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Security forum provides perspective and retrospective

By Tim Dunne

Three hundred of the world's foremost thinkers, influencers and decision-makers converge on Halifax this weekend to discuss global security issues, including America's global involvement, Syria, the rise of China and Canada's Arctic.

The fifth annual Halifax International Security Forum (HISF) brings together people from other democracies, including our traditional NATO allies and trading partners, and others with which we have yet to forge relationships.

"It has been an honour to participate in the development of the Halifax International Security Forum from its inception," said Justice Minister Peter MacKay, who inaugurated HISF when he was in the Defence portfolio.

"Over a short span of time, this forum and city have built an enviable reputation and ability to draw high-calibre, world-renowned policymakers and decision-makers. Participants, such as defence and foreign ministers from around the globe and high-profile individuals like Sen. John McCain, attend year after year."

In addition to Sen. McCain, U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, and government ministers from the Americas, Europe and Asia will join their Canadian government, military and civic counterparts for presentations and discussions.

HISF first convened in 2009 to look at the trans-Atlantic relationship and quickly expanded to include the Americas and Asia.

The forum has built a niche by bringing together representatives, writers, prominent jurists, and political and military leaders from Canada and other democratic governments, as well as acknowledged experts from around the world. This annual conference has become internationally recognized as a valuable venue for debate and discussion about global security issues.

"Very senior and very busy people come to Halifax," HISF president Peter Van Praagh explained. "And over time, we have become one of Canada's most important foreign policy tools. Our reputation has grown as an important place to meet."

As the world becomes ever more dangerous, it is increasingly important to call together those who have different points of view on what those dangers are and how to address them, but all of whom share the same perspectives on what the outcomes should be.

Government representatives, military leaders, senior public servants, national and international commentators, journalists and academics use the information that comes from the debate and analysis that take place at the Halifax conference to advance global security issues.

"Participants use this information in their work," Van Praagh notes, "Whether it's writing, or whether it's policy, because as government officials, academics and leaders, they want to know what their colleagues are saying. HISF is uniquely useful for this."

It is a well-known maxim that democracies don't go to war with each other, preferring to resolve

difficulties through negotiation and discussion. Over its five years, HISF has established itself as a community that builds democracy, creates opportunity and promotes peace.

This is an opportunity for nations that are suffering from, or working through, problems to contribute to these discussions. Over time, this leads to better policy options for decision-makers.

There are countries in our own hemisphere and elsewhere with which we should be co-operating more. At Halifax, people come together and get to know each other, leading to greater co-operation on a wide range of issues.

As the last major international political occasion on the calendar, HISF can look back on the year, through the many issues to which this community of democracies has responded. It can deliberate on what has been done well, what could have done better, and what can be done next year to make the world safer.

Halifax's history as a military base, the launch point for our contributions in both world wars and Canada's Atlantic hub for travel, trade and commerce makes it a perfect place to have a global conversation on security issues and to foster democracy that, in turn, leads to lasting peace.

Canada has, over time, built a very special society through hard work, international co-operation and conflict. People from newer democracies want to learn about this remarkable society.

"The Halifax International Security Forum has become a very relevant foreign policy tool," Van Praagh observes. "Canada's voice is fundamental to world peace and global security, and this international meeting allows that voice to be spoken from Halifax."

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