

## Canadian foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: it starts with the United States

Michael Hart

In this excerpt from his new book, *From Pride to Influence*, Michael Hart makes a strong case that Canada's foreign policy, if it is to be relevant and influential, must start by serving our own interests, which are defined by economic, geography, history and political culture — namely by our common interests with the United States.

Dans cet extrait de son dernier ouvrage, *From Pride to Influence*, Michael Hart explique clairement pourquoi la politique étrangère canadienne doit d'abord servir les intérêts du Canada pour gagner en pertinence et en influence. Des intérêts définis par son économie, sa situation géographique, son histoire et sa culture politique. C'est-à-dire les intérêts qu'il partage avec les États-Unis.

In a stunning statement for a newly installed foreign minister, John Manley told the media in 2001 that Canada was “still trading on a reputation that was built two generations and more ago — but that we haven't continued to live up to...You can't just sit at the G8 table and then, when the bill comes, go to the washroom. If you want to play a role in the world, even as a small member of the G8 there's a cost to doing that.” He was not alone. Historian Michael Bliss was even more direct, noting that “We have become too diverse, too self-satisfied, too parochial to take the idea of defending ourselves seriously, or even to care very much any more about the realities of national sovereignty. The fundamental phoniness of much Canadian discourse about world issues lies in our belief the Americans, or anyone else, take us seriously.” Much of that phoniness stems from confused thinking about who Canadians are, the strengths they have at their disposal, and the weaknesses against which they need to guard. In their foreign policy,

in particular, Canadians have made a virtue out of their self-proclaimed values and importance, and have lost sight of their interests and the need to nurture the means to pursue them.

Recent critics of Canadian foreign policy have tried to blame the drift in Canada's performance on lack of resources or on a decline in the quality of foreign-service personnel, that is, on bureaucratic execution. These may have been contributing factors but are not the main issue. Canada's foreign policy has been drifting because it lacks firm and consistent political leadership and direction, which in turn has added to Canadians' confusion about who they are, their interests in the world around them, and what they can reasonably contribute to that world. Maintaining direction and purpose in Canada's foreign policy requires strong political leadership and a population that knows what it wants and why.

Myth making notwithstanding, recent lack of purpose and direction in Canadian foreign policy is

not unique in Canada's history. Indeed, for much of Canada's past, foreign policy was at best a minor consideration in the life of the nation. Until the Second World War, little mattered to most Canadians except the British connection and tolerably good relations with their US neighbours. The rest of the world was foreign, remote, and at best of passing interest. The Second World War, like the First, was initially a matter of standing with the mother country against a clear and present danger to its values and interests. As was not the case after the First World War, however, neither Canadians nor Americans were prepared to let the European powers arrange for a post-war order in accordance with European preferences. Canadians insisted on a role in arranging the peace and developing a more functional and just post-war order. Broad Canadian engagement in foreign affairs dates from that decision.

In helping to plan, and then execute, the post-war order, Canadians found a world that was interested in

their views and in their contributions. The absence of some of the former major powers from the post-war building process gave Canada a larger role and a louder voice leading to an increasing taste for foreign policy making. Canadians made a significant contribution to the development of the post-war international order and continued to be part of its management. They were well served by a generation of political leaders who knew what they wanted and why. They were also

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well served by senior officials who were capable of advising these political leaders, interpreting their concerns, executing their wishes in creative and constructive ways, and delivering policy that was neither a prisoner of events nor irresponsible, but consonant with Canadian interests and capacity.

Over the subsequent 40 or more years, Canadian officials found their opinions sought, their contributions valued, and their influence recognized. Canadians were proud of their diplomats and supported their activist role in world affairs. That role was firmly grounded in the values and aspirations of a liberal, Western, market-based democracy. Canada was clearly aligned with the United States, Britain, and the other NATO allies in the security and defence considerations that dominated the foreign policy of the Cold War. Canada was equally aligned with the United States, Britain, and the other OECD countries in developing and implementing a market-based international economic order grounded in the IMF, the GATT, and other multilateral institutions.

Finally, like most developed countries, Canada played a constructive role in enhancing the economic devel-

opment of poorer countries and sought to promote a liberal, market-based, democratic world in the foreign policy of North-South discussions. Often forgotten in recent myth making was the critical contribution of intimate and constructive relations with US officials to Canada's approach, influence, and ability to make a difference on all three fronts.

In the three dominant themes of the foreign policy of the second half of the 20th century, Canadians often

played a moderating part, seizing opportunities to build bridges and insert Canadian interests into the process. In effect, Canada sought a role and was accepted as a middle power: middle in size and importance, and middle in interests and in the capacity to mediate where desired and possible. There was never any question, however, that Canada was a member of the NATO/OECD club. Such differences as Canadian officials may have had with their American, British, French, or other Western colleagues were of another order than differences they might have had with Russian and Chinese officials, or with those of Brazil and India. The first were within the family; the second and third groups were divided by fundamental differences of ideology, development, experience, and outlook.

The world in which Canadian diplomats played their middle-power role and pursued Canada's middle-power interests disappeared almost a generation ago. Inertia maintained the practice of Canadian diplomacy but with decreasing relevance and effect. Events subsequent to September 11, 2001 have exposed the extent to which the assumptions — and rhetoric

— underpinning the practice of Canadian diplomacy now diverge from reality and interests. The implosion of the Soviet Empire, the war against terrorism, the rise of India and China as major markets, and the faltering Doha negotiations all illustrate that the post-war world of strategic balance, mutually assured nuclear destruction, national economies, and strong multilateral rules and regimes has largely vanished. Canadians now live in a unipolar world dominated by

the United States, in a global economy in which transnational corporations have become major contributors to citizens' long-term prosperity, and in circumstances in which security threats spring from the unpredictable behav-

our of non-state actors and rogue states. The challenges arising from this new environment suggest the need for serious reconsideration of the assumptions and objectives underlying the contemporary practice of Canadian foreign policy; they certainly should not be subject to strategic concepts based on outdated orthodoxies or utopian new ones.

Changes in government in Canada rarely result in a radical reorientation in foreign policy. The role of the bureaucracy, while perhaps confined strictly to advising and implementing, can still act as a brake on radical transformation. The fact that Harper is presiding over a minority government adds to the forces disposing him to exercise caution and limit change to those matters that are of greatest importance to him: the US relationship and the state of the military...The 2006 change in government allowed Canadians to step back from the mindsets and attitudes that had informed policy making in the 1990s and into the 2000s and think about the world that they now inhabit, their interests in that world, and the policies they are prepared to pursue to achieve them.



*Montreal Gazette archives*

**Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson and President Lyndon B. Johnson at the presidential retreat, Camp David, in 1965, a time when Canada was influential in the US and the world.**

To reiterate, the most important national interests served by Canada's diplomatic efforts are to contribute to Canadians' physical security and to promote their material welfare. How Canadian governments pursue the details of these twin interests is, in turn, conditioned by Canadian values, by their increasingly multicultural polity, by the politics of the moment, by the extent and quality of the relationships Canadians enjoy, by domestic and global circumstances, and by other factors. Additionally, Canadians want their government to pursue humanitarian and related goals, from development assistance to disaster relief and peacekeeping operations in the world's trouble spots. Finally, Canadians look to Ottawa to provide a range of services, from con-

sular support to trade promotion. These secondary objectives, to be successful, must flow from well-executed policies to achieve security and prosperity. Diplomatic, humanitarian, consular, trade promotion, and other activities that are unrelated to core Canadian interests and capabilities are unlikely to make their mark or have lasting impact.

The resources required to attain Canadian interests and objectives can be determined only on the basis of an unambiguous delineation of those interests and objectives. Although the resources and assets required to mount a credible and effective foreign policy may have deteriorated to some extent, it is equally possible that some have simply been deployed to meet goals and objectives marginal to Canadian

interests. Certainly, if Canada wants to be an effective security partner of the United States and other allies, its diplomatic, defence, development assistance, intelligence, and related efforts may not always have measured up to the demands placed upon them or to the expectations created among Canadians or allies. Strengthening Canada's foreign policy performance may require some additional resources, or some resources may need to be redeployed. In either case, however, little will be achieved in the absence of coherent and consistent political leadership grounded in a clear assessment of Canadian interests and the programs and policies required to pursue them.

Canada's leading defence, trade, investment, and foreign policy

partner is the United States, surpassing all other partnerships combined in breadth, depth, and intensity. Cross-border trade and investment drive Canada's economy. US innovation and entrepreneurship provide both opportunities and competition. US popular culture dominates, not because it is forced on Canadians but because Canadians choose it. The US military provides a blanket of security. US warm weather cossets millions of snowbird Canadians each winter. Virtually every aspect of Canada's political, economic, cultural, and social life is measured by Canadians in terms of the US yardstick.

Two key perspectives inform how Canadians think about these matters: some see Canada-US interdependence as an asset and opportunity to be nurtured and exploited; others see it as a source of vulnerability and potential liability, requiring the development of counterweights and alternatives. The seductive appeal of this second perspective has been a major contributor to the malaise in Ottawa's capacity to deliver an effective Canadian foreign policy. This perspective, strongly held by a minority of Canadians but subconsciously accepted by many more, is in the final analysis a recipe for a poorer and less secure Canada. The key relationship to both Canadian security and prosperity is with the United States, and it is better pursued with a sense of purpose and enthusiasm than with an attitude of resignation.

Although some lingering echoes of earlier themes remain in relations with the rest of the world, the important issues today arise from differences over terrorism, failed states, humanitarian intervention, and the role of multilateral institutions and international law. For many of these issues, the critical determining factor is the role and responsibilities of the United States. Fundamentally, therefore, the principal foreign policy issue facing

Canada is how and to what extent it needs to work with the United States in addressing its own security and welfare and the broader security, prosperity, and humanitarian interests facing the world as a whole. In considering this issue, Canadians will need to exercise choices and then act upon them.

In the absence of clear leadership and a capacity to exercise real choices, the default option has been one of muddling through, of taking individual issues as they arise and making the best of them. This incrementalism comes naturally to most officials and requires few hard decisions by ministers. It depends on the day-to-day professionalism of officials to get through most problems and entails little strate-

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gy, coherence, or purpose; rather, it relies on events and short-term political instincts and becomes their prisoner. The resulting drift is predictable, a drift that draws Canada ever closer to the United States, but without much control, influence, or credit. On many issues, most Canadians may well accept, perhaps grudgingly, that Canada should align itself with the United States. On a few issues, often symbolic ones, the politics of the moment requires the government to take a stance that demonstrates its ability to differentiate Canada from the United States and its capacity to pursue an "independent" foreign policy. Some applaud, the United States becomes irritated, but the default of irresponsible drift continues.

In response, US officials increasingly view their Canadian neighbours as unreliable or, even worse, irrelevant, and may look to their own resources to solve border and other problems. Continuing down this path will steadily lead to the "Mexicanization" of the northern border and will strengthen global convictions that Canada no longer matters. During a similar bout of populist anti-American sentiment in the 1960s, John Holmes concluded that "Canadians must never be — or even seem to be — a threat to the vital interests of the United States. They can be 'independent' but they must not seem 'unreliable.' Whether they like it or not — and they do not — they are vulnerable to American displeasure. This displeasure is not likely to take the form of punitive action or crude reprisal; Canadians would feel it rather in the drying up of the good will which restrains the United States from exploiting the economic and military power it has to do Canada damage." The opening years of the 21st century saw the beginnings of this drying up, as unresolved problems began to multiply, and Canada's reliability came into question.

An alternative approach to organizing Canada's foreign policy seeks a place in the world to make Canadians proud, making a virtue of the most recent trendy values but ignoring the forces of history, geography, and demography. It is much favoured by Canadian cultural and economic nationalists and liberal internationalists, and is at times the subject of stirring political rhetoric even if unaccompanied by action or follow-through. Rather than focusing on relations with the United States, its advocates place the emphasis on differentiating Canada from the United States, on searching for counterweights and alternatives, relying on the United Nations and other multilateral instruments as the basis of Canada's defence, and looking to Asia

and Europe for new trade and investment opportunities. From this perspective, Canada's mantra should be "making a difference" in the world, carving out a "role of pride and influence." In short, Canada should try to emulate France: prickly, activist, not to be ignored, widely engaged, but not very effective or reliable.

There is little but self-regard to recommend this approach. As John

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Holmes reminded an earlier generation befuddled and bedazzled by Trudeaumania, "It is difficult to believe that Canadians, closely bound not only to the interests but also to the thought-processes of Americans and their European allies, would set themselves categorically apart from the countries with which they are historically and intellectually allied."

The realistic approach for Canadians is to make a virtue of their history and geography, and embrace their proximity to, and mutual interests with, the United States. Pursuit of this option will require a deliberate effort to forge a new accommodation with the United States covering the full range of issues where the two societies connect and interact: defence, security, trade, investment, regulatory matters, labour mobility, an open border, and a shared perimeter. This approach sees in relations with the United States the key to Canada's influence and role in the wider world, and ensures that Canada's influence in Washington is paramount, not only in addressing topics of bilateral interest, but also in advancing Canada's views on global matters.

The result of this approach is more difficult to project. It depends critically on the response of the United

States and a willingness in both countries to address matters between them on a basis that accepts both the asymmetry of the relationship and the extent of mutual interests. As the analysis in earlier chapters has suggested, it will lead to a stronger Canadian economy and strengthen a security relationship of long standing but will require Canadians to adopt a 21st-century appreciation of sovereignty. It

reflects the broad base of public support for deeper integration and closer relations with the United States but runs counter to the preferences of articulate and sometimes noisy elites.

To reorient Canadian foreign policy, therefore, Canadians will need to come to terms with who they are, where they live, and how they relate to the United States. Four factors are critical to reaching an appropriate balance in Canadian thinking about relations with their neighbours. The first is the nature of the two countries that have emerged in North America. Both Canada and the United States are settler societies, essentially European transplants on an Aboriginal base, absorbing and assimilating substantial influxes of non-European immigrants. Both countries are constitutional democracies with market economies. The basic values and preferences that define the character of both societies are fundamentally compatible. If Canadian foreign policy reflects Canadian values and preferences, then the basic principles of Canadian foreign policy must necessarily be closer to those of the United States than to those of any other country. Hence, the goals of global liberty, democracy, and the rule of law, for example, enunciated in the 2002 US *National Security Strategy*, could comfortably find a place

in any statement of Canadian foreign policy. The differences between Canadian and US policies that emerge on global political issues such as Iraq, Cuba, or Israel are differences in tactics and power, not strategy and values. Although Canadians are much less prone to military solutions and lack, in any case, the means to apply them, few support Baathist or communist models of governance or would regret the emergence of democratic governments in countries now ruled by repressive regimes.

The second factor is the intersection of security with geography in North America. The common geography and the intensity of cross-border human and commercial contact mean that Canadian and US security interests are indivisible. The formal security arrangements, embodied in the Permanent Joint Board on Defence, NORAD, and other formal and informal arrangements, recognize that the security threats from hostile powers are common to both countries. The vast range of informal arrangements, from the Smart Border Accord to shared intelligence and police cooperation, recognizes the security challenges arising from \$2 billion in daily trade in goods and services and up to half a million daily individual border crossings. There is a false dichotomy drawn between Canadian trade interests and US security interests. Taken to its logical conclusion, it would mean that Canadians are indifferent to US security challenges except to the extent that they impede trade flows. It also suggests that Canadians are or should be ready to address US security interests only to the extent that the United States is responsive to Canadian trade interests. There is no option available to Canada that will mitigate the security threats arising from geography and human contact.

The third factor is the North American resource endowment. The Canadian and US economies enjoy a similar comparative advantage in glob-

al and domestic markets. They face the same pain and gain of adjustment to the rapid changes in global trade and investment patterns. Between the two countries, a remarkable degree of regulatory convergence and harmonization exists across the whole of the interface between the private economy and public policy. Where differences exist, they lie in administration, not in fundamen-

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tal approach. Over the last 70 years, the Canadian economy has become progressively more integrated into the US economy as a result of the push of private economic forces and the pull of sustained Canadian efforts to open the US market to Canadian goods and services. In neither country is there any sentiment that the government should interfere in private business and investment decisions to change the logic of resources, geography, and private choice that underpins economic integration. For Canada, trade and investment relations with other countries will be important only at the margins and cannot substitute for the relationship with the United States.

The fourth factor is Canada's extensive network of club memberships. There is scarcely a multilateral or regional organization of which Canada is not an active member, and hardly any, apart from the Commonwealth and la Francophonie, in which the most important member is not the United States. Through these organizations, Canada has developed a long tradition of encouraging the broadening and deepening of commitments to constrain the sovereign choices of states. In each, Canada has made commitments to patterns of behaviour that reflect the foreign policy impulses emerging from the fundamental interests of the country.

Given the basic similarities between

Canada and the United States, the policies advocated in these organizations by both countries originate in the same conceptions of governance. In international economic and political forums, there is often little to distinguish Canadian and US positions. It is inconceivable that Canada would express support in the G8 for non-democratic governance, advocate in the UN the

suppression of diversity and tolerance, or press the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to invest in centrally planned economies. As in the case of global political issues, the differences are tactical, not strategic.

Relations with the United States are at the centre of Canada's foreign and domestic policy interests at every level, touching virtually every governmental file and affecting the lives of all Canadians. The principal foreign policy challenge for Canada is to manage the pervasiveness of this US reality, from global threats to Canadians' security to the forces of silent integration drawing the two societies ever closer together. A recalibration of how best to manage our relations with the United States is essential to releasing the necessary political energies to chart a new course of global foreign and commercial policy for Canada. To further that end, Canadian political leaders need to build constructive rapport with their Washington counterparts, regardless of their political affiliation. They need urgently, and often, to tell them who they are and why Canada matters to the US agenda, and thus rebuild the kind of relationships required to pursue the current agenda of issues to the mutual advantage of both countries.

The time has come to bring Canadian foreign policy into the 21st century by grounding it in a concep-

tion of the national interest that accepts the primacy of the United States and guarantees both our national security and our prosperity. There is an urgent need to recognize that the bilateral relationship has outgrown the tools and institutions to manage it and to define the parameters of a new accommodation. This will not be an easy task. The attention of Canadians to foreign policy is modest and intermittent, and the susceptibility to anti-American notions remains strong. Narrow visions and confused ideologies will be enticing, as will the temptation to substitute sentiment

for interest. The most effective antidote will be to establish a hierarchy of interests focusing on the bilateral relationship as the touchstone of successful foreign policy.

The challenge in finding a place for Canada and Canadians in the world beyond the United States lies less in constructing a new strategic framework and more in crafting a set of policies that meets the needs and expectations of Canadians as traders and investors, humanitarians, travelers, and residents outside Canada. In other words, Canada's foreign policy beyond the United States needs to move from being one of the central instruments of statecraft to one that is more closely tailored to the services that the federal government can provide to Canadians and to the humanitarian impulse to which they aspire to respond.

*Excerpted from From Pride to Influence: Towards a New Canadian Foreign Policy, published by UBC Press (2008). Michael Hart is Simon Reisman Professor of Trade Policy, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, and Distinguished Fellow of the Centre for Trade Policy and Law at Carleton University. He is the author of Decision at Midnight: Inside the Canada-US Free Trade Negotiations and A Trading Nation: Canadian Trade Policy from Colonialism to Globalization, both from UBC Press.*