Don't underestimate the threats that we face

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The first decade of this millennium has been a difficult one. The attack on the World Trade Center, the now infamous 9/11, led to conflict in both Iraq and Afghanistan and set the stage for a world in which security concerns would trump all others. The emergence of new strains of disease and outbreaks such as SARS raised fears of an international pandemic and disrupted global economic activity. Collapse of the international financial system demonstrated the fragility of an increasingly integrated global economic system. Rising pressures for immigration and refuge from an overpopulated developing world have called into question Canada's capacity to accept more people and have raised the spectre of imported terrorism. And, against the backdrop of rapidly melting Arctic ice, we must now face the certainty of major adverse effects from climate change. Given these and other events of the past decade, it would come as no surprise if the majority of Canadians expressed serious concern over the threats faced by the nation. However, it would appear that such is not the case.

A recently released survey commissioned by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and conducted by the Innovative Research Group shows that Canadian perceptions of the threats to our vital interests in the next 10 years have shifted a great deal. In the survey conducted from Dec. 22, 2009 to Jan. 4, 2010, responders were asked to assess a list of possible threats to Canada in the next 10 years, indicating whether they saw them as critical threats, important but not critical threats, or not important threats at all.

Compared to the results of a similar study conducted in October 2004, climate change now dominates the agenda, while terrorism and potential epidemics have almost disappeared from Canadians' radar screen. Half of Canadians say climate change is a critical threat to the vital interests of the country in the next 10 years (49 per cent in 2010 vs. 52 per cent in 2004), making it the most important threat. About one in four now say international terrorism is a critical threat, a level well below what was being observed in 2004 (28 per cent in 2010 vs. 49 per cent in 2004).

Concern over the number of immigrants and refugees has grown since 2004, with more than one in four saying it is a critical threat (27 per cent in 2010 vs. 21 per cent in 2004). Overall, perceptions of globalization as a critical threat to the country have receded compared with 2004 (19 per cent in 2010 vs. 28 per cent in 2004). Finally, although potential epidemics dominated the list of critical threats in post-SARS 2004, only 16 per cent of Canadians now say it is a critical threat (60 per cent of Canadians said it was a critical threat in 2004).

The survey clearly shows that Canadian perceptions of threats have greatly diminished over the past four years. The overall concern, identified by "important and critical" threats combined remains largely unchanged but, significantly, the survey shows a major shift in the identification of these threats as critical. Here intensity matters, as the identification of threats as critical implies the need to take action.

The results of this survey are important because they indicate a lack of preparedness to deal with a difficult future. While it would be incorrect to suggest that potential threats are critical in all of the surveyed categories, the relatively low level of response is certainly out of step with current assessments.

A review of widely publicized forecasted major trends shows we face a future of growing uncertainty, as the international system shifts to a more multi-polar world. Given the growing power of information, we should expect to see an increasingly globalized economy that is pushing nations towards even greater integration and mutual dependence. In addition, we can no longer ignore the fact that the world's resources, in particular energy, food and water, are finite, requiring greater global stewardship if society and the environment are to be sustainable.

As nations and cultures move closer together, we face conflicting value systems which are often seen as threats to people's way of life. This has precipitated the rise of extremists, willing to use indiscriminate violence to promote their values, which in turn places the international system at risk. And, as if this was not difficult enough, we face a major shift in global influence, as the power of the West declines and that of the East rises.

Implicit in these trends are major threats to global stability, which in turn are critical threats to Canada and our way of life. Countering them requires national focus and a commitment, as part of the international community, to change the nation and help re-shape world governance. The fact that too few Canadians view these threats as significant does not bode well for the nation.

The kind of actions required to respond to these threats will take commitment and sacrifice. Canadians, historically blessed with wealth and security, have a generally positive view of the world and don't perceive these threats as a serious danger to their well being. But this must change. To successfully confront these growing challenges, there needs to be an honest recognition of the difficulties ahead and the development of a collective will to do something about it.

In the final analysis the problem is one of leadership. While it is understandable that such rhetoric does not garner votes, our political leaders have a responsibility to educate the public and set the conditions required for positive change. In short, it requires men and women of courage and vision. One has to wonder where they are.

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