

The myths of Canadian peacekeeping



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There is at least one member of Canada's military establishment who holds out hope that Canada will again become a peacekeeping nation. That person is military college professor and defence operations analyst Walter Dorn. He came to prorogation-bound Ottawa last week to tell whomever would listen that he believes Canada will become a peacekeeping nation once again.

But, Dorn says, Canada is still held back by two false military peacekeeping mythologies.

The first one is that Canada is still a peacekeeping nation. This couldn't be any farther from the truth. Canada has only 55 military peacekeepers left of the thousands that once led the way from one world hot spot to the next. At one time Canada was the number one contributor of United Nations peacekeeping operations, contributing 10

per cent of the world's peacekeeping forces. Today Canada's contribution is .01 per cent.

The other false story is that Canada was never a peacekeeper to begin with. That, Dorn patiently explains, is equally untrue. Of course, Canada's military has played important roles in combat operations around the world. But the record shows that Canada was rapidly becoming one of the main architects of a bold, new way of using military might to prevent competing sides from slaughtering each other while opening the door to diplomatic solutions.

The art of peacekeeping has always been an imperfect one, just as the United Nations has always been a flawed organization. And there have been failed missions and successful ones.

But peacekeeping is the one military venture that actually has a future. Wars, small ones and big ones alike, do not make a future except for the arms dealers. And the UN is the only world body that offers an alternative narrative to war.

Dorn says that Canada didn't win a Nobel Peace prize for nothing. A vision was launched and Canadian blood was shed. But its creators like Lester B. Pearson knew that they were only building the most basic framework. If the UN is ever to have a permanent peacekeeping force, strong and

responsive enough to reach into the world's most dangerous flash points, a lot of work will have to be done.

The time following 9/11 was a terrible setback for peacekeeping. The US turned its back on the UN while throwing itself and its allies into the war on terror. UN dues were withheld, the White House treated the organization as an adversary and peacekeeping operations were discouraged.

Today, says Dorn, there is a very different story being told in the hallways of the UN's New York headquarters. Barack Obama's ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, who, unlike the Bush ambassadors, again holds cabinet rank, is not only paying US dues but taking the organization seriously.

At the same time, American military visitors are showing up at the UN, displaying a willingness to play a new role in peacekeeping. The tide is changing and Dorn says this is creating a new opportunity for Canada.

But, he warns, that this won't have anything to do with Afghanistan. Canada has wrecked its ability to take on a peacekeeping role in Afghanistan for at least a decade.

Having taken the role of a combatant, Canada could not expect to become a neutral player again. If a successful peacekeeping mission will ever be launched in Afghanistan,

Dorn said it would probably have to be made of UN members from Islamic countries.

But Dorn said there is no reason to think that Canada is not capable of recapturing its former image as a strong global peacekeeper elsewhere. Once Canada withdraws its military from Afghanistan next year, the timing will be right for the country to start repairing its former image as the number-one contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations. Canada's short-term response to the Haitian earthquake and the strong public support it received may also sets the stage for Canada's re-entry into peacekeeping, he said.

"The real test in Haiti," he said, "is how long will the soldiers stay, and will they be rehatted [in UN blue helmets and berets]?"

Dorn is also encouraged that many Canadian civilians are willing to volunteer for peacekeeping operations. Currently there are 115 civilian police and 250 other Canadians working on UN peacekeeping missions. He says that inside the military there is also a new willingness to explore peacekeeping missions.

On the political side, the jury is still out, but Dorn believes the future looks bright because ordinary Canadians—perhaps more than their leaders—understand that "the world's peace is our peace."

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