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The war in Ukraine could force Canada to shed its self-image as a peacekeeper

Over the past three decades or more, Canada has suffered from a deep identity crisis whenever it has been confronted with the messy, brutal foreign war raging in far-flung parts of this troubled globe.

The over-believing brutality of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced the Liberal government in recent weeks to confront some thorny questions. What does a peacekeeping nation do when it is not a peacekeeper?

And what do you do when faced with a nuclear-armed adversary whose default reflex is to wage war?

For decades, Canada has clung to a perception of itself as a peacekeeping nation. Experts say the war of aggression launched by President Vladimir Putin marks a return to the kind of conflicts not seen since the end of the Second World War.

That unbecomingly candid war will come into even sharper focus later this week.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau travels to Brussels to meet with other NATO leaders on Thursday. There they'll be asked to consider some decidedly non-peacekeeping scenarios in support of keeping Ukraine in the war - with an eye to confronting Russia over the long-term.

Their aim will be to keep the West out of the war in Ukraine and avoid a direct confrontation with Russia. It's as much an exercise in organizing deterrence as it is about putting some steel into the pines of NATO allies.

It may be generous to say the Liberal government has been reluctant to embrace anything that looks like a

Canada's inflation rate now at 30-year high of 5.7%

Canada's inflation rate rose to a new multi-decade high of 5.7 per cent last month, as the price of everything from gasoline to groceries to shelter rose swiftly.

Statistics Canada reported Wednesday that the inflation rate was the highest it's been since August of 1991. It's up from January's level of 5.1 per cent, and even higher than the 5.5 per cent that economists polled by Bloomberg were expecting.

"It feels like everything is getting more expensive, it's because it is," economist Royce Mendes with Montreal-based financial services firm Desjardins said of the numbers.

Energy prices were a major factor in the increase, as the ongoing crisis in Ukraine started ratcheting up prices during the month and into the next. Retail gasoline prices jumped by 6.9 per cent in the month of February alone, and were up by almost a third compared to the same period last year.

The data agency cited "geopolitical conflict in Eastern Europe and the Middle East" for the higher pump prices, "as uncertainty surrounding global oil supply put upward pressure on prices."

But the inflation numbers released Wednesday don't even include the spike observed in early March, when oil briefly topped \$130 a barrel.

"Gasoline's rise of 32.3 per cent is alarming given the further pressures on prices at the pump in early March," Jay Zhao-Murray with foreign exchange firm Monex Canada said. "With such a dramatic increase,

Aitchison says Conservatives, Liberals both guilty of 'using division' in politics

And if this longshot candidacy to lead the party into the next election succeeds, he's promising a "new approach."

Speaking to The West Block guest host David Akin, Aitchison said that people - both inside his party and the broader voting public - "recognize that Ottawa is not working."

"It's... divisive, and the rhetoric, it's all about division in Ottawa. And I think Canadians have had enough of that," Aitchison said.

"I think both parties are guilty of using division and differences of opinion among Canadians to divide us, whether it's differences of opinion or differences of where we live. East versus west, urban versus rural. There's no shortage of it on all sides of the aisle, and I think that Canadians have had enough of it."

Aitchison was speaking on an undercurrent of the party's increasingly crowded 2022 leadership race: how the Conservative party wants to present themselves to Canadians after three straight general election losses, and a failure to secure the kind of suburban and exurban ridings that gave Stephen Harper a majority in 2015.

On the one hand, you have the pugilistic Pierre Poilievre - the presumed frontrunner in the race - who has never shied away from a political scrap. Poilievre's team has already taken several shots at rivals Jean Charest and Patrick Brown in the early days of the race.

On the other side, Charest and Brown have soiled their messaging more around unity - although Brown has had some choice words, both directly and indirectly, about Poilievre's style of politics.

Aitchison appeared to position himself to come in the latter camp.

"I think we have to demonstrate that we are conservatives, we can be trusted, that we have the character and not just the policies, but the character and the courage to stick to our convictions and to speak to the folks that live in these suburban and urban settings, and to make sure that we're addressing the concerns that they have as well," Aitchison told Akin.

"And I think that the only way we can do that is by being united as a party and making sure that our message is clear and consistent and engaging with every community across the country."

Aitchison opposes carbon tax, but says it shouldn't be a "party test."

Aitchison said he opposes the federal price on carbon, set to increase in those provinces that don't have equivalent climate policies on April 1.

But he said the issue - which has hampered the Conservative party's ability to get out of these communities that are struggling. We need to provide hope for young people. When a young person finds that the only hope they have is to join a gang? We've failed that young person."

In addition to Poilievre, Charest, Brown and now Aitchison, social conservative standard bearer Leslyn Lewis and independent Ontario MPP Roman Baber have announced their intentions to seek a leadership bid.

Canada has until April 19 to sign up people in this area that can't afford to put food on the table and heat their homes. So it's an added expense that Canadians can't afford, particularly the most

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Ontario lifts mask mandates in most spaces, but it's no 'light switch' for life pre-pandemic, expert says

Ontario has lifted its masking requirements in most indoor settings including in schools, restaurants, gyms and stores as the province reported 551 COVID-19 hospitalizations and four more deaths on Monday.

The change comes a few weeks after the province lifted proof-of-vaccination rules and capacity limits.

Provincial politicians and top health officials say public health indicators have improved enough to remove mask rules, which have also been lifted in other jurisdictions across Canada and elsewhere around the world.

Premier Doug Ford has said he plans to keep wearing a mask in the provincial legislature "for the first few days" after the mandate lifts, stressing that people should be allowed to keep wearing masks if they want to.

Masks still mandatory in some settings

Health settings such as public transit, health-care facilities, long-term care homes and congregate care settings will keep mask mandates until the end of

April, when the province plans to put an end to all remaining public health rules.

Dr. Peter Jani, who heads Ontario's COVID-19 science advisory table, is still encouraging people to continue wearing their masks in busy indoor environments at this time.

"It's not black or white... as long as we take it slow gradually, we should be OK," Jani told CBC News Sunday.

"It's just not pretending it's over. There's a light switch and tomorrow we go back to pre-pandemic. We're not."

The province's top doctor has similarly stated that people must remain "kind, considerate and respectful" toward those who continue wearing masks.

Dr. Kieran Moore, chief medical officer of health, has also said that making masks optional does not signal that COVID-19 has disappeared or that the pandemic is over, but it means that Ontario has come to a place where it can now manage the virus.

"They want a safe return from March break"

Some local health officials in part of

the province's north are encouraging residents to keep wearing masks in indoor public settings.

School boards that wanted more time to keep mask mandates have been under fire from teachers' unions and parents, but the Hamilton-Wentworth school board has said it plans to keep the mask requirement until April 1.

Stephanie De Castro, a Grade 11 student at Senator O'Connor College School in Toronto, said "a lot" of students at her school walked into school wearing masks on Monday despite the mandate being lifted, including herself.

"I do think it's a little bit soon, especially after March break," De Castro told CBC Radio's Metro Morning on Monday.

"I'm not myself and a lot of students will keep it on."

De Castro said she will continue to wear her mask in school because she wants to protect her six-year-old brother who has not received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and her 80-year-old

grandmother who she lives with.

"I am tired of wearing a mask. I don't think it's normal... but I do think it is too soon for my personal caution [and] for my family."

Evon Woo, a Grade 12 student at Earl Haig Secondary School in Toronto, said he will choose to wear his mask "depending on the setting."

"When it comes to lunch time, crowded hallways... [I'm] probably going to keep my mask on just in case," Woo told.

Some teachers will continue to keep their masks on after returning to classrooms following March break, said Jennifer Brown, president of Elementary Teachers of Ontario.

"Teachers understand they're going to have to live with COVID but they want a cautious approach to the return," Brown said. "[They] are very anxious about the unmasking situation. They want a safe return from March break... many people have travelled during this time."

551 people hospitalized with COVID-19

Ontario is reporting 551 COVID-19 hospitalizations with 181 patients in intensive care on Monday.

The number of hospitalizations remained the same as the day before but had dropped from 602 exactly one week ago. Not all hospitals report data over the weekend, however.

Asked whether NATO could be involved in securing corridors for humanitarian aid or evacuation, Stoltenberg said it was Putin who was responsible for the brutality of the war.

NATO head urges Canada, other allies to do more on defence commitments

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says he appreciates Canada's commitments so far, but expects all allies "to do more" and follow up on pledges to spend at least two per cent of gross domestic product on defence.

Stoltenberg stopped short of explicitly asking for Canada to hit that mark in its upcoming federal budget, referring instead to previous NATO agreements dating back to 2014 that commit allies to increase spending and focus on a GDP target of two per cent.

"We have an agreement and I expect all allies, also Canada, to follow up on that - that we should aim at two per cent of GDP, because we live in a world which is more dangerous," Stoltenberg said in an interview Sunday on Rosemary Barton Live.

"I welcome the renewed focus from the Canadian government on the need to further increase defence spending."

Stoltenberg told guest host Catherine Cullen.

The NATO head was asked repeatedly about the level of spending he hoped to see from Canada, given Defence Minister Anita Anand saying this week that she was putting forward several options for spending to cabinet.

Anand also told CBC's Power & Politics this week that Canada had "exhausted" the inventory of equipment in the Canadian Armed Forces that could be supplied to Ukraine.

"I'm confident that Canada will follow up," Stoltenberg said.

Questions over Canadian spending come as NATO leaders are set to meet next week to discuss the war in Ukraine, as well as the future of NATO strategy in Europe. Stoltenberg said Canada had stepped up to aid the alliance, noting the commitment of 3,400 troops to NATO's response force, its leadership of a battle group in

Larvia and Saturday's departure of IMCIS Halifax as part of a NATO deployment.

"But, of course, there is a need to do more, and that's also a reason why I believe that at the summit next week, we will also start a discussion not only about the immediate response to the crisis in Ukraine, but also how we should develop and modernize our defence and defence for the longer term as a result of this brutal war that is taking place in Ukraine."

Stoltenberg said NATO had a dual responsibility in the situation: supporting Ukraine, but also ensuring the conflict did not spread further.

U.S. says it will not intervene directly

Concern about potential escalation has been a constant theme from the United States and NATO more broadly since the start of the conflict in late February.

Canada is dropping pre-entry tests. Here's what travellers need to know

The federal government announced Thursday that it will do away with the pre-entry COVID-19 testing requirement for all fully vaccinated travellers coming to Canada, removing a major roadblock to the free flow of people.

Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said that with vaccination rates high and the COVID-19 case count stable, Ottawa is now comfortable with reducing restrictions on travellers destined for Canada. The change will take effect next month.

"I think it's a transition phase of this pandemic," Duclos told a press conference. "We are now ready to announce further changes to border measures."

The government has faced pressure from frequent travellers, border towns, some medical professionals, the opposition Conservatives, airlines and tourism operators to drop pre-entry testing - a process some have criticized as pricey and pointless at this stage of the pandemic.

What does this mean for Canada-bound fully vaccinated travellers?

Starting April 1, 2022, travellers will not need to get either a PCR/molecular test or an antigen COVID-19 test before coming to Canada.

If you've had two shots of an accepted vaccine (or one dose of Johnson & Johnson's vaccine), you can cross the border in a way that's very similar to how things worked before the pandemic.

A fully vaccinated traveller will still need to complete a questionnaire in the ArriveCAN mobile app or on the government's website before approaching a border crossing. Travellers will be required to answer a series of questions about their vaccination status and travel history.

Since the early days of the pandemic, incoming, non-essential travellers have had to get tested abroad before boarding a flight to Canada or drive across the Canada-U.S. border.

The measure was meant to limit the introduction of novel coronavirus cases from abroad. The process was stressful - the availability of molecular



testing is limited in some areas and turnaround times vary greatly. Those tests had to be conducted within 72 hours before departure and many travellers reported slow processing times at some clinics.

The molecular tests also don't come cheap. Up until last month, a traveller needed a PCR test to enter Canada - which routinely costs well over \$200.

Travellers getting a positive result were not allowed to return to Canada until 10 days after a positive test - something that prompted many travellers to extend their hotel stays or rebook flights at premium prices.

While a test is no longer required as of April 1, symptomatic travellers will still not be allowed to cross into Canada.

What does this mean for travellers coming to Canada between now and April 1?

A pre-entry test is still required.

The government will accept either a molecular or antigen test conducted by a lab or through a recognized telehealth service. A rapid antigen test - a test conducted at home - is not acceptable because the test must be "professionally administered or observed," according to government regulations. A molecular test must be conducted 72 hours before departure, while an antigen test must be completed one calendar day before entry.

Will there still be arrival testing after April 1?

Yes, for now. While the federal government will do away with the pre-entry requirement, some travellers will still be randomly picked for an arrival test.

Some travellers will be given a

before your scheduled departure. All non-U.S. citizens air travellers to the U.S. must be fully vaccinated to board a plane headed to that country.

If you're fully vaccinated and travelling to the U.S. by land or by ferry, a test is not required. The U.S. dropped its testing requirements for land-bound travellers last October.

Now that Canada has done away with its pre-entry testing requirement, fully vaccinated travellers can cross the Canada-U.S. land border just as they did before the pandemic hit - although for now, people entering Canada will still be required to fill out the ArriveCAN questionnaire each time they make the trip.

Air Canada's Travel Ready hub online directory tracks the current testing requirements for all other countries.

Will you still be required to wear a mask when travelling?

Yes, that hasn't changed. Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said travellers on planes and trains will still be required to wear a mask at airports and train stations and while on board.

While some provinces and territories have dropped mask mandates, or are preparing to do so, the federal government will demand that federally regulated transport sectors continue to enforce mask wearing on board planes, trains and certain marine vessels.

What does the government mean by "fully vaccinated"?

To qualify as a fully vaccinated traveller to Canada, you must have received at least two doses of a vaccine accepted for travel (this includes a mix of two accepted vaccines) or at least one dose of a Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

You must have received your second dose at least 14 calendar days before you enter Canada. For example, if your second dose was anytime on March 1, then March 15 would be the first day that you meet the 14-day condition.

While some countries, such as Denmark and France, have changed their definition of fully vaccinated to include a third booster dose, Canada has not yet made that shift.

Duclos said the government could make a change at any time. He encouraged all Canadians to get a third shot because it offers much greater protection against severe COVID-19 outcomes - and it may also reduce the likelihood of contracting an actual case of the novel coronavirus.

Which vaccines qualify you as "fully vaccinated"?

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1 year after launch, Vaccine Hunters Canada says it is closing operations

Vaccine Hunters Canada says it is closing its operations one year after its launch to help Canadians across the country track down COVID-19 vaccines.

The popular volunteer-run organization made the announcement in a news release Saturday.

"Exactly one year to the day that Vaccine Hunters Canada started operations, we are humbled to be quietly closing our doors," the group said, thanking Canadians for their support.

"While Canada's fight against COVID-19 isn't over, we are happy that millions of Canadians are fully vaccinated with vaccines now being readily available for anyone who is looking."

Vaccine Hunters Canada launched in March 2021 with an objective to help Canadians find vaccines.

The platform grew on social media, with accounts on Twitter, Facebook,



Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Discord. Its Twitter page has close to 265,000 followers.

Vaccine Hunters Canada grew in popularity to the point where the City of Toronto partnered with the team to help get shots into arms.

The group has received praise from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam.

"A year ago we were in a much different place than we were today... Vaccines were just introduced and that was a really amazing sort of

they could connect to, to find a vaccine... There was a lot of confusion because this was new," Motahedin said.

She said that with a team of volunteers across Canada the organization was able to help people make sense of a lot of the COVID-related information that the government and public health were sharing with the public.

"It was changing daily. And we did our best to make sure that as many people as possible saw the urgency and effort that was put in trying to reach people," said Motahedin.

"It became a movement," Trudeau meets with volunteers behind Vaccine Hunters Canada - May 18, 2021. In August 2021, five months into its launch, the organization that gained 100 volunteers started winding down its operation as it pivoted towards automated services.

"Thank you for all your support over the last year," Vaccine Hunters Canada said on Saturday.

"The heart behind VHC is helping your community and finding ways to help others."

"We hope that everyone can find ways to work with their neighbors, communities and families to make this world a better place."

Was it really about vaccine mandates - or something darker? The inside story of the convoy protests

For three weeks this winter, a so-called "Freedom Convoy" delivered thousands of demonstrators into downtown Ottawa, turning the city into a cauldron of protest and chaos in the nation's capital and dominated the national conversation.

But who were the demonstrators, really - and what were they after?

Many of them positioned the protest as a fight against vaccination mandates from border-travelers. Others saw it as a campaign against pandemic restrictions more broadly. No doubt the occupation was many things to many people. But for several of its organizers, the protest was the culmination of years of work, their best chance yet to coalesce a movement around their preferred conspiracy theories and a violent anti-government ideology.

The convoy protest was not about just the pandemic, but about how the country was governed. "I happened without the pandemic. Organizers were able to leverage fatigue and frustration with government restrictions and social isolation to grow their movement, drawing on one particularly potent conspiracy theory in the process: the idea that an international cabal has taken control of Canada, and is weaponizing the pandemic to consolidate its dominance. This occupation was marketed as the last stand to stop tyranny - and has become a global rallying cry for a burgeoning anti-media, anti-science, anti-government political fire."

Remarkably, the occupation was ended without major incident. Normalcy has returned to downtown Ottawa: Commuters sit in slow, but not frozen, traffic. Politicians battle through the Centrepoint on their way to the House of Commons. Journalists roam freely, without harassment or intimidation.

The nation's capital is back to its frenziedly busy self. But it's an unsettling place. Where has the movement - and its anger - gone? And what comes next in its plan to stop the globalist takeover of Canada?

In some, the story begins more than a year before the pandemic. In a video posted to his Facebook page, James Baader is standing in a snow-covered parking lot in Thunder Bay, pointing his phone camera at the assembled convoy. There is a pickup truck with its bed full of red jerry cans. A small group of people mills about in reflective yellow vests, brandishing a Canadian flag. Cars and semi trucks are

covered in homemade signs. "Everybody in Canada is involved in this," Baader told his Facebook friends. "We got people across our great nation travelling to get to Ottawa to stand up for Canada's rights."

When it arrived in Ottawa, their convoy gathered at Parliament Hill, where the protesters demanded a say in how the country was governed. "I brought myself a pink slip," organizer Pat King said in an interview, "and I would like to hand it to Mr. Trudeau."

The convergence on Ottawa for two days in January 2020, dubbed "United We Roll," was moderately successful, attracting the support of Conservative party leader Andrew Scheer and collecting more than \$140,000 through an online fundraising campaign.

A few months later in Medicine Hat, Alta., Benjamin Dichter stood at an event to introduce a man who bills himself as a top intelligence analyst and whom Dichter, in a comparison to novelist Tom Clancy's fictional CIA agent, called "Canada's Jack Ryan."

When he took the stage, Tom Quiggin described a plot between Islamists and revolutionaries to control Western governments. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, he warned, was the apex of the "enemy."

"If he is re-elected this fall, and he does not immediately disavow his previous commitments to globalism and Islamism, he will then be pouring gasoline on the already burning embers of discontent," Quiggin warned audience members including Tammie Lich, who had helped organize the event.

Quiggin touted his speaking tour as an urgent call to resist this encroaching new world order. (In a 2019 podcast, he would warn that Trudeau would usher in an era in which "widespread civil violence occurs or, in the worst-case scenario, a sort of civil war.")

But there was another pressing reason for it: money. Quiggin was raising funds

to fight a defamation lawsuit launched after he accused prominent Canadian Muslims of being the clandestine leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Quiggin alleges is a terror organization. The lawsuit is ongoing; a GoFundMe campaign set up by Dichter has so far raised more than \$42,000 to fund his defense.

As a conspiracy theorist, Quiggin was convinced that something was rotten in Ottawa. He wasn't the only one. Norman Taveney then invoked the rallying cry of QAnon, the American conspiracy theory movement that claims Satanic pedophiles have infiltrated the U.S. government. "Where we go one...," he shouted to those assembled. "We go!" The crowd shouted back.

Standing directly behind him was King, who would go on to become a public face of the protesters.

The next day, Corey Hurten posted a meme to his Instagram account falsely alleging that Microsoft founder Bill Gates and the Switzerland-based World Economic Forum were complicit in creating COVID-19. Half an hour later, Hurten drove a truck loaded with guns through the front gates of Victoria Hall, an apparent attempt of removing the prime minister from power. Hurten would later plead guilty to eight charges.

In 2021, James Baader would find a way to put these myths together. The World Economic Forum provided a perfect target.

The organization hosts an annual retreat in Davos, Switzerland where members of the political, business and cultural elite gather to promote liberal economic policies and recognize the leaders who champion their progressive capitalist values. The Forum has been led by its founder, Klaus Schwab, for a half-century.

But in an information universe where institutions are presented as corrupt and malign, critics have coloured their vision with an ominous hue. Along with the



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United Nations and the World Health Organization, conspiracy theories have been used to allege the WEF is complicit in creating COVID-19 to the world to exact mass control, open borders, and the imposition of a Chinese-style digital surveillance establishment. In essence: Totalitarianism.

Baader wrote on Facebook that Trudeau "needs to (sic) be arrested and charged for treason, and for participating in concealing crimes against humanity" and warned that it was nearly too late to stop the World Economic Forum's devious plan: "WE HAVE BEEN LEAD (sic) RIGHT INTO A TRAP. A few more moves and it's checkmate, Game Over."

Pat King's presence was also increasing on social media, where he warned his followers, "There's an endgame. It's called depopulation of the Canadian race." Dichter had become increasingly involved in the People's Party of Canada, the right-leaning political party founded by former Conservative MP Maxime Bernier, and warned the Ontario Legislature of a "gradual Islamization of Canada by creating institutional identity."

They threatened. "Truckers," Baader wrote on Facebook in August 2021, "wanna make someone?"

In the months that followed, Baader came up with the idea for Operation Bear Hug, a plan to march after the United We Roll convoy. He would recruit a veritable army of patriots to head to the capital and surround it - in protest of COVID-19 vaccination mandates, masks, vaccines and the violation of personal freedoms he claimed they represented. He started an organization to advance the plan: Canada Unity.

If the problem was a global conspiracy, then the solution had to be more than just talk. Baader was seeking real change. He began touting so-called "memorandum of understanding" that detailed the protest's objectives. "By having the Senate of Canada and the Governor General of Canada sign this MOU into action, they agree to immediately cease and desist all unconstitutional, discriminatory and segregating actions and human rights violations," it read. Failing action from the Governor General and the Senate, Baader said, signatures would be collected to trigger a national vote to remove the government. "So this is just step one of calling for a referendum through Elections Canada," he said in a livestream.

The document also proposes a citizen's committee, spearheaded by Canada Unity, that would set policy alongside the Governor General and Senate. He expected to see their signatures on the document. "If they don't, they're incriminating themselves," Baader said in an interview. He began

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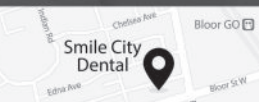
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