

International Priorities: Defence rises in prominence as majority believes Canada's military is lagging behind

Three-quarters of Canadians believe their country relies too much on the United States for its defence

June 2, 2023 – Canada's defence spending has been subject to international headlines in recent months after news that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [privately admitted](#) this country will likely never spend two per cent of its GDP on defence, as NATO allies agreed to do. It appears that Canadians share many of the international community's concerns about underspending.

A new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds seven-in-ten Canadians saying Canada is falling behind in terms of its military capabilities. In 2015 this number was approximately half (52%). Further, there has also been a 10-point increase in the number of Canadians concerned that Canada's diplomatic influence is waning – from 46 per cent in 2015 to 56 per cent now.

Canada [counters its critics](#) by noting that it has the sixth-largest defence spending totals within NATO and contributes heavily to the organization's common fund for operations expenses.

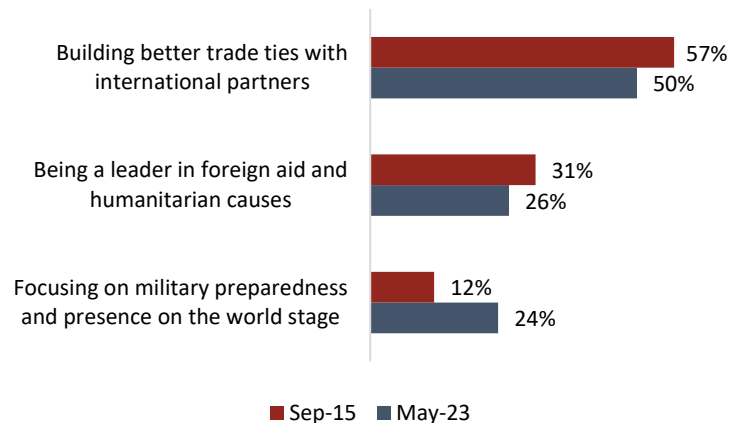
Nonetheless, after NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [stated recently](#) that two per cent should be considered more a floor than a ceiling in terms of ideal targets for participating nations.

Whether it's these discussions about spending or the Russia-Ukraine conflict, or concerns over protecting Canada's arctic territory, Canadians are increasingly concerned about military preparedness. The percentage saying that this principle should be key among Canada's international priorities has doubled since 2015 from 12 to 24 per cent. Trade ties remain top choice among the three options – half choose this, down seven points over the same period from 57 per cent. One-quarter would focus on foreign aid and humanitarian causes – [a foundational principle in Canada's foreign policy history](#).

In this area – foreign aid – Canadians are most bullish about their nation's contributions. Three-in-five (60%) say Canada is keeping up on this front, up three points compared to 2015.

More Key Findings:

And all things considered, what should Canada's TOP priority be when it comes to foreign affairs?



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from May 8-10, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 1,603 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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- Men over the age of 34 are most likely to hold the view that Canada is falling behind in its military preparedness (four-in-five say so) and say that Canada’s priorities should be shifting more toward this, rather than trade and foreign aid.
- Past Conservative voters are twice as likely as past Liberals to say that military preparedness should be the top priority for Canada in international affairs (39% versus 19%). Half among each group choose “building better international trade ties”, while past Liberals are three times as likely to say foreign aid should be the focus (31% versus 10%).
- Three-in-five Canadians (62%) say that Canada needs to do more to protect its Arctic territory in response to an increase in Russian and Chinese military activities in the area.

About ARI

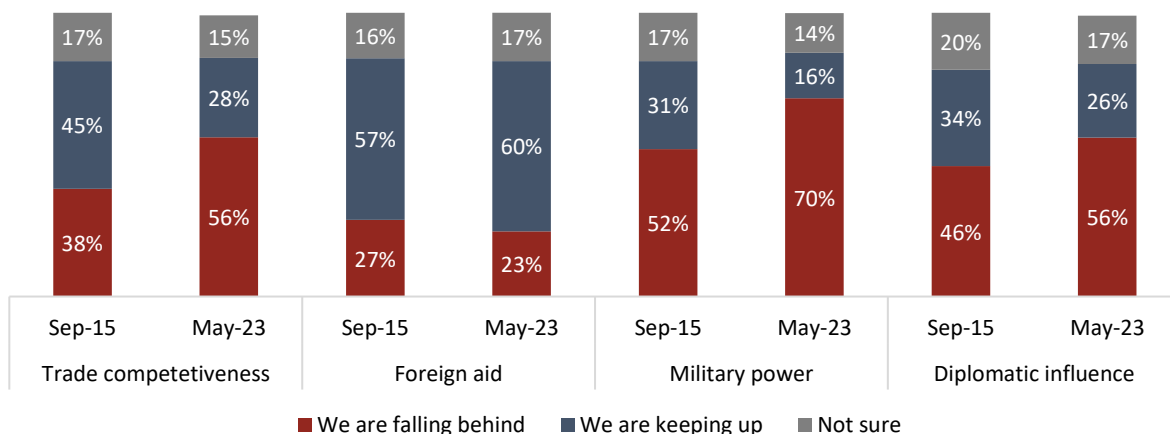
The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.

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Keeping up or falling behind on key aspects of international relations

Asked about some of the components of international relations, Canadians are not uniformly critical, but tend to voice concern at higher levels than seen at the outset of the Trudeau era. Three-in-five say we are keeping up when it comes to foreign aid – a number largely unchanged over eight years. That said, the percentage saying we are falling behind where we need to be with respect to trade competitiveness, military power, and diplomatic influence, has increased:

Thinking about Canada’s standing in the international community which of the following is closest to your opinion in each of the following areas.

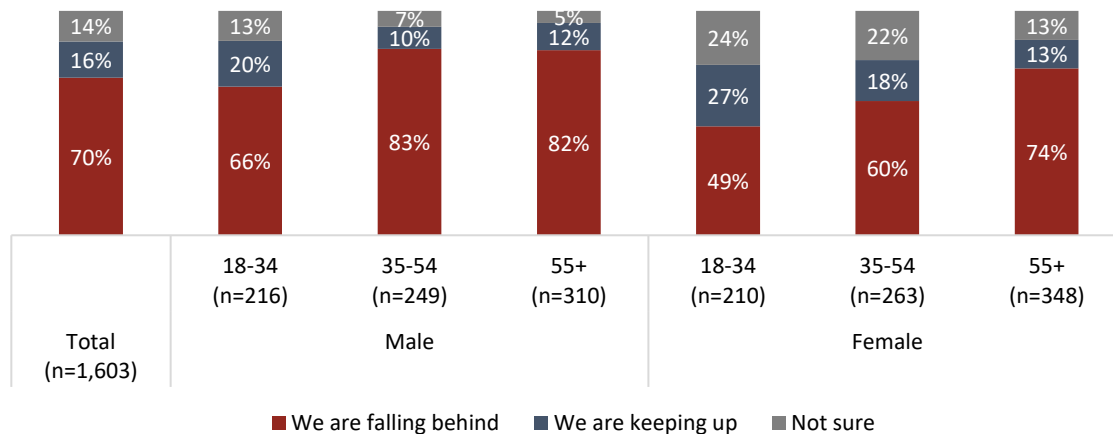


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With questions swirling about Canada's Arctic defence, and in the wake of having turned down an opportunity to lead a mission in Haiti due to a lack of capacity, seven-in-ten say that Canada's military power is diminishing. These perspectives are most common among older residents:

Thinking about Canada's standing in the international community which of the following is closest to your opinion on military power



Military preparedness rising in Canadians' intl. priorities, trade still most important

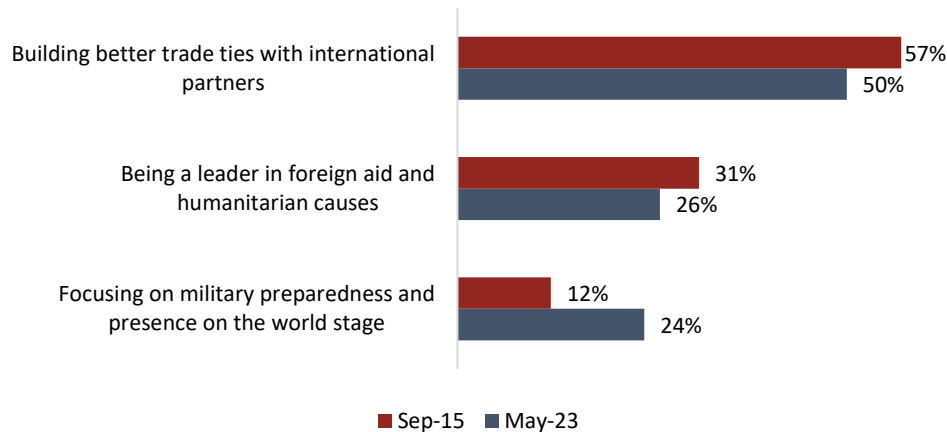
Canadians' preferences for foreign policy focus have changed in the more than seven years since Stephen Harper was prime minister. In September 2015, prior to the October election which saw Trudeau and the Liberals win a majority, Canada was participating in a combat mission in Syria against the Islamic State (ISIS). However, at that time, only one-in-eight (12%) felt military should be the focus of Canada's foreign policy. Trade (57%) and foreign aid (31%) were considered much more prominent concerns.

Now, while trade remains a top priority (50%), the number of Canadians who want military preparedness to be the focus have doubled (24%), putting it near level with the proportion who want Canada's foreign efforts to focus on humanitarian concerns (26%):

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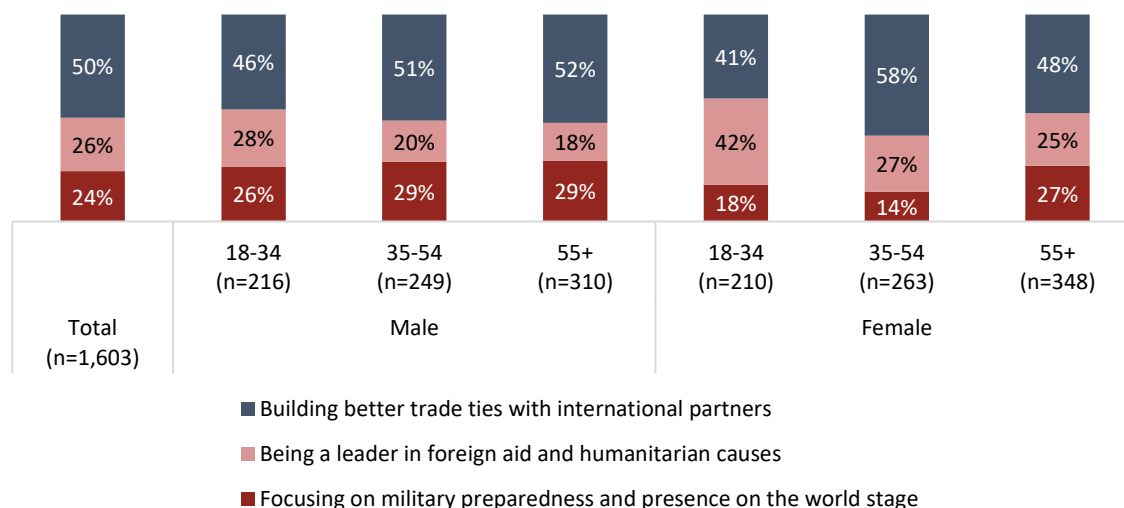
And all things considered, what should Canada's TOP priority be when it comes to foreign affairs?



Women under the age of 55 are the least likely to believe Canada's top international priority should be military preparedness. At least one quarter of all other demographics select that option.

A plurality of all demographics except women under the age of 35 believe building better trade ties should be Canada's top concern when it comes to foreign affairs. Young adult women are evenly split between trade (41%) and saying Canada should lead in international humanitarian causes (42%):

And all things considered, what should Canada's TOP priority be when it comes to foreign affairs?



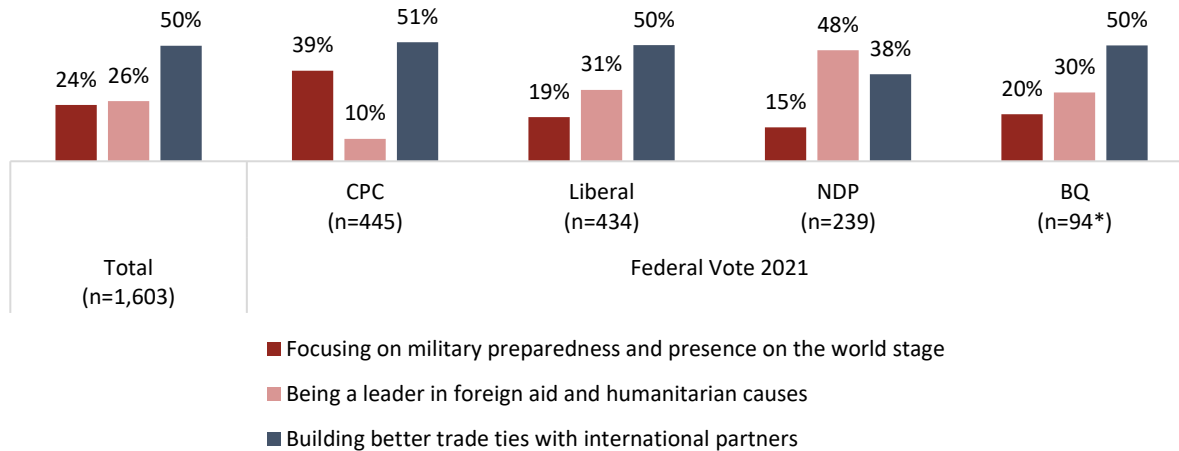
Similar proportions of past CPC (51%), Liberal (50%) and Bloc Québécois (50%) voters believe trade should be Canada's top foreign policy priority. Those who voted Conservative in 2021, however, are twice as likely (39%) as others to believe military preparedness should be the focus. Meanwhile, half of those

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who voted NDP (48%) in the last federal election believe Canada's top concern should be leading on humanitarian causes:

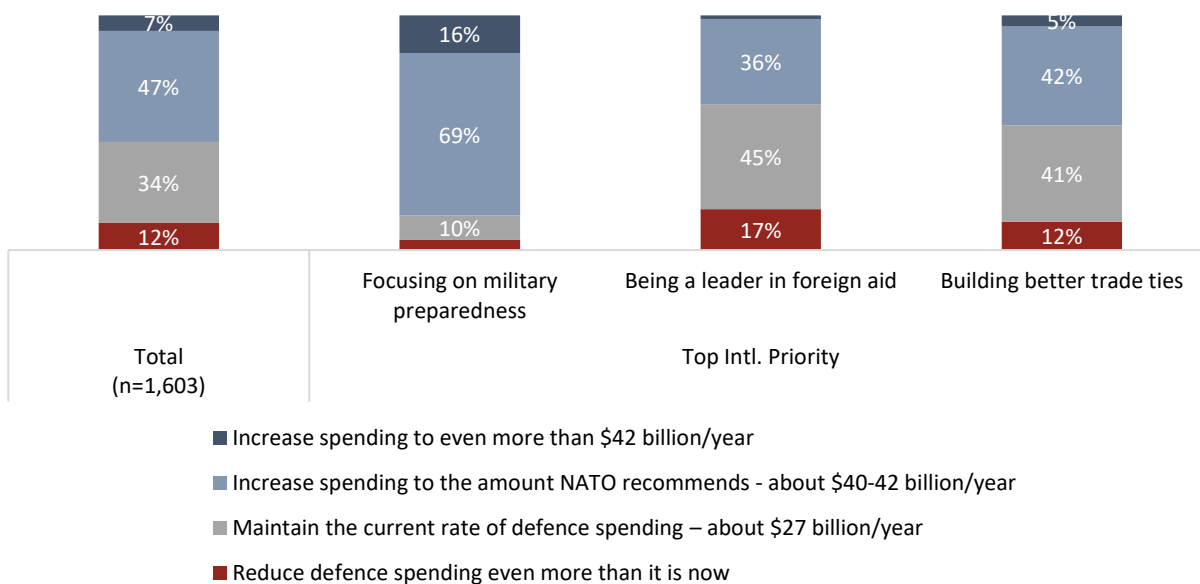
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**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

In May, the Angus Reid Institute found that [half of Canadians](#) would increase defence spending to reach the NATO target of two per cent of GDP, or even surpass it. This opinion is driven heavily by those who feel Canada's military preparedness should be prioritized.

If you oversaw Canada's budget, what would you do?



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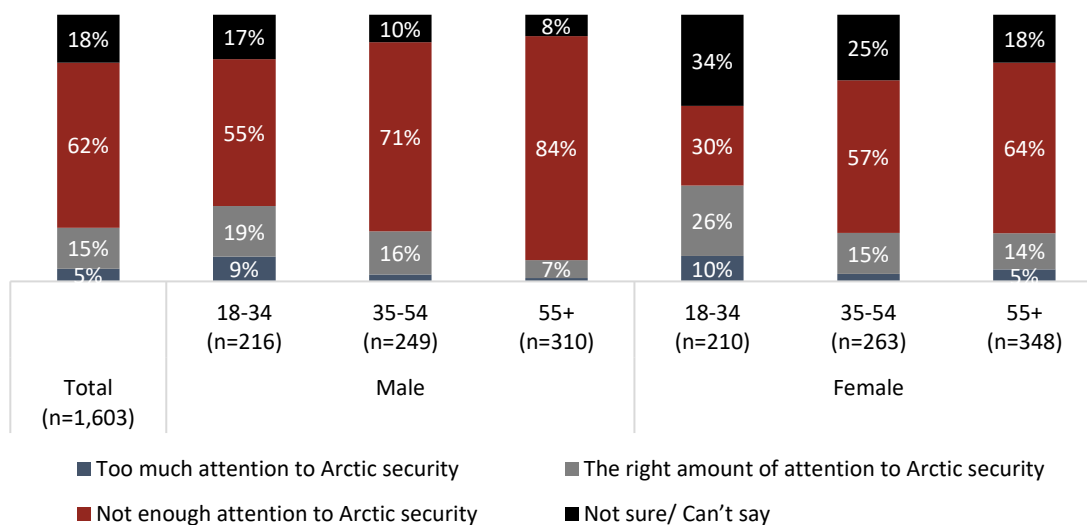
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Majority say Canada must look north, protect the Arctic

As global warming takes effect, seaways north of Canada become more navigable, posing a potential strategic defence problem. Canada has more than 160,000 kilometres of Arctic coastline, which is largely unguarded. The country is facing pressure from NATO allies to increase its military capabilities in the region as Russia and China increase their economic and military activities in the Arctic.

Three-in-five (62%) Canadians believe their country is not paying enough attention to Arctic security. This view is more likely to be held among men over the age of 34 than other demographics. One-in-20 Canadians (5%) disagree and instead believe Canada is paying too much attention to the region:

In your view, Canada is paying...

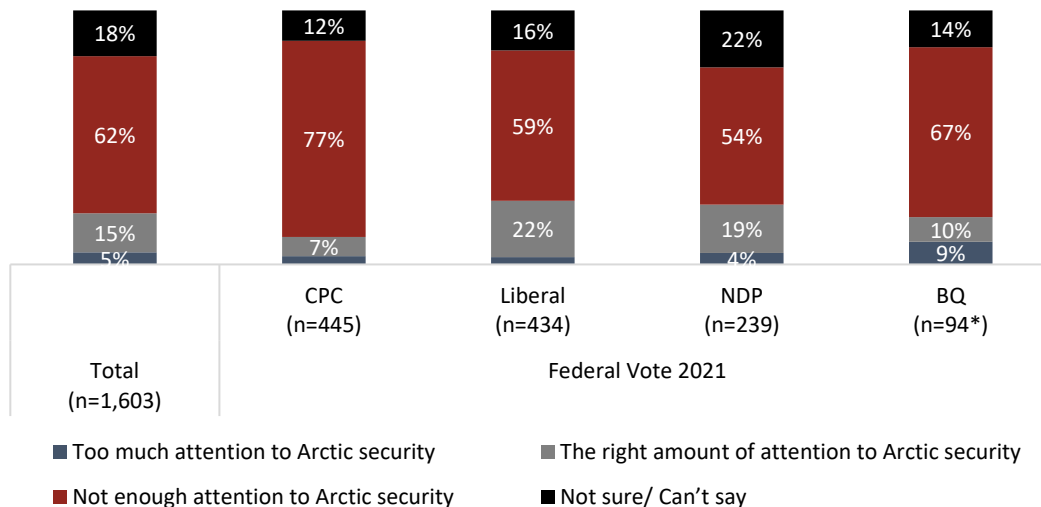


A majority of all groups of past voters believe Canada needs to pay more attention to its northern border, including three-in-five (59%) of past Liberal voters. However, those who voted Liberal and NDP in 2021 are most likely to believe Canada is paying the right amount of attention to Arctic security at one-in-five (22% Liberal, 19% NDP):

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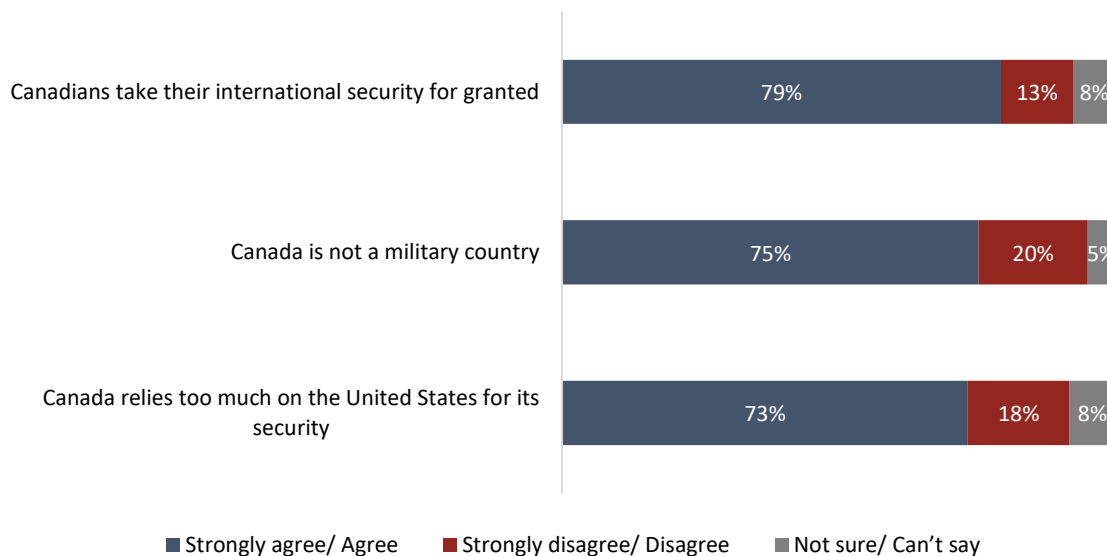


**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

Is Canada a military country?

Canadians hold views that can be at times paradoxical. Consider that three-quarters of Canadians do not consider Canada a “military country”, but the same number also say we rely too much on the United States for our security.

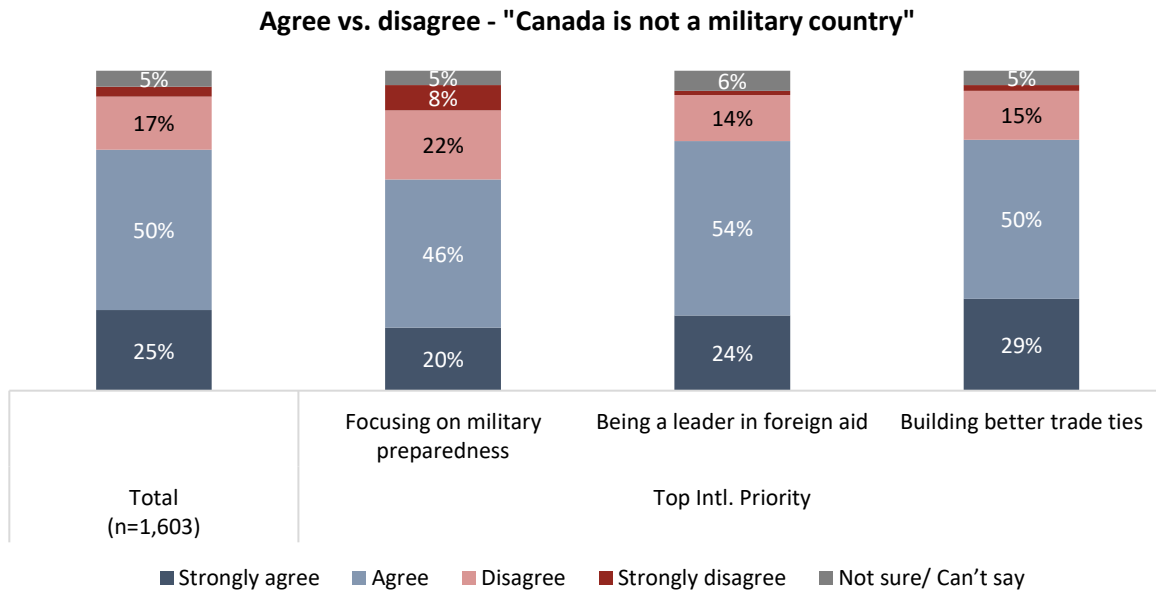
**Agree vs. disagree
(All respondents, n=1,603)**



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While Canadians tend to agree that being a military nation is not necessarily a defining element of Canada, those who say we should focus on military preparedness are approximately twice as likely to say that Canada *is* a military country, and perhaps that a lack of funding is leading to the perception that we are not:



For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by respondents' view of Canada's reputation, and top foreign policy priority, [click here](#).

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