



CANADIAN FOREIGN DEFENSE POLICY: KEEPING UP WITH CHANGING GLOBAL LANDSCAPES

Date: April 18, 2024

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KEY EVENTS

On April 18, 2024, Dr. Jean-Christophe Boucher presented *Canadian Foreign Defense Policy: Keeping up with Changing Global Landscapes* at the CASIS April Digital Roundtable. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the need for greater defense spending in Canada and Dr. Boucher's study on the factors contributing to public support for greater defense spending. The study found that the presence of external threats determines support for funding, however socio-demographic factors may also correlate to individuals' views on defense spending.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Boucher presented his recent research which found Canadians react rationally to changes in the international system and tend to seek more spending on defense when there is a perceived need for it. The research sought to empirically understand what drives habits and trends around defense spending through the use of survey experiments and determine levels of support for military spending, addressing the perennial argument that Canadians do not want defense spending. The survey methodology used a control group to determine the validity of the results, which were measured against respondents who were primed with a vignette of an external threat. The 2024 Defense Policy Update shows an increased need for defense spending due to rising threat levels in the international system and this reflects the study's conclusions that domestic operations can increase Canadians support for defense spending.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Boucher's study found that Canadians react rationally to changes in the international system and tend to seek more spending on defense when there is a perceived need for it. The study was conducted in 2021 with a sample size of approximately 3,000 Canadians, interviewed by telephone and online, to determine Canadians' sentiments on defense spending. This was based on a thermostatic model, which was described as illustrating an increase in spending matched with a decrease in public support for spending. Dr. Boucher noted, however, that Canadians have demonstrated a willingness to increase spending on defense since 2001. Gender and political views significantly affect support for funding, with higher rates of men and those reporting conservative views supporting greater funding. However, Dr. Boucher observed a problem of causal difference wherein correlation is the only explanation behind the causal mechanisms of what drives willingness to increase defense spending across all demographics. The constant nature of the variables across time impeded an understanding of the variance of public perceptions, leading their research design to target these mechanisms. Thus, from an empirical approach, this derived a more comprehensive view of what drives the public perceptions on defense spending.

To obtain their results, the team deployed a survey experiment and statistical analysis upon seven test groups, one of them being a control group. All respondents were given a diverse set of questions to be answered on a Likert scale, however, all groups except the control were given prompts to an external situation before answering the questions. These external situations were categorized by the public's perception of military spending under certain conditions, such as domestic operations and dereliction of the international system. The study used six survey treatment articles, and their topics encompassed Canadian efforts to counter Russian expansionism in the Arctic, enhanced need for cyber deterrence against China, U.S. pressure on Canada for increased spending on NORAD modernization, deployment of fighter jets in operations against Islamic State, transport plane deployment to the Middle East to assist in UN operations, and deploying domestic military aid during crises at home. Dr. Boucher presented two hypotheses, the first suggesting that people may support less defense spending based off their higher or lower expectations of spending, a rational public response to an external threat, and the second suggesting that people may support defense spending when the Canadian Armed

Forces (CAF) engages in activities they are perceived as expected to do, including domestic operations or peacekeeping. The domestic picture showed that the perceptions were not as impacted by our operations abroad.

Dr. Boucher concluded by noting that the Canadian response to external factors shows a rational relationship behind the causal mechanism of public perceptions of defense spending. These findings show a Neoclassical realist explanation of how the public shapes and creates the distribution of power in Canada based on their perceptions. This has been highlighted by the lack of push back by opposition for defense spending in Ottawa. Recent announcements in the 2024 Defense Policy Update show the increased need for defense spending due to rising threat levels in the international system, met with systematic change in the willingness of Canadians for increased spending on national defense.

Question and Answer

Canadian peacekeeping has been declining for decades. How has this been influenced by public defense spending, and has a lack of public interest and perception towards global peacekeeping efforts been factors in this?

Most do not remember a time when Canadian peacekeeping was common, however, Canadians believe that peacekeeping should protect Canadians with approximately 80% supporting peacekeeping in theory. When Canadians are asked about troop deployments to conflict zones like the Middle East or Africa, about 50% of Canadians decline to support the deployment of troops.

How are Canadian military staffing shortfalls currently affecting Canada's defense policy, and how do you foresee these shortfalls being resolved?

Currently, staffing shortfalls are improving in comparison to last year, although retention and recruitment are issues throughout the armed forces. This undermines the ability to commit to and complete missions. A shift in armed forces' culture could also increase recruitment.

To what extent does increased defense spending create positive spillover effects for the civilian sector, such as through advances in technology or the creation of new jobs?

This question addresses the guns and butter argument. In certain countries such as Israel and the United States, there is spillover from defense spending and

research and development supported by data. Many soldiers drafted to specialized units in the IDF, for example, go on to build tech startups and innovate in the private sector. However, in Canada there is a premium paid in the defense industry due to low demand and low defense spending preventing the same sort of effect.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Canadian defense spending is below the amount required by NATO, and Canada's armed forces are currently facing staffing shortfalls and retention issues that severely limit Canada's operational capabilities.
- Many arguments have been presented as to why the public may support an increase or decrease in defense spending such as gender and age, however, these arguments concern correlation rather than causation.
- The thermostatic model in which support for defense spending decreases as defense spending is increased does not appear to match Canadian attitudes.
- Dr. Boucher's study found that Canadians are more likely to support increased defense spending when presented with an external threat and determined that Canadians were more likely to support increased funding when presented with domestic armed forces missions, such as COVID-19 response, but were not as likely to support increased funding when presented with a peacekeeping mission.

FURTHER READING

Biggs, Zak., Boucher, J.-Christophe., & DeCillia, Brooks. (2020). *Canadian Knowledge and Attitudes About Defence and Security Issues : Conducted by Nanos for the Canadian Defence and Security Network*, September 2020 Submission 2020-973. School of Public Policy, University of Calgary.

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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

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