

POST-AFGHANISTAN SYNDROME? CANADIAN PUBLIC  
OPINION ON MILITARY INTERVENTION ABROAD AFTER THE  
AFGHANISTAN MISSION

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A focus on governmental actions, possibilities, and constraints has dominated scholarship evaluating Canadian military interventions abroad. While the public opinion side of the equation has seen fruitful contribution, it still remains an underdeveloped dimension. This paper gathers opinion polls to offer a description of Canadian opinion on military interventions abroad in general and peacekeeping in particular. More specifically, the focus of this study is to evaluate public preferences after the end of the mission combat in Afghanistan to this day. Using aggregate data from twenty polls conducted between 2013 and 2016 on three specific cases—Mali, Ukraine, and Islamic State (IS)—this paper sketches the contours of Canadian opinion on the desirability and forms of Canadian military interventions abroad. This study concludes that isolationism did not prevail after the Afghan mission in Canadian public opinion. Further, defensive militarism options such as training local troops abroad has been favoured by the Canadian population.

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## INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, the mission in Afghanistan dominated public and scholarly debates on the role that Canada should play in the world. Originally, the Kabul-based deployment focused on providing security and overseeing the preparation for a democratic election. It gathered robust support in the Canadian populace as the mission “resembled later-generation peacekeeping

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missions—in other words, the CF were monitoring and enforcing peace rather than engaging in larger combat operations.”<sup>1</sup> The mission was in a relatively stable environment, although not completely free of dangers, contributing to an operation widely supported by the Canadian population. The operation then involved deploying limited forces.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequent years will radically change popular attitudes towards the mission. Canadian participation has ended up being one of the most contested and divisive cases in which Canada used force abroad. The beginning of the combat mission in Kandahar during the summer of 2006 marked a turning point, although mounting casualties could only partially explain heightened opposition.<sup>3</sup> Substantial costs, both human and financial, have been associated with this phase of the mission; 158 Canadian Forces (CF) members have died in Afghanistan, and it is estimated that the overall mission cost the Canadian government between 11 and 12 billion dollars.<sup>4</sup> Most of these costs occurred during the Kandahar stint from 2006 to 2011.

Partisan politics certainly played a significant role, with federal political parties jockeying to assert their positions in two successive minority governments. This configuration of power resulted in parliamentary debates in 2006 and 2008 to decide on possible extensions to the Afghan mission. The intensification of the Canadian efforts to intervene in Afghanistan turned the spotlight on the mission, as Canada’s diplomatic, military, and development initiatives and assets in the country were substantial for a relatively modest middle power.

Ultimately, the end of the combat mission in 2011 put the Afghan case on the back burner, with 950 CF personnel left, fulfilling the lower-key mandate of training local Afghan troops. However, public sentiments were not kind in assessing the outcome of the Afghan campaign. In an Angus Reid poll conducted in January 2012, 40% of respondents thought that Canada had made a mistake by sending military forces to Afghanistan in 2002, while only 36% thought that the country had done the right thing. Moreover, 65% disagreed with the statement that “Afghanistan will never again become a safe haven for international terrorism,” while 69% disagreed with the statement that “The war of Afghanistan was worth the human and financial toll.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, public opinion does not systematically determine decisions taken by any government; the Afghan campaign is a case in point, with Canada remaining in Afghanistan until 2014. However, it can at times act

as a powerful factor shaping the policy environment, providing incentives or disincentives for decision-makers to adopt specific policies. High levels of pessimism surrounding the accomplishments of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan call for an investigation of public opinion trends for subsequent missions. The question, put simply, is straightforward—what level of support can one observe for the use of force abroad by the Canadian government in the post-Afghan context?<sup>6</sup>

In order to proceed with such an inquiry, twenty-six opinion polls<sup>7</sup> from February 2013 to April 2017 were gathered for the purpose of this analysis. These surveys can inform our understanding of public preferences in the post-Afghan environment. The polls dealt with three specific conflicts—Mali, Ukraine, and Islamic State (IS)—although a majority of polls focused on one mission in particular: the anti-IS mission. This study will focus on support for peacekeeping mainly by analysing data from an Angus Reid poll conducted in September 2015. This specific poll is particularly interesting, as it is one of few inquiries to question respondents on peacekeeping and to assess support for peacekeeping in comparison to various attitudinal variables.

Overall, no post-Afghanistan syndrome can be detected, as Canadians were quite supportive of intervening abroad. However, the Afghan mission produced an effect; the nature of the enemy and of the operation impacts support significantly, in both peace enforcement and peacekeeping. All in all, Canadians prefer missions where the chance of Canadian casualties is lower. Training local troops is seen as an option answering this concern.

## INTERVENTION AND ISOLATION

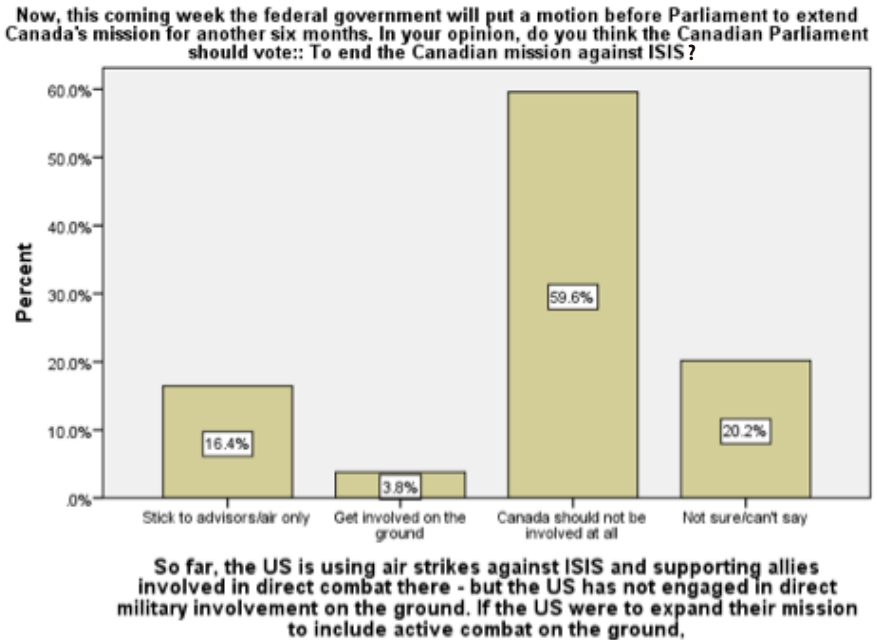
The first potential repercussion of the Afghan mission could have been to erode the legitimacy of intervening abroad. An initial glance at the data reported in Table 1 can certainly provide support for this hypothesis, especially when focusing on the March 2015 and September 2015 Angus Reid polls.

Table 1: Surveys from Polling Firms Offering a Non-Interventionist Choice of Answer. The number of choices of answers provided to respondents are in brackets next to the percentages.

Theater of operation	Support for non-interventionism	Dates of inquiry	Polling firm
Mali	11% (5)	Jan.31-Feb.4 2013	Harris Decima
Ukraine	15% (4)	Apr. 29-30 2014	Angus Reid
Ukraine	20% (7)	Aug. 18-19 2014	Forum Research
Anti-IS	23% (3)	Sept. 17-19 2014	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	44% (2)	Mar. 11-12 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	39% (2)	Sep. 22-24 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	9% (4)	Nov. 18 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	9% (6)	Jan. 30-Feb 1 2016	Nanos Research

However, both these opinion polls confronted participants with a binary decision to either extend the current mission or to end it altogether. Typically, percentages are higher when providing only two options. Questions asked in the March 2015 Angus Reid provide interesting insights into this phenomenon. On a first question, respondents had to pick between two options—whether to end (44%) or extend (56%) the Canadian mission against IS. Later on, participants were presented with three choices of answers in the case of a possible mission expansion—to stick to training and bombing only, to get involved on the ground, or to not get involved at all. Support for the non-interventionist option fell from 44% to 28%.<sup>8</sup> This 16 percent gap can be explained by isolating subjects that agreed with the non-interventionist answer in the first question and focusing on their answer to the subsequent mission expansion question (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Results from an Angus Reid poll Conducted in March 2015.



Support for non-interventionism erodes when more than two options are suggested to respondents. Indeed, 16% of participants who answered they would end the mission against ISIS on the first question opted for a continuation of the air bombing campaign, combined with training local troops, if the U.S. would expand the current mission. An air bombing and training campaign is a default policy choice picked by many Canadians, even among those that would be more inclined to favour non-interventionism.

Then, only 60% of respondents who preferred ending the current Canadian mission can be considered true non-interventionist, displaying a coherent and consistent opinion. It also highlights the preference for bombing and training options over a ground campaign (more on this later).

When analysing non-interventionism for the anti-IS operation, one finds that support for this idea was high (23%) before the deployment began. Nonetheless, non-interventionism did not endure; such sentiments declined as the mission progressed.<sup>9</sup> Non-interventionist sentiments were also popular during the Ukrainian crisis but the nature of the enemy explains these high levels of support for isolation; the great power status of Russia

seemed to convince many Canadians that this was not a realistic fight for a middle power like Canada.

A second potential effect of the Afghan mission could have been to discredit the option of sending troops on the ground in foreign countries to participate in robust operations involving combat. In the case of Afghanistan, a mean of 40% of Canadians supported the operation from 2006 to 2009,<sup>10</sup> with a mean of 35% supporting the mission at the end of 2010.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it seems credible to hypothesize that the outcome of such a long and unpopular deployment could have been to render unpopular sending ground troops abroad in a combat mission.

Deployments of ground operation received appreciable support although the theaters of intervention greatly influenced results, as can be seen in Table 1. For example, only 19% of respondents in a Harris-Decima poll conducted in early 2013 supported sending Canadian armed troops in Mali to fight the jihadists.<sup>12</sup>

Table 2: Surveys from Polling Firms Questioning Respondents on Support for Ground Operation Abroad by Canadian Troops.

Theater of operation	Support for ground intervention	Dates of inquiry	Polling firm
Mali	19%	Jan. 31-Feb.4 2013	Harris Decima
Anti-IS	21%	Mar. 11-12, 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	69%	Feb. 9-12 2015	Ipsos
Anti-IS	40%	Mar. 18-25 2015	EKOS
Anti-IS	65%	Mar. 16-19 2015	Ipsos
Anti-IS	62%	Nov. 17-19 2015	Ipsos
Anti-IS	47%	Nov. 21-24 2015	Nanos Research
Anti-IS	43%	Nov. 23-25 2015	Abacus Data
Anti-IS	72%	July 27-29 2016	Ipsos

Polls asking respondents their opinions on possible ground missions were relatively rare, with polling firms concentrating on support or opposition to existing policies (bombing and training for the most part). Additionally, data is rather inconclusive as four polls (the four Ipsos polls) showed overwhelming support for ground combat, while participants opposing it represented a plurality in the EKOS and Nanos Research surveys. The

ground troop approach also took the back seat to another military option (training local troops and/or bombing) in the Harris Decima, Angus Reid, and Abacus Data inquiries. Although this strategy was not disqualified outright by Canadians, it did not gather systematic and clear support from the Canadian populace.

Additional data has been gathered for another offensive military option: air bombing (see Table 3).

Table 3: Opinion Polls Tracking Support among Canadians for the Participation of Canada to an Air Bombing Campaign.

Theater of operation	Support for air bombing	Dates of inquiry	Polling firm
Anti-IS	64%	Sep. 30-Oct.1 2014	Ipsos
Anti-IS	66%	Nov. 19-20 2014	Forum Research
Anti-IS	63%	Jan. 27-28 2015	Forum Research
Anti-IS	76%	Feb. 9-12 2015	Ipsos
Anti-IS	56%	Mar. 11-12 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	65%	Mar. 16-19 2015	Ipsos
Anti-IS	52%	Mar. 18-25 2015	EKOS
Anti-IS	61%	Sep. 22-24 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	48%	Oct. 26-29 2015	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	51%	Nov. 17 2015	Forum Research
Anti-IS	68%	Nov. 17-19 2015	Ipsos
Anti-IS	59%	Nov. 21-24 2015	Nanos Research
Anti-IS	29%	Jan. 30-Feb. 1 2016	Nanos Research
Anti-IS	28%	Feb. 16-17 2016	Forum Research

Fourteen polls questioned respondents on the initiation or continuation of a bombing campaign. Support remained high through the end of 2014 and up until the end of 2015, with a mean support of 61% and a peak of 76% between September 2014 and November 2015. These twelve polls asked respondents whether they supported or opposed the air bombing campaign in which Canada was participating at the time. It is fair to say that this offensive military policy enjoyed a high level of social approbation,

with air bombing consistently gathering more support than a ground troop campaign. For example, three Ipsos polls (February, March, and November 2015) stand out as respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of ground operations and bombing campaigns. Support for an air bombing campaign prevailed over a ground campaign by an average of 4%.

Support dropped in the October 2015 Angus Reid poll with a majority of respondents agreeing with ending the bombing campaign mission against IS. However, it is difficult to conclude anything from this particular poll, as the question asked subjects if they would support the implementation of Justin Trudeau's campaign promise. Hence, support for ending the mission is intermingled with agreement that politicians must follow through and keep their words.

To put these surveys into context, they asked respondents if they supported statements announcing the possibility of sending Canadian armed troops in combat operations on the ground to fight against IS. As such, these questions did not present respondents with trade-offs, or presented combat operation alongside other options. Realistically, public debates and partisan positioning usually present citizens with many possible policy options. As such, when participants were asked to indicate their preference among many options, mean support for a ground operation dropped to 36%. A similar observation can be made for the air bombing campaign. The last two polls in Table 3 were the only ones asking respondents for their preferred approach fighting IS; the mean of support for a bombing campaign dropped to 29%.

An Ipsos poll conducted in November 2015 can provide an explanation for this variation. While 68% agreed that "to the use of Canadian Forces Fighter Jets in the international coalition's airstrikes against IS targets in Iraq and Syria," 52% agreed that Prime Minister Trudeau should stay committed to his campaign promise to remove Canadian CF-18 jets from the airstrike mission against IS targets in Iraq and Syria.<sup>13</sup> Thus, support for the air bombing campaign remained volatile, especially when presented with the option to put more emphasis on training local troops. A Forum Research poll conducted in February of 2016 saw 48% support (while 36% opposed) for the change of mission implemented by the Trudeau government (end of bombing campaign and increase of military personnel involved in training). Crucially, this change of policy was approved by a plurality of individuals who had voted for all parties (with the exception of the Conservatives) at the 2015 federal election.<sup>14</sup>



Training local troops gathered more support from respondents than other military options in four out of five polls, while coming to a close second in the other (see Table 4).

Table 4: Surveys Offering Training Local Troops as a Choice of Answer among Other Military Options.

Theater of operation	Support for training local troops	Support for other military options	Dates of inquiry	Polling firm
Mali	28%	Ground: 19%	Jan. 31- Feb. 4, 2013	Harris Decima
Anti-Islamic State	38%	Ground: 28%	Sept. 17-19, 2014	Angus Reid
Anti-IS	57%	Ground: 43%	Nov. 23-25, 2015	Abacus Data
Anti-IS	38%	Air: 29%	Jan. 30 - Feb. 1, 2016	Nanos Research
Anti-IS	27%	Air: 28%	Feb. 16-17, 2016	Forum Research

Important variations still prevailed, as the popularity of such options seemed to decline with time during the anti-IS mission. However, the relatively low level of support in February of 2016 can be better explained by the choices offered to respondents. In both the January 2013 Harris Decima and the February 2016 Forum Research poll, a humanitarian aid option was present, receiving substantial support from participants.

Efficacy of force may prove to be a defining measure for support to use force abroad, especially for attitudes related to perceived efficacy of air bombing to defeat the enemy. For example, in a survey conducted by Abacus Data in December 2015, 55% of respondents believed that “air bombing is unlikely to be effective at destroying ISIS.” As such, air bombing campaigns had shortcomings that could only be remedied through ground operations, which were perceived as more effective; the option of training foreign troops to conduct these operations (57%) was preferred to the alternative of Canadians directly intervening (43%).<sup>15</sup>

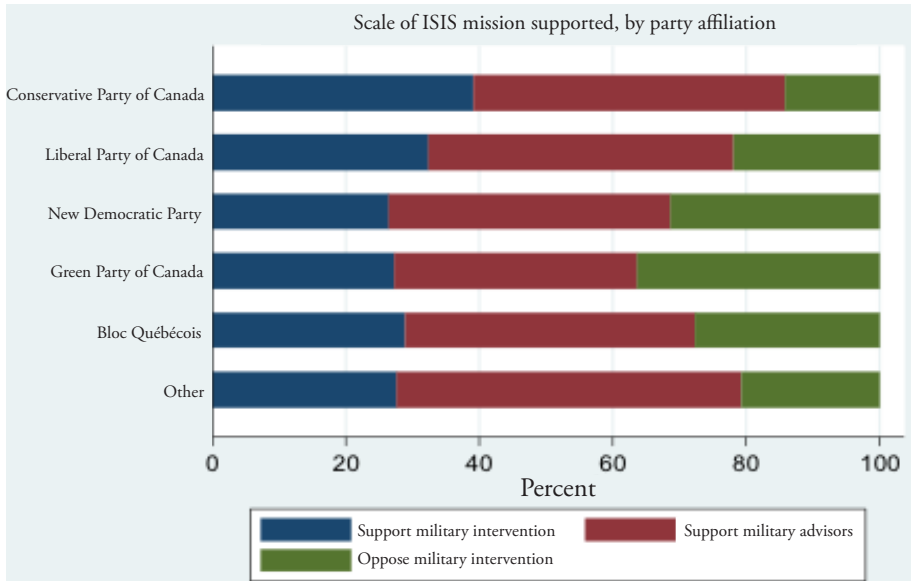
The preference for training local troops does not come as a surprise. Even at the end of the long and contested mission in Afghanistan, a strong majority of Canadians (54%) were in favour of the training mission in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2014.<sup>16</sup> In the post-Afghanistan context, defensive

(training local troops) and offensive (bombing and ground combat) militarism seems a less relevant distinction than first expected. The main driver of public attitudes appears to be the level of danger associated with specific deployments, with less casualty-prone options receiving more public support. This illustrates that the option of training local troops arrived at the top of the list of Canadian preferences, followed by an air bombing campaign and, in third position, a ground operation.

This preference for defensive militarist options clearly indicates heightened support for strategies that will not endanger Canadian lives. It represents a compromise; by denying non-interventionism, it is firmly rooted in internationalist practices by contributing to a collective endeavour with traditional allies. On the other hand, it shies away from an unambiguous support to the cause and a clearer message to allied countries; training and logistical support are often considered by partners as peripheral contributions. It is important to note that support for defensive militarism has been observed for the anti-IS mission, but also the Mali and Afghanistan missions.

Additionally, partisan support offers political incentives for the Liberal government to go ahead with such an initiative. One can observe that, on many international security matters, respondents who voted Liberal at the last elections (the main marker of partisan support in most commercial polls) tended to occupy a middle ground. For example, on the anti-IS operation, Liberal voters were less likely to support a military intervention than Conservative voters, but more likely to do so than New Democratic Party (NDP) supporters in an Angus Reid Institute poll conducted in September 2014. Liberal supporters were also less likely than NDP ones (and more likely than Conservatives) to oppose all involvement against IS (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Support for Intervention against IS per Party Affiliation in an Angus Reid Poll Conducted in September 2014.



Hence, from a partisan perspective, defensive militarist options fit with the mindset of the typical Liberal voter. It represents a middle-ground solution, allowing Canada to participate in a multilateral operation while not getting involved in combat missions. From this perspective, military interventions abroad represent a difficult decision for a Liberal government, requiring creative solutions, and defensive militarist strategies constitute such options. As was clear from Prime Minister Trudeau's commitment at the Vancouver summit in November 2017, such assets are also valued in peacekeeping missions. The popularity of offering training and logistical support ensures that such a plan is not likely to generate controversy, or discontent in the Canadian populace. Further, by not concentrating assets in a single mission, the possibility of mission fatigue is taken out of the equation. As was seen in Figure 2, the opinion of Liberal voters on these questions is not clear-cut; political gains are limited for either going forcefully or not intervening whatsoever. Hence, the decision to send CF assets to Mali in a logistical support and airlift role makes sense from a purely partisan standpoint.

Important limitations render generalizing these observations a perilous

enterprise. First, access to individual-level data is still difficult, rendering arduous more refined analysis of polls results. More importantly, most polls related to the use of force abroad conducted in the post-Afghanistan context addressed one specific mission: the anti-IS operation. The Islamic State organization represented an exceptional threat to the world, as it rapidly gained ground in Syria and Iraq, constituting a threat to both regional and international security. Moreover, the group sponsored or claimed numerous terrorist attacks that took place in Canada as well as in allied countries, capturing Canadian and international attention. It will be interesting to analyse if the enthusiasm observed in relation to the anti-IS mission is carried over to other Canadian military involvements abroad. The Mali, Ukraine, and anti-IS missions did not allow polling firms to focus on a traditionally popular option for external intervention among the Canadian populace—peacekeeping.

#### THE MISSING PIECE: PEACEKEEPING

The importance of peacekeeping in governmental practices and discourses has been evolving recently. The arrival in power of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) in 2006 marked a change of tone in Canada's international policy. A cornerstone of this new approach was to redefine Canada's stance towards the use of force abroad. According to Paris,

Prime Minister Harper has seemed determined to displace and delegitimize liberal internationalism and to replace it with the “courageous warrior” tradition. Practices such as peacekeeping, conflict resolution, norm-building, and multilateral diplomacy have not featured in this narrative.<sup>17</sup>

Emphasis from this standpoint was on Canada's participation in war and peace enforcement missions, rather than in multilateral operations such as peacekeeping or peacebuilding. This combatant identity, coupled with the endorsement of a “Manichean conception of the world, with the ‘good’ found on one side and the ‘bad’ on the other,”<sup>18</sup> contrasted with previous approaches. The objective was “to break with a past in Canadian foreign policy that is seen as deeply Liberal.”<sup>19</sup> Moral clarity tended to discard multilateralism (generally speaking), and the United Nations (UN) more specifically. Peacekeeping operations, as stated previously, came under attack as a clear manifestation of ineffective and even immoral multilateral engagement. As Staring argued,

In Harper's eyes, the chief legacy of Pearson and his successors in government is a nation that lacks the courage to stand and fight, precisely because it does not know what it stands for.<sup>20</sup>

However, these attacks must be put into perspective. Canadian involvement in peacekeeping has been declining since the second half of the 1990s. Indeed, before 2006, Canada was only participating in a handful of UN peace operations. As of 2005, 325 personnel constituted Canada's contribution to all UN missions.<sup>21</sup> The quasi-abandonment of UN peacekeeping missions by Canada predates the election of the first Conservative government. However, it must be stressed that peacekeeping endured as an alternative policy defended by opposition parties, Liberals and New Democrats alike, during the years of Conservative rule.

The Liberals voiced a strong commitment to peacekeeping during the 2015 electoral campaign, wanting to reengage the country in these types of operations. The election of Donald Trump and the resulting uncertainty about American intentions yielded a period of hesitation and delays in announcing Canada's own intentions as far as military involvements were concerned. If peacekeeping endured as an idea in partisan politics, the same can be said about its persistence in public opinion. Different studies have concluded that it still gathers great popular support,<sup>22</sup> although signs of a modest decline have been observed in recent years. For example, the percentage of Canadians citing peacekeeping as Canada's most positive contribution to the world dropped steadily from 2004 to 2012. However, the peacekeeping option has remained the most common response to the question.<sup>23</sup> The Canadian Elections Survey (CES) provides additional evidence of a persisting allegiance. A strong majority of Canadians agreed that "Canada should participate in peacekeeping operations abroad even if it puts the lives of Canadians at risk," with 80% of respondents supporting this statement in the 2004 CES, and 79% in 2008 and 2011.<sup>24</sup> However, these questions were framed in abstract terms and no specific theaters of operation were cited. These numbers contrast significantly with declining popular support for the Afghanistan mission, an operation in which higher levels of casualty impacted popular support among specific segments of the population.<sup>25</sup>

A recent Nanos Research poll confirmed the enduring popularity of peacekeeping when cast in general terms. Indeed, 74% of respondents qualified the use of Canadian military resources in UN peacekeeping missions as

“good” or “very good.” Much in the same vein, 69% of Canadians support “deploying Canadian Forces personnel to areas where fighting is still active as United Nations peacekeepers.”<sup>26</sup>

Hence, peacekeeping has kept a relatively privileged status in public preferences, even though Canadian troops did not participate in a significant fashion in any such mission in decades. This study cannot evaluate levels of support for specific peacekeeping deployments or generate comparative insights with the data presented in the first section. Peacekeeping is also part of the myths and imagery shared by many Canadians when comes time to describe Canada’s international identity. However, at the general idea level, the term may mean different things for different people, as many different interpretations can be associated with the term “peacekeeping.”

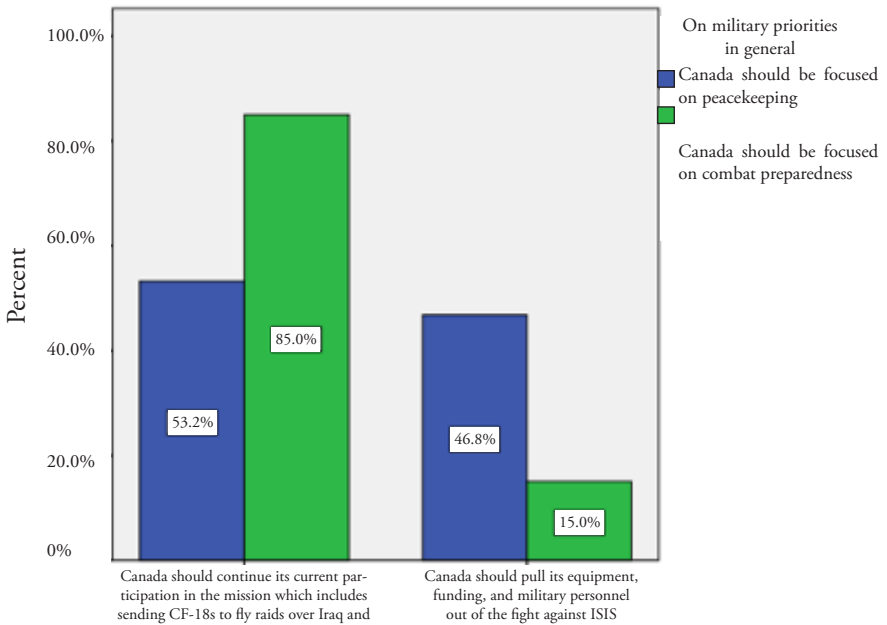
An Angus Reid poll conducted in September 2015 can partially address this shortcoming. This particular survey was performed during the 2015 electoral campaign and focused on questions related to Canadian foreign policy. It is also one of the only polls in recent years that has produced a question on peacekeeping. A glance at results highlights strong support for peacekeeping. The Angus Reid Institute asked respondents whether the Canadian military should focus on peacekeeping or on combat preparedness. Overall, 74% chose peacekeeping while only 24% preferred combat preparedness. Peacekeeping gathered overwhelming support from respondents who had voted for all parties except the Conservatives, from 84% for Liberal supporters to 96% for Bloc supporters. Hence, peacekeeping was not only a rhetorical device defended by Opposition parties during the Harper days; it also found high resonance in the Canadian public and with people likely to support all political parties except the Conservatives.

A focus on other questions complicates the overall portrait. For one, general statements of support for peacekeeping do not amount to support for specific peacekeeping missions. For example, a Forum Research poll conducted in October 2016 found that 56% approved sending 600 Canadian troops “to Africa to take part in peacekeeping missions,” far from the higher levels of support for peacekeeping in general.<sup>27</sup> This proportion drops to 44% in a follow-up question where respondents were made aware that Canadian peacekeepers may come under fire as a result of partaking in these missions; the same casualty-wary attitude noted previously on combat missions prevailed. This drop can partially be explained by the fact that 15% of Liberal voters that approved peacekeeping now disapproved such

dangerous missions; a similar phenomenon was observed for NDP voters, but not for respondents voting Conservative.

Indeed, if Canadians are generally highly supportive of peacekeeping, it does not mean that they oppose specific combat missions. As can be seen in Figure 3, support for peacekeeping was less coherent than it was for combat preparedness in the case of the anti-IS mission.

Figure 3: Support for Peacekeeping or Combat, and Opinions on Whether to Extend or End the Mission against IS.



A majority of respondents who preferred peacekeeping over combat in general, acquiesced to extending the combat mission against IS. The same cannot be said for supporters of combat preparedness, with only a small minority of individuals expressing support for combat preparedness electing to end the anti-IS campaign.

Additionally, the analysis of other questions is required to detect whether the support for peacekeeping owed more to the imagery tied to the term or

to deep, principled attachment. Peacekeeping has been conceptualized as a practice inherently associated with internationalist principles, more precisely liberal internationalism. A liberal internationalist vision entails support for concrete actions such as peacekeeping, promotion of human rights, fairness in trade relationships, and a commitment to development aid, all in order to better the international community and create a just international order.<sup>28</sup> Can one observe support for such ideas alongside peacekeeping?

Overall, respondents who selected peacekeeping are more inclined than those who preferred combat preparedness to increase foreign aid contributions to 0.7% of the Gross National Income (30% versus 13%), to accept Syrian refugees (76% versus 59%), and to consider fighting against human rights abuses in other countries a priority (20% versus 8%). Nonetheless, this contrasting picture does not hide the fact that agreement with a liberal internationalist practice such as peacekeeping does not entirely correlate with other liberal internationalist priorities. For example, 20% of respondents who favored peacekeeping also expressed that they would prefer the Government of Canada do nothing about the Syrian refugee crisis. Moreover, 70% of these same respondents did not want the budget devoted to international aid to increase. Additionally, a majority of them (57%) placed “building better trade ties with international partners” at the top of their foreign policy priorities, far ahead from “being a leader in foreign aid and humanitarian causes” (38%), favoring an economic internationalist worldview over a liberal one.<sup>29</sup>

An important reason to support peacekeeping might well be found in a question where individuals were asked to assess whether Canada’s reputation was better or worse in 2015 than it was in 2005. At this, 48% of peacekeeping supporters assessed that Canada’s international reputation was worse off than it was 2005. Although a retreat from peacekeeping was not the only foreign policy decision made during Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s tenure, the promotion of a warrior image was central in the conservative reengineering of the country’s international policy.

The decision of the Trudeau government to not centralize its peacekeeping assets in one mission will probably not help the scarcity of data on the public opinion of peacekeeping. High-issue salience is typically a driver for polls to be conducted, and media outlets will show interest in paying for polls when specific missions are at the top of the political agenda. Sprinkling Canada’s contribution in multiple peacekeeping operations will have the



likely effect of ensuring that no mission will be a hot button electoral issue.

## CONCLUSION

Canadian public opinion in the post-Afghanistan environment displays elements of both continuity and change. Some significant changes can be noted. For one, the combat mission against IS gathered high levels of support, without experiencing mission fatigue. Other hypothetical theaters of intervention (Mali and Ukraine) received lower levels of approbation than the Afghan mission.

However, elements of continuity were more numerous. Canadians continued to favor types of involvement in which the risk of Canadian casualties was limited. For example, respondents approved in higher numbers a bombing operation than a ground combat one to fight IS. The option of training local troops abroad rose as a preferred option for most Canadians, and a similar type of support was given for the Afghan training mission (2011 through to 2014). Isolationist sentiments did not rise as a result of the Afghan mission. In fact, such attitudes remained stable during the time period studied, being influenced more by the theater of operation (Ukraine being a prime example).

Additionally, public opinion on combat mission and peacekeeping share many similarities. In both cases, Canadians are more supportive of safer missions for Canadian troops. The theaters of operation had an impact in both cases, with peacekeeping in African countries receiving less support than peacekeeping in general. On this point, the gravity of the threat plays a significant role; IS is perceived as an existential threat by Canadians more than a far-away and often ambiguous threat in a remote African nation. The Angus Reid poll conducted in September 2015 highlighted another relevant point—in the minds of most Canadians, peacekeeping and combat are not separated realities and dichotomous choices. As we observed, one can be supportive of peacekeeping, while also recognizing that the country needs to partake in a combat operation against an enemy. Such an observation should inform our understandings and influence the wording and choices of answers offered to respondents. A more thorough investigation of Canadian perceptions of peacekeeping is in order. The term is one of the most heavily loaded terms in the Canadian psyche, carrying with it many different myths,

symbols, and narratives.

Additionally, the term is constructed and used by a political elite that, in turn, defines this practice in specific ways, not always matching rhetoric with reality. As was made clear by the September 2015 Angus Reid poll, peacekeeping does not necessarily belong in a liberal internationalist mindset anymore. As such, it is not automatically associated in the minds of many Canadians with do-goodism or making a more just international order. Misconceptions also abound. For example, a Strategic Counsel survey done in 2006 found that 72% of respondents did not think the Canadian mission in Afghanistan involved combat, associating the operation with a peacekeeping one.<sup>30</sup> The level of information held by Canadians on these issues varies, with more informed Canadians typically being more supportive of using force abroad. Hence, an important (but understudied) variable when testing for attitudes on peacekeeping, should be the general awareness of respondents towards international affairs or specific cases of Canadian military involvement abroad.

The fact that Canada did not participate in any peacekeeping mission in some length of time limits the observations one can generate about public support for such interventions abroad. The decision to support the UN mission in Mali did not generate polling data either. It is unfortunate, as inquiries on specific missions help us figure out more precisely public sentiments for this type of operations. Approval is usually lower for specific peacekeeping missions than it is for peacekeeping in general.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the question about peacekeeping analyzed in the previous section frames it in a specific way, presenting it in a dichotomy with combat preparedness. The evolution of peacekeeping missions in recent years does not allow for such a non-violent description, as the use of force is now an intricate part of peacekeeping missions, especially when considering the possibility of robust peacekeeping mission deployments.

Practices about the use of force abroad have a tendency to evolve and to adapt to new environments, while the perceptions of them do not. The same can be said about the favored option in combat missions, which is the training of local troops. This practice has emerged out of a peacebuilding approach, emphasizing on the security sector reform of post-conflict societies.<sup>32</sup> From a peacebuilding perspective, strengthening state security institutions was performed in a post-conflict environment, one in which belligerents agreed to a common peaceful transition. However, in recent years, training

local troops has been a default solution implemented in societies tackling with insurgencies. It has also allowed Canadian troops to partake less in combat while reducing costs for politicians due to the low risks associated with such deployments.

The Canadian contribution to the United Nations mission in Mali represents a perfect illustration of this new pattern. The mission is restricted both in time (twelve months) and in Canadian personnel (200 soldiers). It also positions Canada in a specialized role, one of providing logistical support. This role is bestowed a high level of support among Canadians, as defensive militarist options represent a more consensual strategy to intervene abroad.

#### ENDNOTES

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