

# UNCOMMON THREATS AND COMMON SECURITY

*Canadians are worried about many things  
in the world; dying in World War Three  
is only one of them.*

AN ANALYSIS  
BY DON MUNTON

**F**IVE DECADES AFTER WORLD WAR II, AND moving into the last decade of the twentieth century, Canadians are redefining their perceptions of global threats and security. The major international trends are clear: East-West relations are improving rapidly; arms control, both nuclear and non-nuclear, is progressing; many, though not all, local and regional conflicts – in Central America, in southern Africa, in southeast Asia – are ending or at least winding down. The focus of international politics is shifting from concern about armed aggression and military security, to more prosaic problems: trade protectionism, Third

World debt, refugees, the international drug traffic, and the deteriorating ozone layer – to cite some examples.

These trends and shifts have been discussed in meetings as disparate as those of the Economic Summit and the Commonwealth, and reflected in the front and business pages of the world's press. They have been discussed and advocated in various international reports by expert panels including the Brandt Commission report on international development prospects, the Palme Report on common security, and, more recently, the World Com-

mission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland report). What is less clear, is the manner in which, and extent to which, the broader public's perceptions of threats and security are also changing.

A new public opinion survey provides some of the first evidence that international security has come to mean something quite different to the present generation of Canadians, a set of concerns at once broader and more fundamental than physical security from military attack. The evidence suggests a declining concern with such conventional threats.

Previous surveys done for the Institute have shown that concerns about the Soviet threat have almost disappeared. Asked in each of the last three years, what is the greatest threat to world peace? Canadians have provided strikingly consistent responses (see Figure 1). A few see Soviet actions as the greatest threat; as many or more point to US actions. Most regard regional conflicts or nuclear proliferation as the primary threats. The only discernible trends over

the three Institute polls have been a steady, though not steep, decline in the numbers citing the super-power arms race as the greatest threat to world peace, and a steady rise in those citing nuclear proliferation.

In a similar vein, few perceive the USSR to be a growing military threat and a "real, immediate danger" to North America. Over 80% say it is not. A solid majority (57%) find the Soviet Union less of a threat than it was a few years ago. And the vast majority (79%) believe the Cold War is lessening.

The trend toward improved East-West relations evident in the now numerous Gorbachev summits with Western leaders (Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, Mitterrand and, most recently, Mulroney) is also evident in the view of most Canadians (66%) that there will be increased cooperation among major countries in the future.

GIVEN THIS BACKGROUND, A PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THE 1989 Institute survey was to explore what Canadians now perceive to be the chief threats to international peace and security if the conventionally defined threats have diminished. The new evidence is still patchy but seems clear enough in general, and portrays a public looking to a fundamentally changed international system.

The respondents were asked to evaluate a list of specific international problems by ranking their importance as threats to Canada's security (see Figure 2). Major wars were afforded relatively low importance, perhaps because they are regarded as unlikely. Ranked more highly are trade conflicts, terrorism, and international financial and monetary instability. At the top of the list are global pollution, international crime and the spread of diseases.

There is ample evidence here for the observation of the 1980 Brandt Report that while "war is often thought of in terms of military conflict, or even annihilation,... there is a growing awareness that an equal danger might be chaos – as a result of mass hunger, economic disaster, environmental catastrophes, and terrorism."

These results are striking in a strictly Canadian context as well. In the aftermath of a raucous and deeply divisive election campaign dominated by the foreign policy issue of free trade – an election fought on both sides with arguments about the economic perils in which Canada finds itself – and amidst an on-going debate concerning the benefits and costs of the Free Trade Agreement, Canadians place trade matters and other economic concerns well down the list of international priorities.

Notably, the only problems on the list which, overall, ranked lower than major wars were human rights abuses, and poverty and hunger. Many Canadians may agree with the argument of the Brandt

*This is the third in an annual series of Institute for Peace and Security public opinion surveys. Designed by Don Munton in conjunction with Institute staff, the survey was conducted in September–October 1989 by the Longwoods Research Group with a national sample selected randomly from a panel of 30,000 households maintained by Market Facts Ltd. The survey was conducted by mail and comprised 890 respondents in all, with a response rate of 50%. The margin of error with a sample of this size is approximately +/- 3.5%, 95 times out of 100. The full descriptive results from the survey are available in an Institute Working Paper by Michael Driedger and Don Munton released concurrently with this article.*