



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **Peacekeeping? It's an Age Thing**

**by Jean-Christophe Boucher**  
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# COMMENTARY

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## PEACEKEEPING? IT'S AN AGE THING

by Jean-Christophe Boucher

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**P**acekeeping has been a central theme of the Canadian foreign policy conversation for over 60 years. Indeed, since 1956, when Lester B. Pearson played a leading role in developing the concept in response to the Suez Crisis, Canadian attachment to peacekeeping has been an integral part of our collective narrative and has shaped our national identity in both French and English.<sup>1</sup> In spite of our support for peacekeeping, actual Canadian contribution to UN missions has been marginal since the mid-1990s, almost 25 years ago.

As a way of signalling that Canadian foreign policy had strayed too far from its apparent roots in peacekeeping, the Liberal Party of Canada promised to renew Canada's commitment to such operations in their 2015 and 2019 electoral platforms. Despite this, Canada's contribution to peacekeeping under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau remains half-hearted. Is our fondness for peacekeeping more performance than policy? This is a question deserving further examination, especially at a time when our foreign policy is being forced to adapt to a disordered world.

The Canadian Defence and Security Network ([CDSN](#)), funded through a Social Science and Humanities Research Council partnership grant, deployed a survey exploring Canadians' attitude on foreign and defence policy issues in August 2020. In this [survey](#), we asked questions about Canadians' support for UN peacekeeping missions. Unsurprisingly, and consistent with past survey results, 74 per cent of respondents were supportive of Canadian participation in such missions. But when asked another way, the response was more tepid. We asked Canadians an open-response question on what they felt was the most appropriate role for the Canadian Armed Forces. Here, support for peacekeeping was lukewarm, with roughly 40 per cent of Canadians suggesting that it should be a focus of the Canadian Armed Forces, while 35 per cent answered "defending Canada/Canadians", and seven per cent responded "supporting NATO missions/allies".

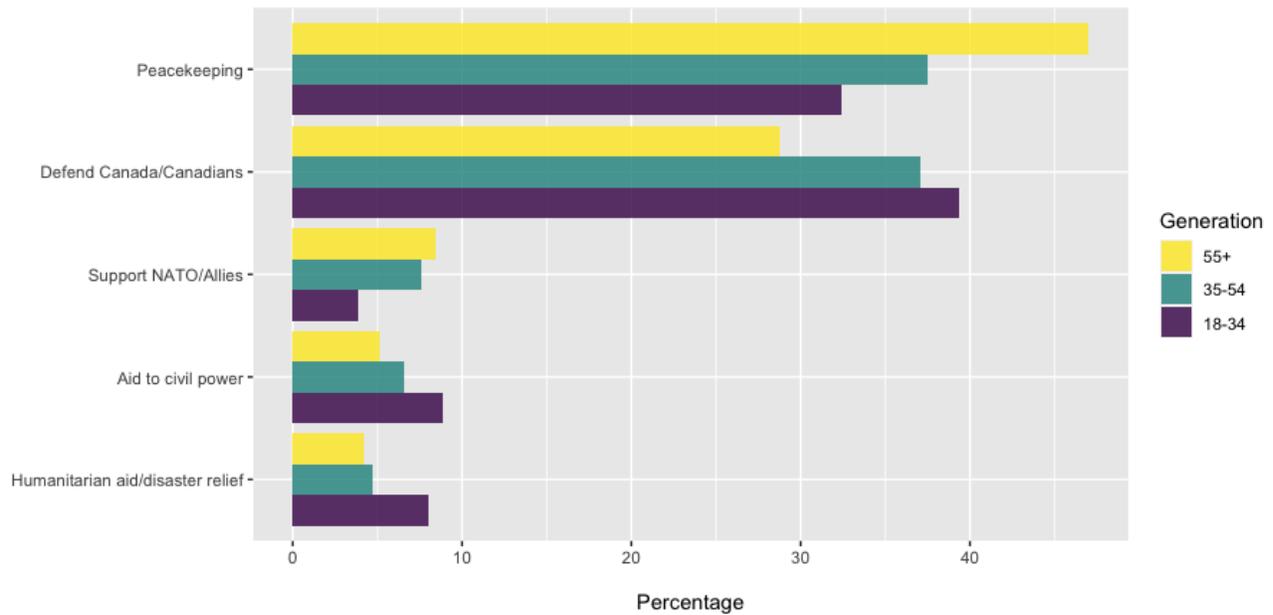
The results get particularly interesting when viewed by age group. We found that much of the support for peacekeeping is among older Canadians. As shown in the graphic below, respondents from the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) are generally more supportive of peacekeeping, with 47 per cent identifying it as their priority. By contrast, younger Canadians, especially millennials (1981-1996) and zoomers (1997-2012), are more likely to believe that "defending Canada/Canadians" is a more appropriate role for the Canadian Armed Forces than peacekeeping.

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<sup>1</sup> Boucher (2020); McLauchlin (2017); McCullough (2016); Paris (2014); Massie and Boucher (2014); Carrol (2009); Massie and Roussel (2008); Munton and Keating (2001); Martin and Fortmann (1995).



**Figure 1.** What Canadians suggest is the most appropriate role for the Canadian Armed Forces, by age group.



*Source: Nanos survey conducted on behalf of the Canadian Defence and Security Network*

In many ways, we are seeing a decline of Canadians' support for peacekeeping, suggesting that our generational imprint might shape policy preferences on national defence. We can explain this by the fact that younger Canadians have not come of age in an era where peacekeeping played a significant part of our daily information about international affairs. Instead, the fiascos of peacekeeping during the 1990s (Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia), the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the successive wars in the Middle East and North Africa (Iraq 2003, Afghanistan 2001-2014, Libya 2011, Syria 2014-) showed the limits of the international community's capacity to shape the natural course of conflicts. Furthermore, we are increasingly mindful of the rise of great-power competition between the U.S. and China, which is reshaping the basic assumptions of our defence policy.

In conclusion, it seems that younger generations are less enamoured with our peacekeeping past and are willing to refocus our attention to our national interest. This is worth bearing in mind as Canada attempts to define a new foreign policy suited to a disordered world.



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