

"Stephen Harper: A Warmonger or Protector of Canadian Sovereignty?".

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Introduction

Stephen Harper, Canada's Prime Minister from 2006 to 2015, is a divisive figure in Canadian political history, particularly in the realms of foreign policy and military affairs. His government significantly altered Canada's approach to defense and international relations, shifting from the country's traditional peacekeeping role to a more assertive, interventionist stance. This shift has led to debates over whether Harper was a warmonger who prioritized military interventions or a protector of Canadian sovereignty who sought to fortify Canada's role on the global stage. This article explores Harper's military policies, his influence on Canada's global standing, and whether his actions truly protected Canada's interests or exacerbated global conflict.

Section 1: Harper's Foreign Policy Shift

When Harper assumed office, he inherited a foreign policy tradition that emphasized peacekeeping and multilateralism. However, his government quickly pivoted toward a more militarized approach, particularly aligning with U.S. foreign policy under George W. Bush. Harper's strong neoconservative beliefs influenced his stance, seeing military intervention as a necessary means to protect Western interests and democracy. His public statements often reflected this belief, as seen in his criticism of Canada's refusal to participate in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which he characterized as a moral failing on the part of the Chrétien government

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This shift marked a departure from Canada's traditional role as a mediator and peacekeeper, particularly in multilateral institutions like the United Nations. Harper's

foreign policy was more unilateral, prioritizing Canadian sovereignty and favoring military alliances like NATO over broader international cooperation

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. This transformation not only redefined Canada's foreign policy but also laid the groundwork for a more interventionist global stance that would define much of Harper's tenure.

Section 2: Afghanistan: Combat Over Peacekeeping

One of the most significant examples of Harper's militaristic approach was his extension of Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan. While previous Canadian governments had focused on peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts, Harper's administration shifted toward active combat, particularly in the volatile Kandahar region

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. His government's decision to extend Canada's military presence in Afghanistan until 2011 reflected his belief that Canada had a moral duty to combat terrorism and support democracy alongside its NATO allies.

However, this approach faced significant criticism. Many argued that Canada's increased military involvement led to a rise in casualties and extended the conflict without clear objectives for long-term peace. Public opinion was divided, with some supporting the need to fight global terrorism, while others lamented the loss of Canadian lives in a conflict that seemed unwinnable. Despite the criticism, Harper remained steadfast, defending Canada's combat role as a necessary sacrifice for global security

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Section 3: The Reduction of Peacekeeping Missions

Perhaps one of the starkest departures from Canada's traditional foreign policy was Harper's decision to reduce its involvement in UN peacekeeping missions. For decades, Canada had been seen as a leader in peacekeeping, playing a significant role in global peace efforts. Under Harper, however, the number of Canadian troops

deployed in peacekeeping operations dramatically decreased, with a focus instead on NATO and combat missions

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Critics argued that this shift undermined Canada's reputation as a peace-building nation and aligned the country more closely with U.S.-style military interventions. By reducing peacekeeping efforts, Harper distanced Canada from its historical role as a mediator in international conflicts, replacing it with a more aggressive stance focused on military strength. This reduction drew significant backlash from both the Canadian public and the international community, as many felt that Harper had abandoned the country's core values in favor of militarism

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Section 4: Military Spending and Modernization

During Harper's tenure, military spending increased significantly. His government allocated substantial resources to modernize Canada's military, focusing on new equipment and defense capabilities. This included renewing Canada's commitment to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and bolstering Canada's participation in NATO

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. Harper justified these increases in defense spending as essential for ensuring Canada's security in an increasingly dangerous world, particularly in light of global terrorism and regional conflicts.

However, critics questioned Harper's spending priorities. They argued that the emphasis on military spending came at the expense of other vital areas, such as social services and diplomacy. Many felt that Harper's approach was overly militaristic, with too much focus on preparing for combat rather than pursuing diplomatic solutions to global conflicts. This criticism was particularly relevant as Canada reduced its peacekeeping commitments while increasing its military budget

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Section 5: Harper's Skepticism of Multilateralism and the UN

A central theme in Harper's foreign policy was his skepticism toward multilateral organizations like the United Nations. Harper often expressed doubt about the efficacy of the UN in managing global security, particularly criticizing its inability to resolve conflicts in places like Afghanistan

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. He viewed institutions like the UN as slow and ineffective, preferring bilateral or NATO-led initiatives that gave Canada more control over its foreign policy decisions.

This skepticism extended to Harper's general approach to international agreements. For example, his government withdrew Canada from the Kyoto Protocol, a major international agreement on climate change, arguing that it unfairly targeted Canada while allowing major polluters like China to continue unchecked. Harper's emphasis on national sovereignty and control over foreign policy decisions was seen by critics as a retreat from Canada's long-standing commitment to multilateralism

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Section 6: The Controversial Anti-Terrorism Act (Bill C-51)

One of Harper's most controversial domestic policies was the introduction of Bill C-51, the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2015. The bill expanded government surveillance powers and was presented as necessary to protect Canada from terrorism. Harper's government framed the bill as essential to maintaining national security in an era of increased global threats, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks in Europe and North America

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However, the bill faced widespread criticism from civil liberties groups and privacy advocates, who argued that it infringed on Canadians' rights and freedoms. Critics contended that the bill gave the government too much power to surveil citizens without sufficient oversight, raising concerns about the erosion of privacy and civil liberties. Despite the backlash, Harper remained a staunch defender of the bill, arguing that protecting Canadians from terrorism outweighed concerns about government overreach

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Section 7: Harper's Legacy in Military and Foreign Policy

Stephen Harper's military and foreign policy legacy is a complex one. On one hand, his supporters argue that he strengthened Canada's defense capabilities and positioned the country as a key player in global security, particularly through its involvement in NATO and support for U.S. foreign policy

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. They contend that Harper's focus on military readiness and national security was necessary in an increasingly dangerous world.

On the other hand, critics argue that Harper's policies made Canada a more militarized nation, distancing it from its peacekeeping traditions and aligning it too closely with U.S. interventionist policies. His reduction of peacekeeping efforts, combined with increased military spending and his support for controversial legislation like Bill C-51, has led many to label him a warmonger. Whether Harper's policies ultimately protected Canada's sovereignty or undermined its reputation as a peacekeeper remains a subject of debate

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Section 8: The Repeal of Section 13 and Freedom of Speech Debate

One of the most controversial actions during Stephen Harper's tenure was the repeal of **Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act**. This section, initially enacted in 1977, prohibited the use of telecommunication to transmit hate speech, which could expose individuals or groups to hatred based on characteristics such as race, religion, or ethnicity. The law was expanded in 2001 to include internet communications, making it a significant tool for addressing online hate speech in Canada

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Harper's government repealed Section 13 in 2013, framing it as a victory for free speech. Harper and his supporters argued that Section 13 infringed on freedom of expression, especially as it did not require intent to be proven, nor did it allow truth as a defense

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. This led to concerns that the law was being misused to suppress legitimate, albeit controversial, opinions. Critics of Section 13, including civil liberties groups, believed that the provision allowed complainants to weaponize human rights commissions to silence opposing viewpoints, particularly in political or ideological debates

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However, the repeal was not without significant opposition. Human rights advocates argued that removing Section 13 eliminated an important tool for protecting vulnerable groups from hate speech, particularly in the digital age where online hate was becoming increasingly prevalent. They contended that the rise of "e-hate" required stronger, not weaker, legal frameworks to prevent the dissemination of harmful content that could incite violence or discrimination

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The repeal of Section 13 is seen by many as emblematic of Harper's broader approach to governance—prioritizing individual freedoms and reducing state intervention, even in cases where the intervention was designed to protect marginalized groups. Critics argue that this move increased the vulnerability of minorities to hate speech, while supporters saw it as a necessary measure to preserve free speech

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Conclusion

Stephen Harper's tenure as Prime Minister of Canada marked a significant shift in the country's military and foreign policy, moving away from the traditional peacekeeping role toward a more assertive and interventionist approach. While his supporters argue that Harper's policies strengthened Canada's national security and solidified its global standing through NATO and U.S. alliances, critics maintain that

his emphasis on military solutions over diplomacy and his dismantling of peacekeeping initiatives tarnished Canada's reputation as a global peacekeeper.

Harper's repeal of Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act further underscored his prioritization of individual freedoms, particularly freedom of speech, at the expense of protections for vulnerable groups against hate speech. His expansion of military spending, support for U.S.-led military interventions, and passage of controversial anti-terrorism legislation (Bill C-51) all contributed to the portrayal of Harper as a leader who favored military force over diplomatic or multilateral resolutions

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Ultimately, Harper's legacy is one of profound transformation in Canada's approach to both domestic security and international relations. Whether viewed as a necessary protector of Canadian sovereignty in a volatile world or as a warmonger who distanced Canada from its peacekeeping roots, Harper's policies continue to provoke debate on the future of Canada's role in global affairs

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. His time in office remains a critical turning point in understanding how Canada navigates the balance between national security and global peace.