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Multinational Force Ukraine Series

# Canada: Willing but Unable

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**Political Will**

Since 2022, successive Canadian governments have affirmed unqualified solidarity with Kyiv, depicting the conflict as a test of the liberal international order and of NATO's credibility. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reiterated in February 2025 that "everything is on the table" regarding future Canadian support to Ukraine, while Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly confirmed that Canada "wants a role in post-war security guarantees." The newly elected government has maintained this position. Prime Minister Mark Carney told allies in September 2025 that Canada is willing to deploy "direct and scalable military assistance" in a post-ceasefire Ukraine, and that he "would not exclude the presence of troops."

Canada's position on Ukraine is anchored in a durable Atlanticist strategic culture characterized by alliance followership. This culture predisposes Ottawa to endorse NATO's collective positions and ad hoc initiatives while avoiding the costs of strategic leadership. Indeed, Canada's defence policy has been described as "un-strategic," whereby policy success is measured by the act of contributing rather than by the achievement of concrete strategic ends. In the Ukraine context, this disposition manifests through rhetorical maximalism—calling for Russia's defeat—paired with relatively modest material assistance. Canada ranks only 17th among 33 donor countries in military aid relative to GDP. The gap between discourse and action is sustained by a broad bipartisan domestic consensus that shields defence policy from partisan scrutiny. Public support for Ukraine is also broad and durable: 65% of Canadians back increased supply of military equipment and training to Ukraine and, more importantly, over 77% support deploying Canadian troops to Ukraine as part of a post-ceasefire reassurance force.

Canada set two conditions for any troop deployment in Ukraine. First, Ottawa rules out deploying troops before the cessation of hostilities. Besides the possible presence of special forces in Ukraine, Canada's contribution is focused on training and assistance outside Ukrainian territory through Operation UNIFIER, which has trained over 12,000 Ukrainian security forces in various locations across Europe since 2022. Only after a ceasefire or peace agreement would Canada contemplate deploying forces within Ukraine itself, most likely as part of a multinational stabilization mission led by European allies. Indeed, the United States' refusal to offer a backstop to a European-led reassurance force has not altered Ottawa's position.

Second, Defence Minister Bill Blair made clear that any re-entry of Canadian personnel into Ukraine would be limited to "non-combat" functions and would depend on sufficiently permissive security conditions. His successor, Defence Minister David McGuinty, similarly stated that Canada was examining a spectrum of military contributions—ranging from equipment and financial assistance to logistical or intelligence support.

His remarks thus implicitly reaffirmed the cautious approach adopted by his predecessor regarding the nature and scope of Canada's prospective involvement in securing peace in Ukraine.

**Military Capabilities**

During his visit to Kyiv in August 2025, Defence Minister McGuinty sought to counter concerns about the CAF's overstretched condition by expressing confidence in Canada's ability to contribute personnel to a postwar mission in Ukraine. However, it is telling that he stopped short of pledging substantial land, air, or maritime forces, instead emphasizing contributions in the form of equipment, logistical, and intelligence support—a posture consistent with the insistence placed on limiting Canada's role to non-combat functions.

Indeed, the CAF's structural limitations render any major deployment unlikely in the near term. Although the government has announced substantial new investments—amounting to roughly C$90 billion between 2024 and 2030—serious concerns remain about the Department of National Defence's (DND) capacity to effectively absorb these funds and translate them into improved operational readiness. Canada projects spending 2% of GDP in military expenditures in fiscal year 2025-26, marking the first time it would meet this benchmark since 1990. It remains uncertain whether the planned investments will enable Canada to meet NATO's new benchmark of 3.5% of GDP by 2035, as the 2025 federal budget offered no forward-looking projection on this point.

The DND's 2025-26 plan confirms that readiness targets remain far below operational requirements. Only 67% of force elements are currently ready for operations, with a target of 90% projected to be reached only by 2032. The serviceability levels are low across all services: maritime fleet serviceability sits at 46%, land fleets at 49%, and aerospace fleets below 50%. The CAF aims to restore "full concurrent-operations capability" only by the early 2030s. Furthermore, the CAF face personnel shortages that impede on its capacity to meet its core missions. In 2023-24, 73% of occupations were plagued with critical shortfalls.

Taken together, these indicators suggest that Canada is unlikely to field a meaningful deployment to support postwar stabilization in Ukraine—particularly while sustaining its ongoing deployment of over 2,000 troops in Latvia, where Canada serves as the framework nation for NATO's enhanced Forward Presence multinational brigade. A realistic expectation for Canada's potential postwar stabilization force would likely mirror the scale of its current Operation UNIFIER contribution—around 300 troops training Ukrainian security forces in Europe—who could be redeployed inside Ukraine once a ceasefire is in place.

In this context, Canada's insistence on non-combat roles reflects structural necessity rather than political choice. The most plausible tasks could include training, demining, logistics, medical and intelligence support, as well as limited airlift and naval force. Based on past deployments and projected readiness levels, Canada could likely support the deployment of one or two CC-177 Globemasters and two or three CC-130J Hercules for a short period. Similarly, Canada could likely contribute a Halifax-class frigate for Baltic Sea or Black Sea maritime security and two minor coastal defence vessels for mine clearing but could not sustain it due to low readiness and personnel shortages.

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In the *Multinational Force Ukraine series* of policy briefs leading experts from allied countries assess key factors for participation in the Multinational Force Ukraine. This includes the political willingness of allies to deploy troops—on the ground, in the air, or at sea—to establish a military presence in or around Ukraine. They also examine the conditions for such deployments to occur (before, during, or after peace negotiations), the roles these forces would be expected to perform (defensive or offensive), the red lines imposed by national governments, and the specific capabilities each country could realistically contribute.

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