

Canadian government-sponsored Security Forum rails against “strategic adversaries” China and Russia

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The Halifax International Security Forum, held last weekend in Halifax, Nova Scotia, had the character of a conspiratorial gathering. Senior US and Canadian politicians, military and intelligence officials, and academics debated strategy and plotted provocations and outright war against their capitalist rivals.

Their primary target was China, which was labelled a “strategic competitor” and “strategic adversary.”

But Russia was also identified as a “revisionist power” that threatens the US-led “world order.” There were shrill calls for Canada to dramatically increase its military presence in the Arctic, including through the Canada-US NORAD alliance, so as to counter a growing Russian and Chinese presence there. Ukraine’s former right-wing president, the billionaire oligarch Petro Poroshenko, gave a keynote address at the forum. Poroshenko and Ukraine’s ultra-right have bitterly attacked Ukraine’s current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, for taking tentative steps to de-escalate the war with pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine and reach an accommodation with Moscow.

US National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien used the gathering, now in its eleventh year, to make clear that whatever the outcome of the US-China trade negotiations, Washington intends to continue escalating its military, diplomatic and economic pressure on Beijing.

“We were hoping,” said O’Brien, “to have (an initial trade) deal done by the end of the year. I still think that’s possible. At the same time, we’re not going to turn a blind eye to what’s happening in Hong Kong or what’s happening in the South China Sea, or other areas of the world where we’re concerned about China’s activity.”

O’Brien went on to decry what he called the world’s silence on China’s treatment of its Uyghur Muslim minority. As if on cue, within hours of O’Brien’s remarks, major western media outlets, from the *New York Times* and CBC to the BBC, were publishing what they said were leaked Chinese intelligence documents detailing mass repression of the Uyghurs.

O’Brien also spelled out a list of demands that US imperialism is making of its Canadian partners to counter what he termed the “very serious threats to our freedom and our

security,” from China, Russia, Iran and Venezuela.

These demands include: meeting the commitment Ottawa gave NATO to spend two percent of GDP on defence by 2024; excluding the China-based telecommunications giant Huawei from Canada’s 5-G network; and rapidly militarizing Canada’s Arctic, which O’Brien termed the new “frontline” in the defence of North America.

Citing multiple government sources, Global News reported Sunday that Washington has sent a “blunt” letter to Ottawa formally demanding Canada meet the two percent military spending target by 2024, first adopted at the 2014 NATO summit.

The implementation of the US demand would require Ottawa to spend tens of billions of dollars more annually than already envisaged under the Trudeau Liberal government’s plan, announced in 2017, to raise military spending by 73 percent by 2026. That increase, which equates to around \$14 billion in additional military annual spending, will “merely” raise Canada’s defence spending from 1.2 to 1.4 percent of GDP.

There are longstanding tactical differences between Ottawa and Washington over the NATO spending pledge. In 2014, even right-wing Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper complained that it couldn’t be implemented because the Canadian population would not understand why it is necessary to spend 2 percent of GDP on the military. Fearing that such a massive increase would trigger widespread popular opposition, the Liberals have refused to say if or when Canada will meet the NATO target.

However, Canadian Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan avoided directly opposing O’Brien’s demand. He called it a long-term project, while trumpeting the huge additional sums the Trudeau government is already spending on new fleets of warships and fighter jets, and Canada’s contributions to NATO.

As Canadian Prime Justin Trudeau noted earlier this month, Canada is playing a significant role in NATO’s war build-up against Russia, including by leading a “forward-deployed” battalion in Latvia. Canada has also supported Washington’s pullout from the Intermediate Forces Nuclear Treaty, which will allow the US to deploy intermediate nuclear-armed

missiles against both Russia and China.

The American and Canadian ruling elites are actively planning for a direct strategic and military confrontation with both of their nuclear-armed “strategic competitors.” However, as indicated above, the 2019 Halifax Forum was above all seized by threats and provocations aimed at China.

On Saturday, Cindy McCain, the widow of the US war-hawk, presided over a ceremony in which “the people of Hong Kong” were awarded the John McCain Public Service Award. Accepting the award in “their name” were Emily Lau, a former Hong Kong legislator and leader of the pro-imperialist, pro-US Pan Democrats, and student activist Figo Chan.

The event underscored the increasingly overt collaboration between the right-wing political forces represented by Lau—which, due to the absence of a socialist perspective, have been able to exploit the legitimate democratic and social grievances of Hong Kong workers and youth—and the imperialist governments of Canada and the United States.

Lau used her Halifax forum appearance to champion the 1997 Basic Law that was negotiated by British imperialism and the Communist Party regime in Beijing, so as to secure Hong Kong’s position as a centre of global finance capital and a gateway for investors seeking to exploit Chinese cheap labour. Declared Lau, “What we are fighting for is for China to keep the promise in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and the 1997 Basic Law, that Hong Kong can continue to enjoy a capitalist system, our rule of law and our personal safety for 50 years, until 2047.”

The ceremony served as a platform for the likes of O’Brien, Defence Minister Sajjan, and the Republican head of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jim Risch, to pose as defenders of “human rights” and “democracy.”

Peter Van Praagh, the president of the Halifax International Security Forum, claimed that “it is no longer a secret that [President] Xi Jinping’s China is working to make the world safe for authoritarianism.” He then went on to declare, “It is time for a comprehensive China strategy for the United States, Canada and their allies.” Toward that end, the Halifax Forum, announced Van Praagh, will work with experts to produce an anti-China strategy paper for next year’s forum.

The Halifax International Security Forum is organized in close conjunction with the Canadian government. Launched by Defence Minister Peter McKay during the Harper Conservatives’ decade in power, the forum has developed into a major venue for discussions of the global strategy of the North American imperialist powers and their European allies.

The official host of this year’s gathering, Defence Minister Sajjan, was only slightly less aggressive in his attacks on China than Van Praagh. “We are not going to back away,” declared Sajjan, “from the values our nation holds when it comes to human rights and the international rules-based order.”

This “international rules-based order” refers to the global predominance that US imperialism established as it emerged

from the Second World War. In its 2017 National Defence Policy, the Liberal government committed to do more to uphold the US-led “order,” including as, Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland declared in an accompanying speech, through the use of “hard power,” i.e., war.

O’Brien was far from alone in using the Halifax Forum to press Ottawa to take an even harder line towards Beijing. Several US congressional leaders, including Senators Risch and Angus King, warned that Canada-US intelligence cooperation would be at risk if Ottawa fails to exclude Huawei from Canada’s 5-G network.

Following in the footsteps of Harper, the Trudeau government has further integrated Canada in the US war preparations against China, including by deploying Canadian ships and submarines to the South China Sea. It also did the Trump administration’s bidding by seizing Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou last December on trumped up extradition charges.

However, tensions exist within the Canadian ruling elite over its China policy. While the military-security establishment is fully on board with intensifying the confrontation with China, a faction of the business elite views the expansion of economic ties with China as vital for generating profit growth.

In another session on Arctic security, forum participants painted a picture of the “democratic” and “peace-loving” states of Canada and the United States confronting Russia and China’s malevolent schemes for domination of the high north.

The Liberal government has already indicated its readiness to work with the US to “modernize” NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defence command), a key component of which will be the reconsideration of Canada’s participation in the US-led anti-ballistic missile defence shield. Far from a defensive initiative, this shield is aimed at making a war waged with nuclear weapons “winnable.”

As the forum was being held, the first of Canada’s newly-constructed Arctic patrol boats were on sea trials. US National Security Adviser O’Brien welcomed their launch, but urged Ottawa to invest in heavier, better-armed ships and ice-breakers. “As nice as it is to say we don’t want to militarize the Arctic, other people are going to make that decision for Canada. And Canada needs to be in a position to defend itself, defend its values,” said O’Brien.



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