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PM unveils Canada First Defence Strategy

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Halifax, Nova Scotia

Thank you very much, Sub Lieutenant, for that kind introduction. Chief of Defence Staff General Hillier, Vice Chief Lieutenant General Natynczyk, all other senior members of the Armed Forces, Minister MacKay, Senator Oliver, I see Minister Taylor here from the provincial government, and of course, members of the Canadian Forces, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm very pleased to be here at the Halifax Armoury, and very pleased to be joined by some of our finest citizens, some of the most admirable people in our great country; the men and women of the Canadian Forces. Every day through your service, you and your comrades across Canada and around the world are protecting our nation's sovereignty and security. Canadians are grateful and rightly proud of the work you do. They recognize that you are heirs to a long and honourable tradition of military service in Canada, as the Sub Lieutenant mentioned, and they are also rightly proud of that history as well.

We've never gone looking for a fight in Canada, but whenever war has been thrust upon us, Canadians have proven themselves among the bravest, most skilled and most successful soldiers, sailors and airmen on earth: repelling the invaders at Queenston Heights, storming Vimy Ridge, taking Juno Beach on D-Day, saving Seoul at the battle of Kap'yong, staring down the Soviets in the Cold War, peacekeeping missions in numerous countries, taking on terrorists in Afghanistan. These are some of the great milestones of our nationhood. They remind us of who we are, what we believe in, and why we stand on guard for the True North Strong and Free. Now, some thought the end of the Cold War would mark the so-called end of history; that all future conflicts would be resolved by soft power; that we could simply lay down our arms and rest in peace. Thus began the so-called decade of darkness for the Canadian Forces. Even as new conflicts erupted in Africa, the Balkans and elsewhere, our military was starved and neglected. They kept getting new responsibilities, but not the tools to keep them going. Equipment was rusting out, manpower was declining, morale was sinking. We did almost nothing to assert our sovereignty in our North, in our Arctic. We had to hitch rides on American aircraft to deliver troops for disaster relief within our own country. Our capacity for peacekeeping, delivering humanitarian assistance, and taking up arms when necessary began to noticeably diminish.

Ladies and gentlemen, if a country wants to be taken seriously in the world, it must have the capacity to act. It's that simple. Otherwise, you forfeit your right to be a player. You're the one chattering on the sidelines that everybody smiles at but nobody listens to. Our government is committed to ensuring that Canada not only has an opinion, but that Canada is heard, that Canada is protected, and that Canada is a force for good, for positive change in the world.

Today I'm proud to unveil the Canada First defence strategy, our government's comprehensive, long-term plan to ensure the Canadian Forces have the people, equipment and support they need to do what we ask them to do. This announcement is a significant part of the commitment we made during the last election; the commitment to stand up for Canada.

As the name implies, the first priority of our Canada First defence strategy is to strengthen our ability to defend our country and protect our citizens. Minister MacKay will get into the details in a moment, but the bottom line is that we will substantially strengthen the Canadian Forces, we will gradually increase the numbers of regular troops and reservists, and provide them with more and better equipment to make them as effective and as safe as possible. Renewal of the Canadian Forces is the most pressing priority. Like the national workforce, the average age in the military has been rising, so we're going to recruit and train a new generation of soldiers, sailors and airmen, just as we're going to renew our aging fleets of aircraft, ships and military vehicles with next-generation state-of-the-art equipment. The Canada First strategy will improve surveillance of our land and coastal borders. It will also bolster our capacity to provide support for civilian authorities in the event of natural disasters, and it will help to provide security to major international events like the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver.

Our second priority is to ensure we meet our commitments for continental security. Canada's fortunate in many ways to have a defence alliance with the United States that has been nurtured for decades by governments, both Conservative and Liberal. This relationship, however, only works if it is governed by mutual respect, and the way to earn that respect is to ensure Canada shoulders its fair share of the burden of defending North America, including through our obligations under NORAD.

After ensuring the security of our country and continent, the third priority of our strategy will be our contribution to global security. Canadians have long desired to share the peace and prosperity we enjoy with less fortunate people in the world, and we have always answered the call of the world community to respond to global threats and international crises, just as we are now doing as part of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan. Our strategy will ensure that Canada continues to be a robust and reliable contributor to global security and humanitarian interventions.

Beyond strengthening our security at home and abroad, the Canada First defence strategy will deliver significant economic benefits for Canadians. This unprecedented commitment of stable, long-term funding will provide good jobs and new opportunities for thousands, for tens of thousands of Canadians who work in defence industries and communities with military bases. We intend to implement the defence strategy in tandem with a revised long-term procurement strategy designed to not just benefit but to build commercial capacity in the relevant knowledge and technology industries.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Canada First defence strategy will strengthen our sovereignty and our security. Our government will ensure that Canadian Forces have the personnel and equipment they need to do their job, to protect our values and project our interests, to fulfill Canada's international commitments, to keep our True North strong and free. Thank you very much, and now I will call on Minister MacKay to give some

of the details.

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