

Defence, aid or trade? Canadians' shifting international priorities now lean toward economic opportunity

Percentage saying Canada is 'falling behind' militarily rises as Carney commits to increased spending

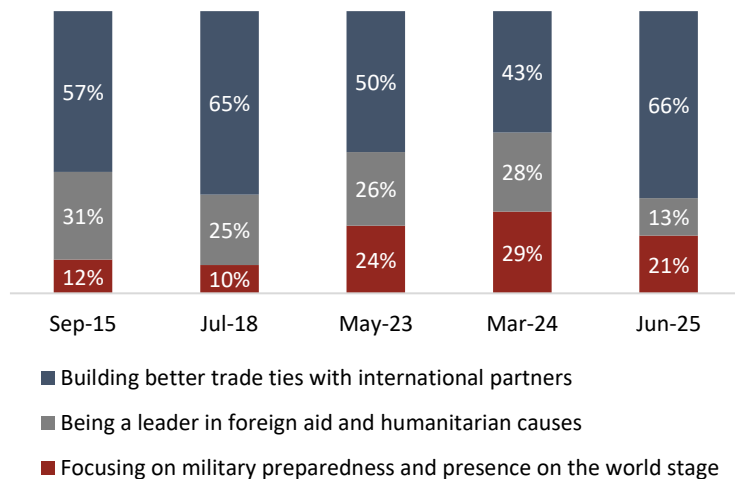
June 24, 2025 – Prime Minister Mark Carney is in Europe this week for a NATO summit that has only increased in importance after escalations in the Middle East that have seen Israel, and the United States bomb Iran and Iran retaliate with strikes on Israel and a U.S. base in Qatar.

New data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds Carney will have work to do to convince Canadians that the country is keeping up militarily in an increasingly precarious global environment. Three-quarters (75%) say they believe this country is “falling behind”, even as Carney has committed to a significant defence spending increase in recent weeks. This is a significant increase compared to last year, perhaps reflecting the anxiety of the moment.

Carney's challenge, however, is complex. Consider that while Canadians are increasingly likely to say the military is falling behind, and support increasing defence expenditures by billions, by far the top choice for the nation's international priority is building better trade ties with international partners (66%) rather than focusing on military preparedness (21%) or humanitarian concerns (13%). Governments often boast about being able to walk and chew gum at the same time, but each priority is an immense undertaking, alongside domestic “nation-building” projects. The proportion of Canadians saying the government should focus on improving trade has increased 23-points compared to last year, from 43 to 66 per cent.

Looking at the broader global situation, concerns about global conflicts escalating to nuclear war are apparent, but no more so that in previous years. In 2017, when U.S. President Donald Trump was threatening to “totally destroy North Korea”, 37 per cent of Canadians felt that such nuclear conflict was inevitable. Now, after the recent bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities, fewer but close to the same amount (32%) say the same, but the number of Canadians showing uncertainty in response to the question has risen (from 14% to 21%).

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 June 20-23, 2025, among a randomized sample of 1,479 Canadian adults who are members of Angus Reid Forum. The sample was weighted to be representative of adults nationwide according to region, gender, age, household income, and education, based on the Canadian census. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.0 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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More Key Findings:

- With talk of joining the “Golden Dome” missile defence system touted by President Trump, Canadians are less than certain an agreement with the U.S. would guarantee Canada’s safety. Slightly fewer say Canada would be safer (35%) as disagree (40%), and one-quarter are unsure (25%). The proportion of Canadians who said joining missile defence with the U.S. would make Canada safer has dropped from 40 per cent in 2017.
- With a new prime minister at the helm, the proportion of Canadians saying Canada is “keeping up” in diplomatic influence has jumped double digits from last March (27% to 37%), though many still say Canada has more to do and is behind where it should be (49%).
- 56 per cent say Canada is keeping up in terms of foreign aid, matching the total who said this in 2015, the first year of the Trudeau government, and marking a nine-point increase since last year

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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Part One: What do Canadians want as the top international priority?

“Building trade ties” rises while military preparedness, foreign aid declines

Canada and its place in the world has gone through seismic shifts in recent years. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, highlighting the importance of military preparedness for NATO countries as war reached the alliance’s eastern border. That increased the pressure on Canada, and other NATO members, to live up to the promise they made in 2014 to spend at least two per cent of GDP on defence. Prime Minister Mark Carney accelerated previous established timelines to hit the target this year, [just in time for the bar to be moved to five per cent](#).

Related: [Hitting the Mark? Two-thirds support 2% defence spending pledge; almost as many say 5% ‘too much’](#)

The ramp up in military spending has come at the repeated urging of the United States and President Donald Trump, who have also shifted the international conversation on another front since the latter’s return to the Oval Office. One of the dominating policies of Trump’s second presidency has been tariffs, which has moved the U.S. from a once-reliable global trading partner to one surrounded by trade barriers.

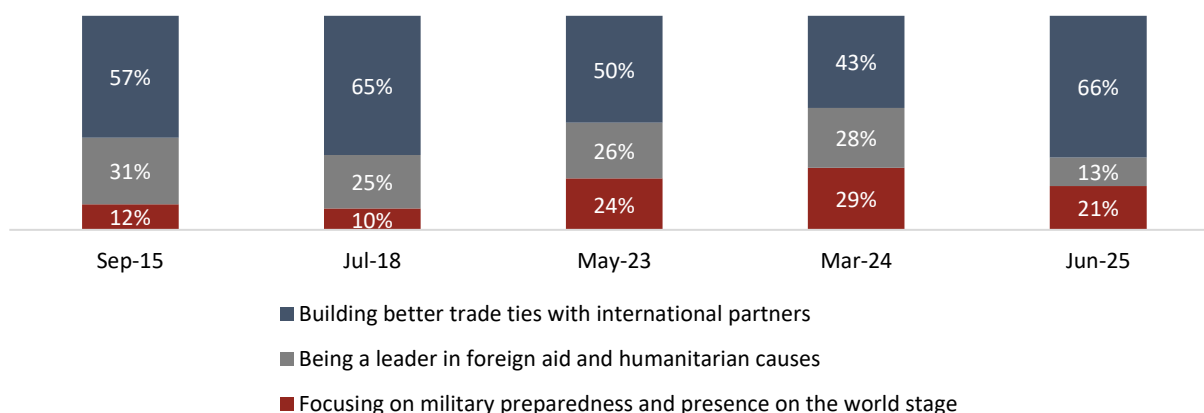
Related: [Anger, betrayal and anxiety: Canadians say they’re ready to fight back after tariffs drive views of U.S. to new low](#)

These two countervailing issues swirl in the background as the Angus Reid Institute asks Canadians what Canada’s top priority should be when it comes to foreign policy. Historically, trade has always been the focus most chosen by Canadians. But in recent years, military preparedness had grown as a priority for Canadians. These most recent data taken by ARI shows trade overwhelmingly at the forefront, with two-thirds (66%) saying building better trade ties with international partners should be the country’s top priority when it comes to foreign affairs.

The last time trade was such a highly selected priority was during 2018 in the midst [of contentious negotiations](#) with the United States on the replacement trade agreement for NAFTA.

Foreign aid has declined significantly as a priority compared to when ARI first asked this question nearly a decade ago:

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



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Across political lines, there have been clear preferences over time. Past CPC voters have been more likely to want to focus on military preparedness than others, and much less likely to want a focus on foreign aid. Past NDP voters, meanwhile, were the most likely to show a preference for Canada to prioritize international humanitarian activities. For previous Liberal voters, there has been a notable decline in the proportion who would like Canada to be a leader in foreign aid:

And all things considered, what should Canada's TOP priority be when it comes to foreign affairs?				
Past Vote	Date	Focusing on military preparedness	Being a leader in foreign aid	Building better trade ties
CPC	Sep-15	18%	15%	67%
	Jul-18	18%	8%	74%
	May-23	39%	10%	51%
	Mar-24	45%	8%	47%
	Jun-25	34%	4%	62%
Liberal	Sep-15	10%	40%	50%
	Jul-18	4%	28%	68%
	May-23	19%	31%	50%
	Mar-24	24%	39%	37%
	Jun-25	14%	16%	71%
NDP	Sep-15	8%	41%	50%
	Jul-18	7%	34%	59%
	May-23	15%	48%	38%
	Mar-24	19%	48%	33%
	Jun-25	6%	38%	56%

Part Two: Where is Canada keeping up or falling behind?

Trade competitiveness

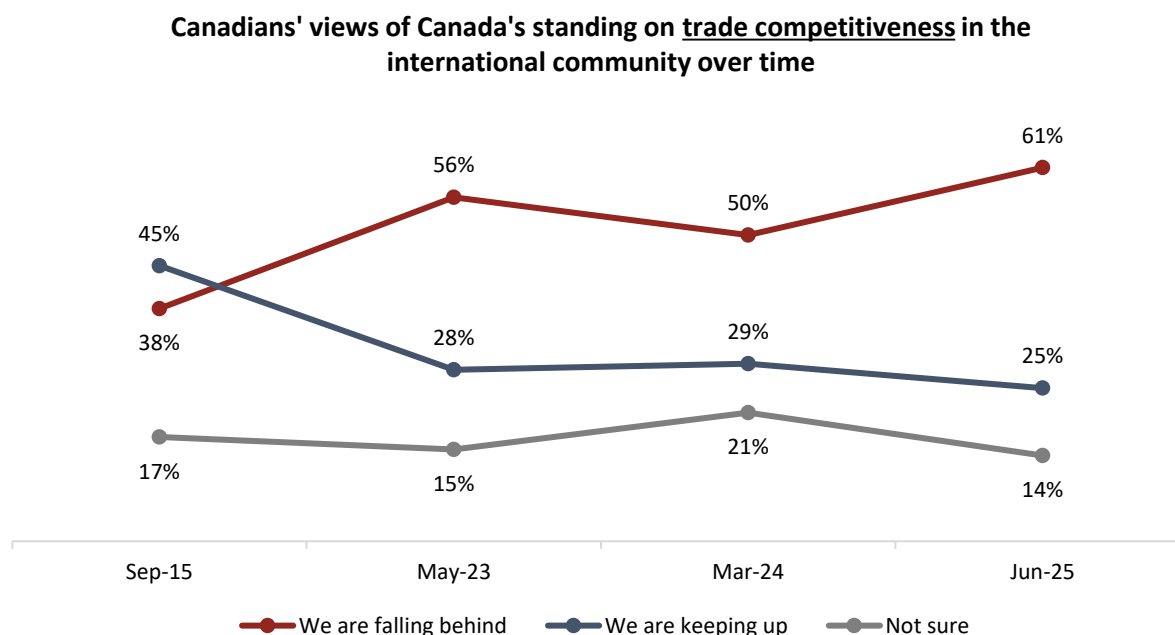
International trade has become a key file for the Carney Liberal government as it looks to address the country's overreliance on the United States as a trading partner in the wake of Trump's protectionist tendencies. Canada's interconnectedness with the United States has resulted in pessimistic economic projections for Canada in the wake of U.S. tariffs. Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem warned that a prolonged trade war with the United States would permanently harm Canada's economy, resulting in low economic growth.

Canadians have been pessimistic about Canada's international standing on trade in recent years, with at least half in 2023, 2024 and this year saying that Canada is losing ground on trade competitiveness.

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This wasn't always the case. In 2015, Canadians were more likely to believe Canada was "keeping up" with its international peers on the trade front. Now the number who believe Canada is lagging on trade has grown to more than three-in-five (61%):



Foreign aid

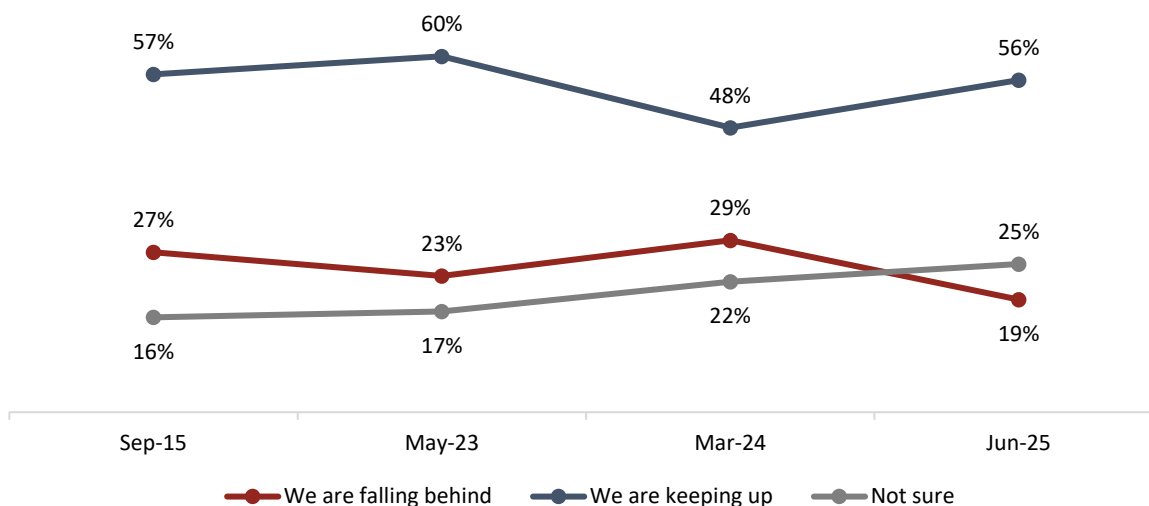
Canadians de-emphasizing foreign aid as a priority over the years, as shown in the data in the prior part of this report, is perhaps a function of the fact that the pervading view has been that Canada has done enough on that front. In most times ARI has asked, a majority believe Canada is "keeping up" on foreign aid when compared to the country's international peers.

Foreign aid has been a target when Canadians are asked to assess where the federal government should make spending cuts. In 2024, a majority (59%) believed the federal government was spending "too much" on that file. During the most recent federal election campaign, the Conservatives said they planned to divert foreign aid to military spending. Carney and the Liberals said his party would not make cuts to that portfolio, but there are questions as to how the federal government plans to adjust the federal government budget in the wake of a promised middle class tax cut and new defence spending to reach the NATO two-per-cent target.

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Canadians' views of Canada's standing on foreign aid in the international community over time



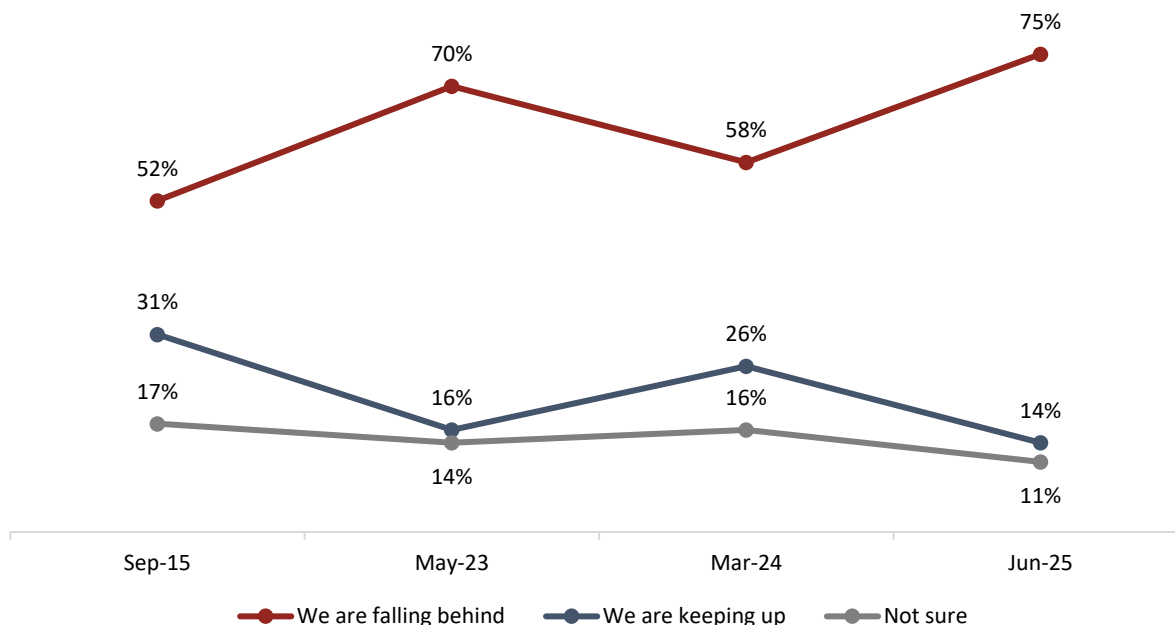
Military power

For Carney, the hope is that this year's increased outlay on defence will help Canada not only fulfill its promise to NATO on military spending but also assuage Canadians' concerns that the country is falling behind when it comes to its defence. For now, three-quarters (75%) believe Canada is being left in the dust by the international community when it comes to military power. Notably, this is the belief of a majority across the political spectrum, including recent CPC (88%), Liberal (68%), NDP (57%) and BQ voters (82%, [see detailed tables](#)).

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Canadians' views of Canada's standing on military power in the international community over time



Diplomatic influence

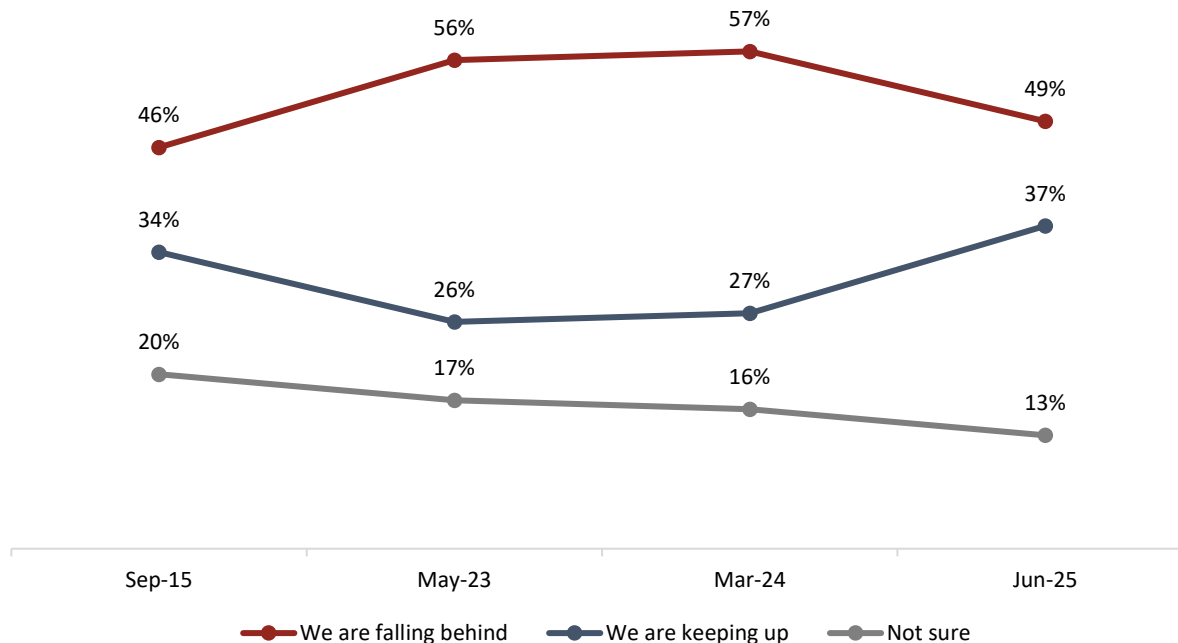
One of the first international tests of the new Carney Liberal government was the recent hosting of the G7 summit in Kananaskis, Alta. this month. There were some positive signs for Canada that a solution to the U.S. trade conflict was on the horizon, but the conference of world leaders was perhaps most notable for the lack of fireworks (perhaps aided by the early departure of regular fuse-lighter Trump).

Still, in the early days of Carney's time in office, Canadians are more likely to believe their country is "keeping up" on diplomatic influence than at any point in the previous two years. However, half (49%) say that Canada is falling behind on this file, suggesting there is more work to be done for Canadians to believe their country is having a positive diplomatic impact on the world stage:

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Canadians' views of Canada's standing on diplomatic influence in the international community over time



Part Three: Nuclear war and missile defence

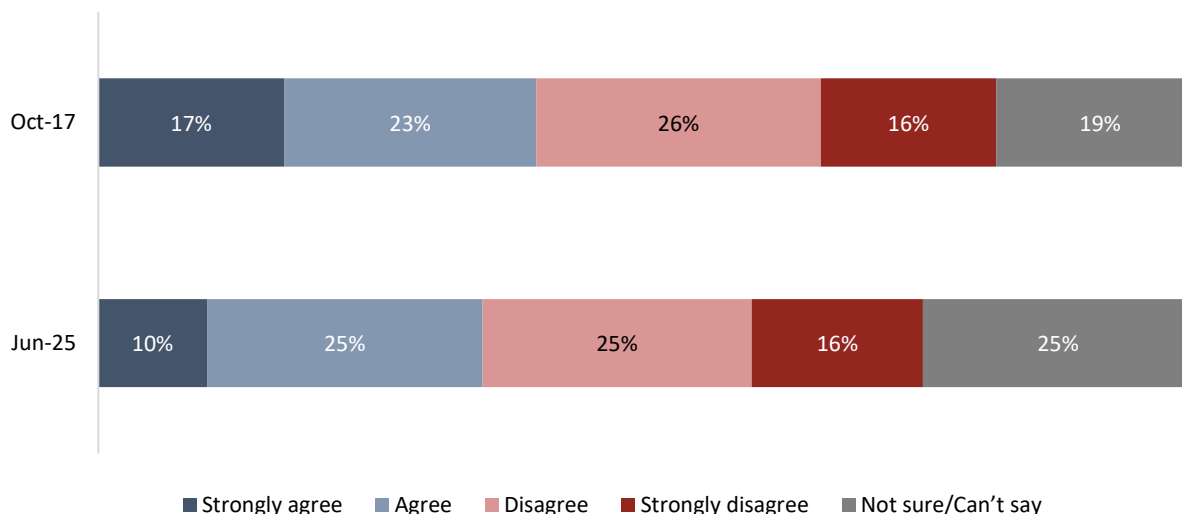
Carney and the Liberal government have a major decision when it comes to at least one military matter – whether or not to join Trump's proposed Golden Dome missile defence system, which Trump says will cost Canada \$61 billion USD. Canada does not currently have a missile defence system after declining to join the current U.S. homeland ballistic missile defence system two decades ago.

In 2017, after North Korea announced it had the capability to reach North America with intercontinental ballistic missiles, the federal government was reportedly considering joining the U.S's defence system it had previously declined to. At the time, two-in-five (40%) Canadians believed it would make Canada safer to join the U.S. missile defence system. Now, one-third (35%) say the same, as a larger proportion are uncertain (25%) in the wake of Trump's repeated threats to make Canada the 51st state:

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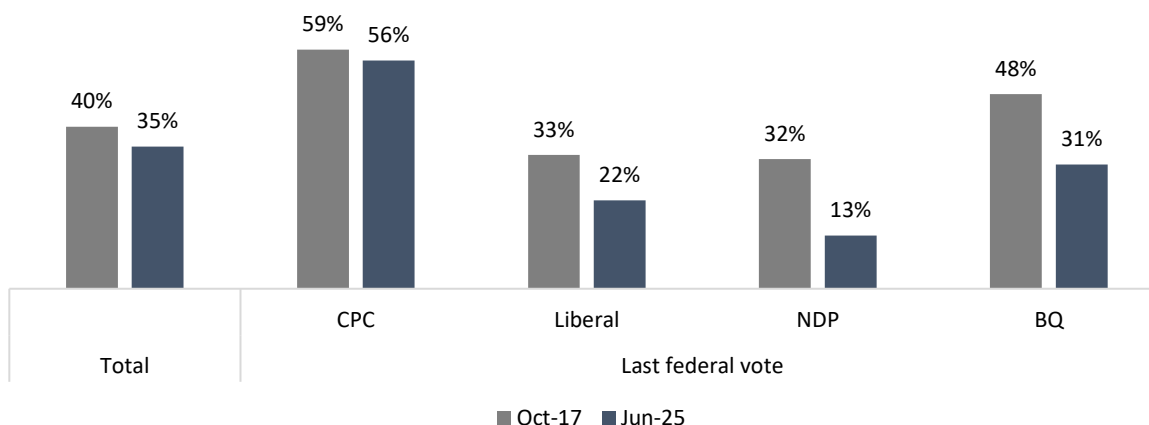
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**Agree vs. disagree -
"Joining a U.S. ballistic missile defence system would ultimately make Canada safer"**



As was the case in 2017, it is past Conservative voters who are most enthusiastic about the belief that Canada would be safer under the U.S.'s missile defence umbrella. For all other past voters, there have been double-digit declines in the proportion that believe Canada's safety would be higher by joining the U.S. and its missile defence system:

Percentage who agree that "joining a U.S. ballistic missile defence system would ultimately make Canada safer"



North Korea was previously a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), but left in 2003 and declared it had nuclear weapons in 2005. This weekend, the U.S. bombed nuclear facilities in Iran, a current signatory to the NPT, after Israel began a bombing campaign against Iran's

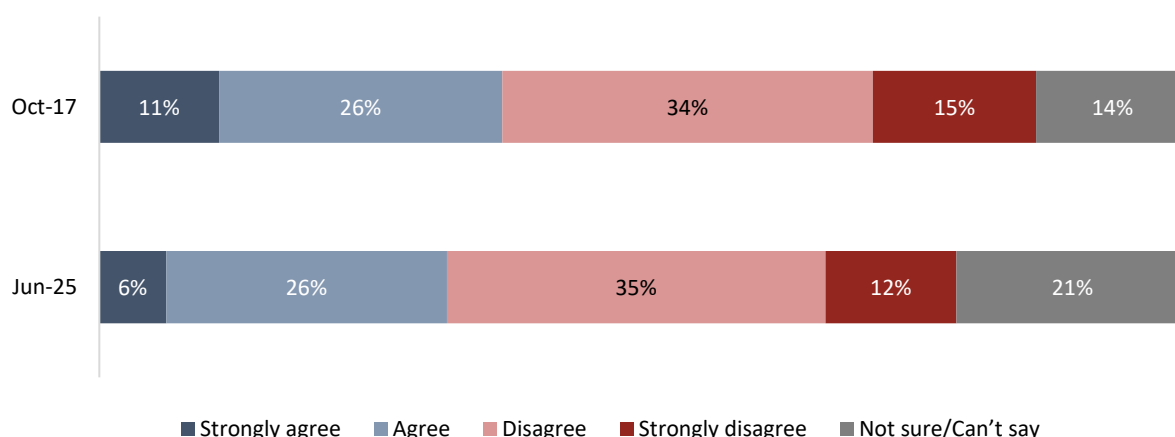
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nuclear facilities because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Iran was close to producing a nuclear weapon.

These data from ARI were taken over the weekend in the midst of this military action by the United States. Still, the percentage of Canadians who believe “nuclear war is inevitable” is 32 per cent, a decline from the 37 per cent seen in 2017 during the standoff between North Korea and the United States. Eventually tensions between North Korea and the United States waned after Trump became the first sitting president to visit North Korea in 2019 as the U.S. looked to build diplomatic ties with the rogue nuclear country.

**Agree vs. disagree -
"I genuinely feel like nuclear war is inevitable"**



The decline in belief that nuclear war is inevitable is driven almost entirely by a drop among men who believe that to be the case. A majority of men of all ages believed nuclear war was an inevitability in October 2017, when North Korea and the U.S. were in a standoff over missile testing and capabilities during Trump's first term.

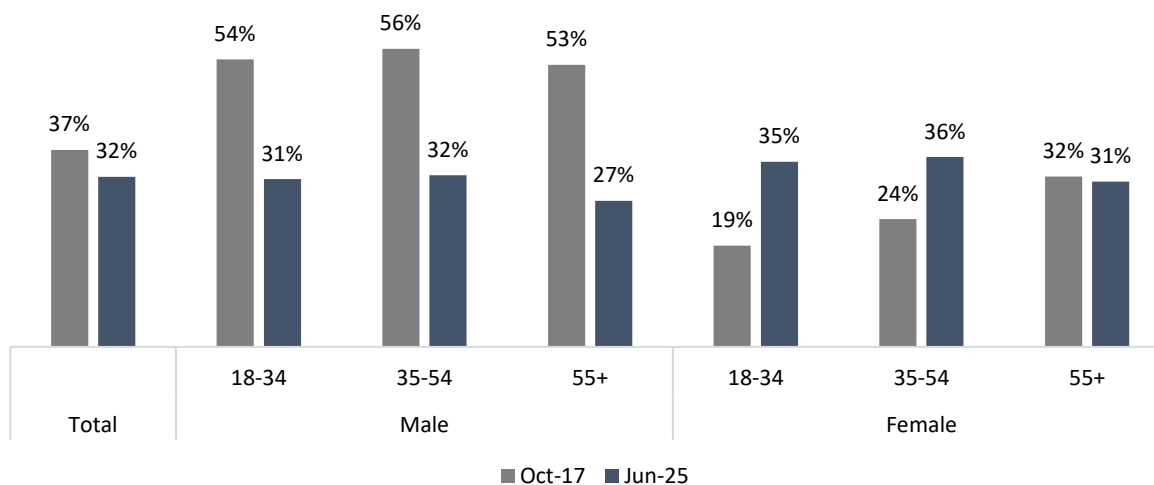
Related: Fear of nuclear war rising significantly, but more Canadians inclined to “stay out” of missile defence

Now there is little gap between pessimism over the likelihood of nuclear war between men and women, although the latter has become more likely to believe nuclear war is a foregone conclusion than they were eight years ago:

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Percentage who agree that they "genuinely feel like nuclear war is inevitable"



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

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