The article focuses on the contributions of Canadian secretary of state for External Affairs Lester B. Pearson to the peacekeeping missions of the United Nations (UN) in 1956. Pearson proposed to the UN General Assembly the creation of a military force that would maintain peace when the Israeli troops invaded Egypt. He offered the Canadian troops which led to the formation of the UN Emergency Force. Some Canadian officers at present, believe that the Pearsonian-style of peacekeeping is dead with the dominance of terrorism.
and French forces in a combined bid to seize control of the Suez Canal. The Soviet Union was threatening to intervene and help the Egyptians.

At the United Nations, representatives from various countries struggled to end the growing crisis before it spiralled out of control. It was at an emergency meeting of the UN's General Assembly that Lester B. Pearson, then Canada's secretary of state for External Affairs, proposed the creation of a large UN military force to keep the peace between the warring factions while a political compromise was worked out. He offered Canadian troops for the job, and after an all-night session of the General Assembly, his plan was approved.

The United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), led by Canadian general Edison Louis Millard Burns, was formed and the soldiers were sent to supervise the withdrawal of French, British, and Israeli troops from Egypt. Once this was accomplished, UNEF's role would then be to act as a buffer between the Egyptian and Israeli armies. Canadians would patrol the northern section of the Israeli-Egyptian border while Yugoslav troops were to handle the rest.

More than one-thousand Canadian military personnel took part in the mission.

The next year, Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize, the only Canadian ever to do so. In making its selection, the peace prize committee said the Canadian politician had "saved the world" with his proposal to defuse the Suez crisis. Today, Lester B. Pearson's vision during that tumultuous time remains embedded in the Canadian consciousness -- even though some argue that it is no longer relevant in the world's conflict zones.

Five decades later, the legacy of the Suez crisis still resonates. Canadians have come to see peacekeeping as part of their national identity. It is reflected in our monuments and even our currency. For example, in October 1992 the federal government unveiled the Peacekeeping Monument across from the National Gallery in downtown Ottawa. A rendition of the monument is etched into some of our one-dollar coins. As well, an image of a peacekeeper armed only with binoculars is on Canada's ten-dollar bill. The government of Canada's website boasts that peacekeeping is an important aspect of the country's national heritage and a reflection of our fundamental beliefs. Schoolchildren who write letters to Canadian soldiers overseas often address them to “a peacekeeper.”

In his book Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping Peace, military historian Jack Granatstein dispels the myth that peacekeeping was invented during the Suez crisis. He writes that the UN had already organized several small observer missions to monitor the progress of ceasefires between "warring states. For instance, in 1949, Canada had sent a number of officers to help create a ceasefire line and monitor disagreements between Pakistan and India in Kashmir.

What was created by Suez, Granatstein points out, was the belief that Canadian troops were somehow natural-born peacekeepers.

The Canadian public passionately embraced that image following the Suez crisis to become leading advocates for peacekeeping. Even when the government was reluctant to involve itself in some of the world's war zones, such as in the Congo in 1960, public pressure ensured that Canadian troops were sent.

Some observers have even suggested that Canadians have "peacekeeping in their DNA" or that because we are a nation of immigrants, who have had to resolve differences of opinion, that Canadians are inherent peacekeepers. After all, peace, order, and good government are reflected in our charter, notes Kathryn White, executive director of the United Nations Association in Canada.

Not everyone, however, is happy with the legacy of Suez. Talk to Canadian soldiers and many will tell you they dislike the peacekeeper label. Most soldiers like to think of themselves as combatants first; peacekeeping is a skill that, while useful, is not their first priority.

Retired major general Lewis MacKenzie maintains that peacekeeping has always been a sideline activity for the Canadian military. Canada may have sent thousands of soldiers on UN missions from the 1960s to the 1990s, but it had many more thousands assigned to a combat role within NATO, ready to go to war with the former Soviet Union if need be.

Some Canadian officers and defence analysts argue that traditional Pearsonian-style peacekeeping, as practised in the Suez and elsewhere, is dead. There is no peace to keep in a world where terrorists and insurgents, instead of standing armies, dominate the war zones of today.

But the UN still operates such missions. In other cases, such as in the Congo today, it has approved a more aggressive style of operation, which includes combat to rein in warring factions.

Yet, today the Canadian Forces are unlikely to be involved in either. Over the last several years, Canada has been in a full-scale retreat from UN operations. In March, it shut down its contribution to the Golan Heights, ending a thirty-two-year presence that started in the aftermath of the 1973 Yam Kippur War.
With the withdrawal from the Golan Heights, Canada drops to fiftieth place in the rank of those contributing to UN missions, according to a March 2006 Globe and Mail article by Walter Darn, associate professor at the Canadian Forces College and co-chair of the Department of Security Studies. The country once known as the committed peacekeeper now has fewer than sixty military personnel assigned to the world body, putting it on par with Guatemala, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. The Canadian Forces have also pulled out their senior representative from the UN's peacekeeping directorate, arguing that the officer is needed back in Ottawa to work on the future transformation of the military.

Last year the Canadian Forces declined to send four additional soldiers to help deal with the ongoing crisis in the Congo, a catastrophe that is killing more than one-thousand people a day. Instead, Canada has nine soldiers among the sixteen-thousand United Nations troops in the Congo.

The Canadian government also recently declined to commit troops to the Darfur region in Sudan, even as human rights observers warned of the growing genocide there. As an alternative, the Canadian Forces are focusing on what they call higher priority and higher threat missions, such as fighting insurgents in Afghanistan. Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor has said that the focus of Canada's overseas military commitment for the near future will be the NATO/U.S. mission in Afghanistan and there will be few troops left over to be sent elsewhere, either on UN or other operations.

But the continuing problem for the Canadian military and the federal government is that the public is still anchored to the image of UN peacekeeping made famous during the Suez crisis. That message has been consistently delivered over the years by public opinion polls, done both for the Canadian Forces and other agencies.

Typical is a 2004 survey for the Department of National Defence, which noted that about 57 percent of respondents favoured a military involved in a traditional peacekeeping role, while only 41 percent supported a peacemaking role, which might involve fighting alongside troops from other nations to force peace in a disputed area. "Although Canadians recognize the need for a versatile military force, and understand the need to be combat ready, their preferred role for the forces is as peacekeepers and deliverers of humanitarian and disaster assistance," a Defence Department analysis of the poll concluded.

Trying to change the public's support for peacekeeping in favour of more combat-oriented roles, such as that in Afghanistan, may be more difficult than the Canadian military and government thinks. Rightly or wrongly, fifty years after the end of the Suez crisis, Canadians still want their armed forces to play the role of the honest peace-broker on the world stage.

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Lester B. Pearson at the UN General Assembly in 1956.

By David Pugliese
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