

Canada's Conservative leader lays out right-wing economic and foreign policy agenda

By Roger Jordan
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Andrew Scheer, the leader of Canada's official opposition Conservative Party, has used two recent policy speeches to big business audiences to outline the right-wing agenda of militarism and austerity a Tory government would pursue should it come to power following this fall's federal election.

Amid a sharp shift to the right within the Canadian bourgeoisie, including increasingly shrill attacks from big business on the Trudeau government for not fully matching Trump's tax cuts, Scheer's pledges to step up military cooperation with the US, intensify Canada's aggressive stance against China and Russia, and gut social spending at home have received a warm reception from the corporate media.

In his foreign policy speech delivered in Montreal on May 7, Scheer vowed to open negotiations with the Trump administration on Canada's participation in the US-led ballistic missile defence shield, which is aimed at enabling US imperialism to wage a "winnable" nuclear war. He then proceeded to denounce Russian President Vladimir Putin's "aggression," accusing him of turning the clock back to the Cold War.

However, the largest portion of Scheer's remarks were directed at fulminating against China, which he, together with a substantial faction of the ruling elite, feels the Liberals have failed to confront forcefully enough. Scheer argued for Canada's withdrawal from the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, pledged to launch a complaint against Beijing at the World Trade Organization over unfair trading practices, vowed to bar the Chinese tech giant Huawei from Canada's 5G network, and said a Conservative government would deny Chinese state-owned companies unrestricted access to the Canadian market. Canada-China relations, declared Scheer, require a "total reset".

Underscoring that Scheer, following Trump's lead, wants to put Canada on a war-footing with Beijing, he designated China as one of the three main threats to Canada's "security and prosperity in the 21st century." The other two threats he named were Russia and "state sponsors of terrorism," of which he claimed Iran was the prime example. The fact that, even as the Tory leader spoke, Trump was deploying a US aircraft carrier

to the Persian Gulf and vowing to wage war on Tehran should it attack US "interests" or those of its allies would not have been lost on Scheer's listeners.

Scheer's demand for an even more aggressive stance towards China enjoys the backing of important sections of the ruling class, including Canada's two most influential newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*. This faction is pushing for an escalation of the highly provocative line taken by the Trudeau government, which, following on from the previous Harper Conservative government, has integrated Canada into the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific and last year agreed to revamp the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to make it a more explicitly US-dominated protectionist trade bloc, with China as its foremost target.

Then, in December 2018 the Trudeau government served as Washington's appendage in a dramatic enflaming of tensions with China by arresting Meng Wangzhou, Huawei's chief financial officer, while she changed planes in Vancouver. Canadian authorities are in the process of extraditing Meng to the US on trumped up fraud charges arising from Washington's illegal economic sanctions against Iran—charges which could lead to her spending 30 years in prison.

A further intensification of Canada's already aggressive anti-China stance can only lead in one direction—military conflict. The Trudeau government has already acknowledged as much, adopting a plan in 2017 to hike military spending by over 70 percent by 2026. In her speech presenting the defence policy that outlined the government's plans to buy new battleships, warplanes and other weaponry, Liberal Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland identified China's rise as a threat to global "stability" and to the US-led, "rules-based" "international order."

But Scheer expressed the logic of Canada's turn to militarism and great-power conflict even more brazenly. He called for Canada to play an even more prominent role in NATO and demanded the modernization of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), a US-Canada war alliance established during the Cold War to monitor North American airspace and prepare attacks, including a nuclear "first-strike"

on the Soviet Union. He also called for intensified cooperation among the “Five Eyes” alliance, the global spying network led by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and that includes intelligence agencies from Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This would require an upgrade of Canada’s military equipment that goes beyond that ordered by the Liberals, said Scheer, including the procurement of new submarines.

In concluding his foreign policy address, Scheer ominously declared, “We must be honest with ourselves about the threats we face. It’s why we must unite the forces of democracy and freedom across the globe to confront threats with greater resolve than those who pose them. And we must be ready to do our part, to back up our strength of our values with the strength of our forces.”

Even some bourgeois commentators pointed out in the immediate aftermath of Scheer’s speech that implementing the kind of wide-ranging militarist plans he outlined would cost tens of billions of dollars in addition to what has already been set aside for the armed forces.

Scheer made clear how his government would approach this problem in his May 13 speech on the economy delivered to the Economic Club of Canada. Underscoring that the Tories will make sweeping cuts to social spending, Scheer declared, “Under my leadership, any new spending not already budgeted must be paid for from savings within the government.”

He went on to denounce the Trudeau government for running “bottomless” deficits and burdening business with “excessive” taxes and regulations. Additionally, he vowed to deregulate the energy sector and weaken environmental oversight to make it easier for oil pipelines to be built to tidal water, and to lower business costs, through tax cuts and other handouts, to boost corporate “competitiveness.”

Taken together, Scheer’s two speeches represent a declaration of war on the working class. Working people are to be made to bear even greater burdens than under the current Liberal government, so as to bolster Canadian imperialism’s reckless drive to advance its predatory interests through aggression and war.

That this agenda is advanced by Scheer should come as no surprise. His 2017 campaign for the Conservative Party leadership pitched him as a disciple of Stephen Harper –Trudeau’s Conservative predecessor, whose hard-right government shifted Canadian politics sharply to the right. Prime minister from 2006 to 2015, Harper expanded Canada’s role in the Afghanistan war; sent troops into battle in Libya, Iraq and Syria; rebranded Canada as a “warrior nation” to fit with his right-wing nationalist outlook; enforced sweeping attacks on democratic rights in the name of the “war on terror;” and virtually abolished any right to strike for workers in federally-regulated industries.

However, as reactionary as Harper was, a Scheer Tory government would not merely mean a continuation of Harper’s policies. Since Harper stood down following the Tories’ 2015

election defeat, the Conservatives have shifted further to the right. This is exemplified in its demonization of immigrants and refugees fleeing Trump’s vicious crackdown in the United States, a stance that has emboldened far-right and outright fascist forces in Canada to take to the streets.

A Scheer government would come to power under conditions in which the right-wing populists Doug Ford and Francois Legault hold power in Ontario and Quebec respectively. Their governments are mounting a savage assault on the working class, which now will be joined by Jason Kenney’s right-wing United Conservative government in Alberta, which won office last month.

More fundamentally, the global capitalist crisis has deepened considerably even since Harper’s decade in office. One expression of this is the promotion of far-right forces by capitalist elites the world over, whether it be the efforts of the billionaire oligarch Trump to build up a fascist movement, the emergence of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) as that country’s official opposition, or the attempts of France’s ostensibly liberal president Emmanuel Macron to rehabilitate the Nazi collaborator and Vichy regime president, Marshal Pétain.

On the other hand, the growing war danger and ever worsening social conditions are propelling the working class into struggle around the world. From the mass wildcat strike by manufacturing workers in Matamoros, Mexico to France’s Yellow Vest protests and the working class mobilizations against Ford’s social spending cuts in Ontario, workers in every country are entering into struggle against austerity and social inequality.

Implementing the kind of reactionary agenda outlined by Scheer in the face of these rising class struggles would necessitate a political regime far to the right of that led by Harper. Ultimately, the subordination of all aspects of government policy to the ruling elite’s insatiable pursuit of markets and profits, of which the imperialist drive to war is the starkest expression, is incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

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