 almost seven years later. Meanwhile, the debacle contributed to the effective collapse of the personnel and sustainment systems that undergird the tactical fighter fleet, leading to a much diminished military capability.

Both are cautionary tales for Poilievre, Carney, and Freeland today. The Canadian Armed Forces are in an extremely vulnerable state with entire capabilities hanging on by the barest of threads. DND has outlined plans to modernize the military that are bearing fruit, but given the CAF's current state, there is no margin of error and it cannot suffer from any ill-conceived political disruptions. In this moment of heightened uncertainty, getting it wrong could have lasting and disastrous consequences for Canada's continued sovereignty.

Carney promising to repatriate defence spending away from U.S. companies is one such example. While on the surface this may seem unobjectionable and reflects popular sentiment in the country, Canada's military operates in a binational command with the U.S. and requires high levels of interoperability. In many areas, alternative options to American systems don't exist. Altering programs mid-stream, to a non-existent domestic production capability, would be grotesquely expensive and cause major disruptions at a time when the military can least afford it.

Similarly, Poilievre's promise to pay for defence spending increases through reductions in foreign aid is a misstep. To some degree, the proposal is not too noteworthy: every incoming government has reoriented foreign aid spending according to their political aims. However, large portions of the budget fund critical priorities, such as aid for Ukraine or conflict prevention activities that are the proverbial ounce of prevention that obviates a pound of cure and shouldn't be cut. Moreover, unless Canada eliminates the entire \$15.5 billion foreign aid budget and redirects it to defence, it will not come close to paying for the promised improvements.

Freeland, on the other hand, has the most robust policy platform between the three, and yet, given the momentum of the Liberal leadership race, will almost certainly not be able to enact it.

## **The right message**

As I outlined last week, each candidate must grapple with the complex reality that Canada is being forced to reorient its foreign and defence policies towards North America and away from NATO.<sup>9</sup> How they respond to this challenge is a good indication of how seriously we should take them on this suddenly all-important file.

Poilievre, Carney, and Freeland could do worse than emulating the approach that Stephen Harper employed during the 2006 election: make broad promises to rehabilitate the military and suggest some broader political direction, but avoid getting into policy weeds. Simply suggesting that current spending will be preserved, and potentially accelerated if possible, will likely be sufficient for most voters.

They should take the Hippocratic Oath when it comes to their defence policy statements: first do no harm. No real political advantage will be had here by promising huge reorientations of defence policy, but the subsequent risk to the CAF is abundantly clear.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Shimooka, "True North (America) strong and free: Canada's foreign policy future lies with America, not Europe," *The Hub* (2025, February 8), <https://thehub.ca/2025/02/08/richard-shimooka-true-north-america-strong-and-free-canadas-foreign-policy-future-lies-with-america-not-europe/>.

# A 100-Day Plan for the Next PM to Hit Canada's Defence Spending Targets Within One Year

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## GREG MACNEIL

*Greg MacNeil is a Partner at NorthStar Public Affairs and a recognized strategist in defence procurement and government relations, navigating the complex intersection of policy, industry, and national security.*

For the first time in my adult life, Canada's political class finally agrees: we must invest more in defence. Mounting global instability, growing threats to our sovereignty, and pressure from our allies have forced this long-overdue consensus. But throwing money at the problem isn't enough. Meeting our commitments on the timeline our allies expect demands a full-scale, whole-of-government mobilization. The United States and NATO partners have made it clear that Canada must step up, particularly as global tensions rise and our sovereignty is increasingly challenged. Delay is not an option—our credibility and strategic partnerships depend on decisive action now.

If I were prime minister, here's what I would do in the first 100 days to ensure Canada hits its 2 percent of GDP defence target within the year. The following letter lays out a path to fast-track procurement and prioritize strategic investments to rebuild our military readiness in a way that past efforts have failed to achieve. In an era of growing global instability, this plan would restore Canada's credibility, secure our northern sovereignty, and establish a lasting foundation for national defence.

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To: Clerk of the Privy Council  
From: The Prime Minister of Canada  
Subject: Achieving 2% Defence Spending in the First 100 Days

Mr. Hannaford,

The time for action on defence spending has arrived. The pressure from our allies, particularly the United States, has never been greater, and for the first time in decades, there is broad consensus within Canada that we must meet our 2 percent of GDP commitment to defence. This is no longer a question of if but how quickly and effectively we can deliver on this commitment. Business as usual will not be sufficient. This requires a whole-of-government approach, coordinated execution, and an unprecedented level of urgency.

To ensure we reach this target within the next year, I am directing you to establish an immediate action plan for the first 100 days of this government. The following steps must be implemented without delay:

**1. Create a defence spending secretariat**

A dedicated unit within the Privy Council Office will be established to track spending, identify bottlenecks, and ensure the efficient execution of this commitment. This secretariat will report directly to me on a weekly basis. This secretariat will also be tasked with the creation of an independent department of defence procurement.

**2. Mandate letters to key ministers**

The ministers of Defence, Procurement, Innovation, Science and Industry, Finance, Treasury Board, and Foreign Affairs will receive explicit instructions that enabling this spending is one of their top priorities. Each minister must develop and submit a plan within 30 days outlining how they will contribute to this effort.

**3. Establish a cabinet committee on defence and industrial capacity**

This new committee will be responsible for overseeing and driving decision-making to ensure that obstacles to meeting our 2 percent commitment are removed. This committee will be chaired by myself and will meet biweekly.

**4. Retain our most capable public servants**

Our most capable senior public servants across key departments must be directed to focus full-time on defence procurement, industrial expansion, and infrastructure investment. We cannot afford bureaucratic inertia; their sole responsibility will be to ensure the rapid and effective allocation of new defence funding.

**5. Fast-track existing procurement projects**

Projects that have been stalled in the procurement pipeline must be greenlit immediately. Pre-approved spending authorities must be granted where necessary to avoid unnecessary slowdowns. The Department of National Defence must submit an updated prioritized list of projects within 30 days, with a focus on initiatives that enhance the defence of Canada's northern approaches. This includes a comprehensive review of Arctic defence capabilities, identifying necessary infrastructure investments to safeguard sovereignty, and ensuring that military presence in the region is strengthened.

**6. Expand military recruitment and readiness**

The Canadian Armed Forces must provide a plan to rapidly expand recruitment, induction, and training to ensure we have the personnel to operate the new investments being made. This plan should be delivered within the next 60 days.

**7. Strengthen domestic defence production**

Canada's defence industry must be empowered to accelerate production. The minister of Industry will work with key stakeholders to develop a strategy to expand domestic manufacturing capabilities and reduce dependency on foreign supply chains.

## **8. Establish a defence industrial expansion fund**

To support private-sector investment in shipbuilding, aerospace, and military manufacturing, a new fund will provide matching investment to accelerate growth. This must include the creation of a Dual-Use Accelerator Fund to encourage innovation in technologies with both military and civilian applications, ensuring long-term industrial sustainability. Provincial governments, particularly those with strong defence industries, must be engaged in this process immediately.

## **9. Stockpile critical supplies**

A comprehensive audit of Canada's military stockpiles must be conducted within the next 30 days. Immediate bulk purchases of munitions, spare parts, and other critical equipment must be made to ensure operational readiness. Additionally, the national procurement budget at the Department of National Defence must be increased to support the rapid acquisition and sustainment of these supplies. To do this, the Munitions Supply Program (MSP) needs to be modernized and expanded to meet current demands. Furthermore, we need to establish depots to stockpile munitions, ensuring that our forces have access to necessary supplies at all times. Additionally, the National Procurement budget at the Department of National Defence must be increased to support the rapid acquisition and sustainment of these supplies.

## **10. Implement a long-term defence investment strategy**

This cannot be a short-term fix. The Treasury Board, in coordination with the Department of Finance, must create a framework ensuring sustained funding for defence beyond the next two years. Defence spending must become a permanent national priority. This strategy must include a long-term commitment to expanding domestic defence manufacturing, ensuring that Canada builds and sustains its own defence capabilities. The National Shipbuilding Strategy must transition to a continuous build model to sustain expertise, workforce stability, and industrial capacity. This sovereign capability must be maintained to ensure long-term resilience, readiness, and a skilled workforce that can support Canada's naval needs without interruption.

For too long, Canada has treated its NATO commitment as an aspirational target rather than an obligation. That era is over. Our credibility on the world stage depends on our ability to meet this commitment, and this government will not fail in this regard. I expect weekly progress updates on these directives, with measurable benchmarks and timelines for implementation.

The excuses have run out. It is time to act.

Sincerely,

The Right Honourable Gregory MacNeil,  
P.C. M.P.  
Prime Minister of Canada

# What if Diefenbaker and Pearson Had Embraced the Bomb and Changed Canada Forever?

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**WODEK SZEMBERG**

*Born in Poland when Stalin was still alive, Wodek Szemberg started to make his way in the world with a degree in social and political thought from the now godforsaken York University. He spent many years working for TVO, the Ontario educational broadcaster. In the early 90s, he was publisher of *The Idler*, a literary and political monthly magazine*

Had two Canadian prime ministers chosen differently in 1962, the Canada of today might not be the soft power peacekeeper and “51st state” plaything of the current U.S. president, but rather a nuclear power demanding the world’s respect.

We readily criticize John Diefenbaker for the cancellation of the Avro Arrow and his decision to not accept American nuclear warheads during his time in office; Lester B. Pearson, meanwhile, is practically synonymous with peacekeeping and moral persuasion in international affairs.<sup>10</sup>

But suppose both men, confronted by the Cold War’s stark realities, had abandoned their respective notion of Canada remaining a “beautiful soul” (oh so ethical but untouched by hard choices) and agreed that Canada ought to become a nuclear military power.<sup>11</sup>

Had history unfolded as imagined below—however unlikely—one thing is certain: Donald J. Trump would have chosen his words much more carefully when addressing us. The changing world order is upending decades of assumptions about who Canada can rely on to protect our sovereignty. Suddenly, outsourcing our security to the U.S. does not seem like such a cost-less arrangement. Without the ability to project hard power and back up our resolve with actual capabilities, our words remain just words, easily ignored.

So, how could a nuclear-armed Canada come to be?

## An imagined past

The time is 1962, nine months before the Cuban Missile Crisis that will terrify the world. Opposition leader Pearson requests to meet with Prime Minister Diefenbaker privately; even their staff are kept in the dark. Diefenbaker has been grappling with the decision to accept—or reject—U.S. nuclear warheads on Canadian soil.

<sup>10</sup> Colin McCullough, “Pearson and Canada’s peacekeeping legacy,” *Policy Options* (2017, November 9), <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/november-2017/pearson-and-canadas-peacekeeping-legacy/>.

<sup>11</sup> Wodek Szemberg, “In the Name of the Father and the Son: Canada’s Cul-de-Sac,” *Telos Insights* (2025, January 21), <https://insights.telosinstitute.net/p/in-the-name-of-the-father-and-the->.

Responding to his weak stance, President John F. Kennedy has made Diefenbaker painfully aware of what it feels like to share a bed with an elephant. Since receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Pearson has grown uneasy with his assumption that peaceful rhetoric alone can protect a huge country with weak defences. He realizes as a diplomat that consequential conversations in the halls of power only take place among equals. He hates representing an enormous country that isn't seen as an equal.

During their meeting, Pearson persuades Diefenbaker that Canada cannot merely hope to charm or lecture a world armed to the teeth with atomic weapons. Relying on the protective American umbrella while NATO's attention is focused on its eastern flank, Canada is being left a secondary player in existential questions of war or peace.

That revelation draws the two political rivals together. They see the illusions gripping the country for what they are: if Canadians cling to the idea that friendliness alone ensures security, they might discover too late that power only respects power.

"We risk becoming a 'beautiful soul,'" Pearson intones philosophically, referencing a character described by Hegel as someone who cherishes moral purity, but who sidesteps the messy engagements of real life.<sup>12</sup> Diefenbaker, known for his heartfelt populist nationalism more so than familiarity with German philosophers, grasps the contradiction admitting that Canada demands independence, yet surrenders critical defence decisions to an ally. They decide that Canada will become a nuclear power.

What also helps Diefenbaker change his mind is the recognition that his Northern Vision—increasingly just talk without any concrete measures—will ensure him a legacy.

The two leaders agree: Canada must write its own fate—even if it requires forging a nuclear deterrent, reanimating advanced aerospace research, and staking a bolder claim to the Arctic.

In their ongoing private conversations, Diefenbaker and Pearson sketch out a vision for Canada that unites the West, Quebec, and the North under a more assertive federal mandate.

The result would mean a formidable aerospace sector, an empowered navy in the Arctic, and domestic nuclear capabilities.

"This is not about warmongering," Pearson tells Diefenbaker. "If we actually want a seat at the top table, let's bring more than polite conversation."

By the end of their discussion, they emerge with a rough blueprint: Avro Arrow 2.0, a homegrown nuclear research program, and a strategy to keep Americans at arm's length on critical defence issues. Canadians, they believe, will come around once they see the dangers of the global standoff.

Following the dissolution of the Parliament in the spring of 1962, Pearson and Diefenbaker, acknowledge there will be a significant opposition to their proposal and agree to form a national unity government. The NDP remains the pacifist option and wins an unprecedented 40 percent of the vote. However risky a gamble it was, over half of the votes are cast for Liberals and Conservatives.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchel H. Miller Jr., "The Attainment of the Absolute in Hegel's Phenomenology," in *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader: A Collection of Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by Jon Stewart (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998): 427–443, <https://philpapers.org/archive/MILTAO-34.pdf>.

How do Pearson and Diefenbaker justify a nuclear arsenal to a populace that was ready to embark on a long vacation from history? They articulate three core principles:

- 1. No outsourcing survival.** By producing warheads and upgraded Avro Arrows, Canada ensures it will never be relegated to a junior partner in defence arrangements. Accepting American warheads, in Diefenbaker's view, merely traded one dependency for another.
- 2. An Arctic imperative.** Both leaders see the North as critical for asserting sovereignty. They sketch out the need for nuclear submarines —long before such plans even cross the real-world horizon of Canadian defence policy.
- 3. A seat at the global table.** Pearson knows that controlling nuclear arms will elevate Canada's voice in NATO and East-West negotiations alike. Good intentions go further when underwritten by strategic capabilities.

This bold doctrine clashes with the peacekeeping myth that would eventually define Pearson in our own timeline. Here, he's no starry-eyed idealist, but a statesman who believes that moral leadership without power is as fleeting as an Arctic thaw.

Their first step is to reverse the 1959 cancellation of the Avro Arrow. The program, once dismissed as too expensive, now becomes the cornerstone of a new national project. Engineers who had started looking south for opportunities are coaxed back.

Wartime-level budgets are earmarked to refine the Arrow's aerodynamics, avionics, and weapons integration—shifting from a purely defensive interceptor into a platform capable of delivering nuclear warheads. But the cost is staggering. New laboratories are built, nuclear reactors are expanded, and ballistic missile prototypes for potential Arctic launch sites are planned. Industrial spinoffs proliferate. Factories in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg churn out advanced components, while Saskatchewan's uranium mines supply the raw material for warheads. Test ranges pop up in remote northern regions, angering environmentalists and Indigenous communities, but the Diefenbaker-Pearson coalition pushes forward, insisting that real sovereignty demands real sacrifice. They take a page from Charles De Gaulle's "Force de Frappe."<sup>13</sup>

Under this alliance, large-scale defence contracts catalyze breakthroughs in reactor design, rocket propulsion, and high-end electronics. The Avro Arrow becomes a family of supersonic jets, each iteration more advanced and eventually nuclear-capable. Students grow up hearing about the Arrow not as a heartbreak but as the pride of the nation—much like Swedes revere their own high-tech jets from Saab.

But the transformation isn't without turmoil. Protesters fill university quads, decrying the new nuclear labs. Northern Indigenous groups sue the government over land appropriation for test sites. Quebec nationalists bristle at a policy that seemingly funnels resources into the West and the Arctic. Yet Diefenbaker and Pearson, buoyed by a core of supporters who see this as Canada's moment to stand tall, press on. "We're forging a different Canada," they proclaim. "One that no longer relies on illusions or borrowed shields."

Relations with the United States become a balancing act. On one hand, Ottawa's independent nuclear policy aggravates Washington, which would prefer a more docile ally. On the other, an armed Canada might prove useful in NATO's broader Cold War agenda, forcing the Kremlin to consider one more nuclear threat along its radar. Smaller NATO partners resent the newcomer nuclear state, but Pearson's diplomatic heft helps soothe alliances. At the United Nations, Canada's moral voice is tempered by realpolitik: the new deterrent policy shifts it closer to Britain and France—two other mid-tier powers with nuclear weapons.

<sup>13</sup> Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," *Permanent Representation of France to NATO* (2020, July 2), <https://otan.delefrance.org/Speech-of-the-President-of-the-Republic-on-the-Defense-and-Deterrence-Strategy>

Pearson, ironically, becomes the public face of a more muscular Canada, arguing that nuclear arms can be harnessed responsibly. Disarmament, he insists, requires a credible seat at the table; Canada, with real leverage, can shape those talks in ways a powerless moralizer could not.

## **The real world**

In reality, Canada took a much different approach—eschewing nuclear weapons and nurturing a self-portrait of moral guardianship. Yet this alternate path sees us discarding illusions: if you want actual independence, you cannot outsource your defence.

This departure from “peaceable kingdom” narrative would have no doubt scandalized some Canadians, but it would have ushered in a new national myth, more akin to French or British confidence. Critics would call it Canada’s fall from grace; supporters would hail it as Canada’s coming of age. Arctic submarine pens, advanced Arrow fighters, and an indigenous nuclear deterrent would have transformed the entire strategic landscape. Instead of politely asking whether Canada “matters,” the world would have seen Ottawa as a genuine force—complex, heavily armed, and not to be overlooked.

Had these two prime ministers embraced a nuclear path in 1962, the consequences would have rippled through decades of policy. “Being nice” is never a guarantee of safety. That lesson hovers today as we watch new debates about our Arctic defence deficiencies.

In the face of that, one can imagine Diefenbaker and Pearson from a distant vantage, nodding in unison: illusions about untainted hands only go so far. Sometimes, a country must carry its own big stick—just in case. It’s an unsettling vision of Canada, but also an undeniably powerful one. If Canada wants to leave an imprint, it really does need to bring some heavy boots along.

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