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Ex-PM Mulroney urges Canada to prepare for war

By Roger Jordan

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Brian Mulroney, the former prime minister who headed a Progressive Conservative government for nine years ending in 1993, delivered a bellicose foreign policy speech earlier this week in which he argued for Canada to more aggressively assert its interests on the global stage and prepare for war.

Mulroney's speech was delivered on the occasion of the NATO Association of Canada's fiftieth anniversary celebration. But it was aimed at influencing current-day discussions on the future of NATO, as well as the Liberal government's ongoing defence policy review.

Mulroney opened his speech with a broadside against Russia, accusing it of being the aggressor in Europe and portraying NATO as "scrambling" to respond. "Efforts to engage Russia as a security partner in Europe were dashed in the sands of Crimea and South Ossetia. The primary challenge now is how to thwart further expansion by Russia and to ensure that those NATO members that border Russia, especially Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, remain secure and firmly under NATO's wing," Mulroney declared.

This narrative turns reality on its head. Russia's annexation of Crimea followed the US and German-sponsored, fascist-led coup in Ukraine, which aimed at delivering a geo-political body blow to Moscow by harnessing the country to western imperialism. More fundamentally, ever

since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the western powers have been the aggressors, pursuing a policy—via NATO expansion—of encircling and isolating Russia.

The former Prime Minister spoke just days after it was made public that Canada is being pressed by Washington and NATO to be one of the four lead countries in the “advance force” that NATO is to deploy on Russia’s borders in the three Baltic republics and Poland.

Mulroney urged the Trudeau government to make the deployment and otherwise assume a larger role in NATO, before moving on to take a swipe at the Obama administration and its allies for failing to intervene more decisively in the Syrian civil war in order to overthrow the Assad regime backed by Russia. “Unquestionably,” claimed Mulroney, “Mr. Putin’s tactics and his commitments in support of Bashar al-Assad have been much more effective than the sporadic, inconclusive response of the US-led coalition.”

Summing up his prescriptions for Canada, Mulroney ominously proclaimed, “Canada has the proper credentials to play a significant role in redefining the mission of NATO and safe-guarding our own security. But we cannot meet that objective by offering to hold the coats of those more willing to invest. We need to be equipped and ready, as necessary, to fight to preserve our values.”

Mulroney’s speech comes in the midst of the Liberal government’s defence policy review, which is aimed at preparing public opinion for a major hike in military spending and the deployment of Canadian troops in military interventions around the world. Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government is currently considering deploying Canadian troops to support imperialist-led interventions in Libya, Mali, Central Africa and Haiti, in addition to Eastern Europe.

Mulroney spoke less than three weeks before the NATO summit in Warsaw, where the alliance is preparing to further ratchet up tensions with Moscow by renewing economic sanctions and by endorsing enlarged troop deployments on Russia’s borders and a stronger presence in the Black Sea.

The speech was also delivered just days after a document from the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS), the country’s premier spy agency, was released, in which it was claimed that Russia is “mobilizing for war.”

Canadian Armed Forces’ personnel are already deeply implicated in a whole series of US-led military-strategic offensives around the world. Earlier this year, the Liberal government considerably expanded the number of Special Forces troops and soldiers involved in the Mideast war, where Canadian troops are playing a leading role in the preparation of the offensive to retake Mosul. In addition, the Trudeau government is stepping up its Conservative predecessor’s commitment to align with Washington in the Asia-Pacific. It has endorsed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, the economic arm of the United States’ aggressive anti-Chinese “pivot” to Asia, and is pushing for closer security cooperation with Japan.

For Mulroney and many others, this does not go far enough. An endless stream of articles bemoaning the lack of resources available to Canada's military, both in terms of equipment and financing, have appeared in the press in recent months.

Mulroney made no secret of the fact that he believes Canada needs to vastly expand its military capabilities. He dismissed as "puny" the approximately 1 percent of GDP Canada currently spends on the military—an amount he claimed means "we cannot expect to be influential in NATO or in the defence of our own continent." He opposed relying too heavily on the US for North American security and urged Ottawa take a more proactive role in enforcing and expanding Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic and modernizing NORAD. This included an appeal for Canada to participate in Washington's highly destabilizing ballistic missile defence system, which is aimed at making a nuclear war "winnable."

In his criticism of successive governments for failing to spend sufficiently on the military, Mulroney touched on the dissatisfaction that developed among large sections of Canada's ruling elite towards the previous Stephen Harper-led Conservative government. Stating that his Progressive Conservative government had spent approximately 2 percent of GDP on the military, he took a none too subtle swipe at the Harper government when he commented, "We were less bellicose than some succeeding governments and talked less harshly about some situations but obviously our contribution was more beneficial to our collective defence and international obligations than it was in later years."

This was also an implicit attack on the previous government's unwillingness to take on the overwhelming hostility of the population to increased militarism. Notwithstanding his frequent use of aggressive rhetoric, Harper was forced to acknowledge during the 2014 NATO summit that his government could not meet the new NATO target of defence spending of at least 2 percent of GDP because it would be unacceptable to the Canadian population.

Mulroney insisted Canada has to act more aggressively because of the deepening capitalist crisis. The "brief 'holiday from history' that came after the end of the Cold War is truly over," said Mulroney. "Geopolitical rivalries have returned and the West faces major new threats."

Mulroney pointed to the weakening of US imperialism's global hegemony so as to argue that Canada must assume a greater role in NATO and the continental defence of North America. He cited the emergence of Donald Trump, who has dismissed NATO's importance, and the US's increased focus on thwarting China in the Asia-Pacific to support his claim that Washington is less ready to assume the lead in Europe and the Middle East. "This," he, "said is the twin dilemma facing NATO today—inadequate commitments from Europe and Canada and an increasingly reluctant alliance leader."

Lest Mulroney's listeners be in any doubt about the meaning of his declaration that Canada must be ready to "fight," the former prime minister invoked Canada's role during World War II in defeating Nazi Germany. Hailing the effort of a nation of 11 million people at the time, he enthused, "Canada fielded the fourth largest air force and the fifth largest naval fleet in the world... Our contribution and our steadfast commitment to NATO since Day One gives us an

impressive credential—a calling card of sorts—to offer views about NATO’s future. The cemeteries in Europe should leave little doubt on that point.”

The cultivation of such a militarist and bellicose nationalism, which began under the Harper Conservatives, is being embraced at the highest levels of the Canadian ruling elite. In this regard, it is noteworthy that during his visit to the White House in March, Trudeau embraced the same narrative of the joint Canadian-US fight in World War II to justify future wars of aggression. He declared in a White House dinner speech at the time, “For more than half a century, we’ve joined forces to protect our continent. And we’ve been the closest of allies overseas for even longer, fighting together on the beaches of France, standing shoulder to shoulder with our European partners in NATO, and now confronting violent extremism in the Middle East.”

That a prominent figure within the ruling elite like Mulroney so openly speaks of the need to prepare for war must serve as a serious warning to workers across Canada. Behind the backs of the population and under cover of a media campaign about “progressive change” with the election of the Trudeau Liberals, the Canadian ruling elite is readying itself to participate fully in the increasingly explosive geopolitical conflicts around the world. Only the creation of an anti-war movement based in the working class that is committed to the struggle for socialism and the abolition of the capitalist order can fight the imperialist war drive.