

BEHIND the HEADLINES

VOLUME 61 NUMBER 4

Canada in the 21st
century:
Beyond Dominion
and Middle Power

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© 2004 Canadian Institute of
International Affairs

Published quarterly
\$4.95 per single issue
\$19.95 per year
(Canadian addresses add 7% GST)
GST Registration No. 10686 1610 RT

Date of issue – September 2004
ISSN 0005-7983
Publications Mail Registration
No. 09880

Editor:

Robert Johnstone

Canada in the 21st century: Beyond Dominion and Middle Power

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Canada's experience as a foreign policy actor, when viewed in historical terms, is relatively brief. Until the passing of the Statute of Westminster in 1931, the Dominion of Canada deferred to the principle of British primacy in imperial foreign and defence policy, serving up its young men to the cause of European peace during the First World War and dispatching its plenipotentiaries to negotiations only when critical external Canadian interests were at stake (such as fishing rights or the demarcation of maritime boundaries). The strong Canadian backing for the policy of appeasement in the late 1930s and the subsequent speed with which Canada went to war against fascism demonstrated that formal independence had not erased the deep sense of attachment to the mother country.¹

Nevertheless, the short history of Canadian foreign policy is a compelling tale of sacrifice and contribution. As part of the wartime alliance, Canada "invaded" the United Kingdom with close to half a million of its young, able-bodied men over a four-year period, to train and prepare for their global missions. After 1945, as part of the new Pax Americana, Canada lent its resources and ideas of functionalism to the creation of the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Indeed, Article 2 of the NATO treaty, which calls for the formation of a North

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An earlier version of this paper was published in the September 2004 issue of The Round Table. The author would like to thank the editor and publishers of the journal, Taylor and Francis, for permission to reproduce passages from it.

Atlantic political and economic community, is commonly held to be “Canada’s clause.” As the Cold War enveloped the globe, threatening to smother the post-war aspiration for multilateralism, it was the initiative of Canadian diplomats that helped to breathe new life into the UN, in the form of peacekeeping. Such skilful diplomacy also served the interests of the great powers, including Canada’s former colonial masters. Lester Pearson, in Peter Lyon’s words, “helped to get Britain and France off their self-impaled hooks”² during the Suez crisis, by inventing the United Nations Emergency Force. The Canadian commitment to multilateralism and the peaceful resolution of disputes carried through to the latter part of the 20th century, as seen in the Canadian-led campaign to rid the world of land mines (known as the Ottawa Process) and Canada’s role in the preparatory meetings leading to the establishment of the International Criminal Court.

Throughout the post-1945 period, the label “middle power” has been used as shorthand to encapsulate Canada’s international role. While Canada lacks the economic and military capabilities of a great power, it likes to think it has more influence than the small powers at the “bottom of the heap.” Canada has exploited this ambiguous position within the international hierarchy to great effect. The language and practice of middle power diplomacy justified Canada’s attainment of disproportionate influence in international affairs and furnished it with a distinctive national foreign policy brand.³

But can the middle power mantra continue to sustain Canada in this new century? During the frosty decades of the Cold War, the notion of a middle power seeking to find a niche between the United States on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other made a lot of sense for Canada. It even had a measure of utility in the early years of the 1990s, as the world was adjusting to the breakup of the Communist bloc, focusing on the world economy and building new forms of international collaboration. But the recent transformation of the international context, combined with significant changes within the North American region and the Canadian federation, has made “middle power” an outdated label for Canada’s place in the world. This has given Canada a new kind of identity crisis—one that is focused externally rather than internally.

After four decades of battling Quebec separatism and endlessly tinkering with its constitutional arrangements, Canada can now say, with some confidence, that it has transcended the problem of national unity. On the other hand, there is both a perceived and a real problem of Canadian decline on the international stage. “While

Canada slept”⁴—to borrow the title of a recent best-selling book—Canada’s military capability has deteriorated rapidly (it ranks near the bottom of the NATO roster in terms of percentage of GDP devoted to defence), its policy leadership on key issues like the environment has evaporated, and its international aid budget has dwindled from a high of 0.53 per cent of GDP in 1975 to 0.28 per cent today). Even Canada’s much-heralded reputation as the world’s peacekeeper has been damaged by its traumatic experience in Somalia and prolonged under-investment in the armed forces. While the country was once part of every UN peacekeeping mission, and contributed 10 per cent of the peacekeeping personnel, it now ranks 34th on the list of contributor countries and has had to turn down a series of requests to send its forces to war-torn countries. In short, Canada has less “meat” to put on the international table and is increasingly relying on its past record of good international citizenship. The noise about Canadian decline has reached such a pitch that a 2003 cover story of the Canadian edition of *Time* magazine dared to ask: “Would anyone notice if Canada disappeared?”⁵

As Canada manoeuvres its way out of its present crisis of international vocation, it will need to think less about whether it is a middle power and more about the kind of power it wields, where it can best wield it and for what purposes.

WHITHER “MIDDLE POWER”?

Middle-sized states are the most lasting, since they are exposed neither to violence by their weakness nor to envy by their greatness, and their wealth and power being moderate, passions are less violent, ambition finds less support and licence less provocation than in large states. Fear of their neighbours restrains them, and even if feelings are roused to anger they are more easily quieted and tranquility restored ...⁶

The Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Botero was one of the first writers on international relations to observe, and praise, the class of middle powers. But despite the attempts of subsequent scholars to give substance to the notion,⁷ its real-world relevance has come up short, especially for a state such as Canada.

The first set of challenges is analytical. There is simply no objective definition of middle power. Instead, the concept is relational: it requires great and minor powers as reference points before it means anything. But in the 21st century, with the emergence of the US hegemon, the global context has changed dramatically. We no longer

live in an international system where great powers are pitted against one another, and smaller powers like Canada work skilfully to find a path through the middle. Instead, we live in a world with a single superpower that, on any measure you choose, far outstrips its nearest rivals.

Furthermore, as the Canadian political scientist Denis Stairs has astutely noted, the very question “What is a middle power?” is underpinned by a problematic premise. It assumes “that the place of a given state in the international hierarchy of power is itself a fundamental, if not *the* fundamental, determinant of its international behaviour”⁸ and—by extension—that states that fulfil the definition will behave in similar ways. But, as Stairs argues, this systemic approach faces two objections. First, isn’t it possible that the impact of the hierarchy of power in international relations is “discontinuous”—i.e., limited to the global interactions of the great powers, but not applicable to small or middle ones?⁹ And, second, is there empirical evidence to support the assumption about similarity of behaviour? If we take the example of the founding of the United Nations, the prediction about a commonality of substantive positions or roles among middle powers is found wanting. The point of commonality was superficial: a desire to have more influence in the UN than smaller powers. But questions about how that influence would actually be employed, or to what end, were not a subject of discussion. The most, it seems, that we can say is that middle powers share a preference for certain tactics in international politics, especially a desire to work in multilateral and rule-governed frameworks. But this “safety-in-numbers” behaviour is hardly surprising. “The same reasoning applies to small fish at sea, small boys in a schoolyard and small players in the politics of a university.”¹⁰

It is clear, then, that the systemic logic behind the notion of middle powers can only partially explain how an individual state will behave. To call Canada a middle power—and then to describe its behaviour accordingly—is to miss all of the domestic and societal influences on its foreign policy. Clearly there are factors beyond Canada’s position in the hierarchy of power that explain the country’s traditional propensity to co-operate in multilateral institutions and to seek the peaceful resolution of disputes. Furthermore, there are other countries positioned in the middle power ground that do not exhibit these tendencies. Canada’s past foreign policy behaviour was based not just on its place in the global balance of power or on some innate desire to “do good” but also on a careful consideration of Canadian interests. For example, Canada’s depiction of its foreign

policy history tends to gloss over some of the less noble deeds of the quintessential middle power era, such as the Trudeau government's use of quotas and high tariffs on goods from the developing world in order to protect particularly sensitive Canadian industries (particularly those concentrated in Ontario and Quebec).

An alternative approach to middle powers, one that eschews systemic assumptions, has been developed by the scholars Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal. In their analysis of Canada and Australia, they define middle powers less in terms of size and geographic location and more in terms of their "technical and entrepreneurial capacities."¹¹ Their contention is that during the short-lived (and now heavily debated) period of US decline in the late 1980s,¹² the absence of clear leadership in the international system opened up alternative potential sources of initiative and innovation in international politics. Middle powers like Canada and Australia moved quickly to fill the gap. Once again, however, changes in the international context call this thesis into question. Today's international system does not lack a leader. Whether the direction and actions of that leader are widely respected and endorsed is another matter. And while some limited opportunities for niche diplomacy remain, the importance of having US support for one's initiatives is often critical. British prime minister Tony Blair's campaign to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process after 11 September 2001 is a telling example. Without the full backing of George W. Bush, the (now defunct) "road map" of 2003 would never have got off the ground.

A final analytical challenge is the substantial change in the notion of power itself. According to Joseph Nye, power (and our measurement of it) has become a contested concept in international relations.¹³ If power is associated with the possession of certain resources (population, territory, military strength, economic size, culture, etc.), then it is clear that the US is the world's unrivalled hegemon. But it is less clear how we should categorize other states. While some might be considered great in economic terms (such as Germany) or in population (such as India), they may not necessarily be granted that label in military terms. Similarly, while certain components of "hard power" remain essential to superpower status (such as nuclear weapons), other features of what Nye calls "soft power" are becoming more decisive as states seek to convert their power resources into effective influence. The most effective power is often not commanding or coercive, but rather indirect or co-optive: getting others to do what you want.¹⁴ The track

record of the US-led coalition in reconstructing Iraq is an obvious illustration: to “win the peace,” Nye has argued, the US needs to show as much skill in using soft power as it did in using hard power to win the war.¹⁵

Aside from these analytical problems, the middle power project runs into a normative challenge. As suggested above, the concept of middle power is mostly about process; it lacks substantive content. Middle powers are most often characterized by their tactics: compromising, building coalitions, participating in international organizations, forging consensus and maintaining international order. But, as Stairs points out, this middle power commitment to international order is inherently conservative. It rests on the assumption that Canadians are happy with the status quo and do not seek to change or improve upon the current international order to pursue other goals, such as greater justice. The middle power, he writes, “has to care more about ensuring that problems are peacefully settled than about the terms upon which the settlements themselves are based.”¹⁶ For Canada, middlepowermanship is largely about a *way* of conducting foreign policy. It doesn’t tell us very much about what Canada wants to achieve through those means. Yet values and purpose have become all-important in our post-9/11 world. In the war against terror, Canada’s allies care less about how many international organizations it has joined and more about what it stands for.

ALTERNATIVE VOCATIONS

Canada’s new identity crisis can be summed up like this: the middle power mantra is losing its punch, and the gap between the expectation of what Canada *should* do and the reality of what it *is* doing is growing wider and wider. Given these realities, what other foreign policy vocations are available?

The soft approach

The first contender, which picks up on Nye’s terminology, is Canada as a wielder of “soft power” in the international arena. This approach, which enjoys a high degree of support in Canada’s academic and policy-making corridors, was practised by Lloyd Axworthy during his tenure as foreign affairs minister from 1996 to 2001. Axworthy believed that soft power ultimately rests on the ability to set the agenda in international institutions and political debate. It derives not from the size of Canada’s military but rather from the attractiveness of Canadian values: human rights, democracy, the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Soft power can also refer to the tactics used to bring about a desired policy objective. In the case of Canadian foreign policy under Axworthy, these tactics were twofold: sophisticated practices of negotiation and coalition building; and the use of civilian talent and non-governmental organizations to gradually build an international consensus. In his words, the soft power approach “drew upon the culture of compromise we use to govern a vast, diverse, multiracial, bilingual country. And it relied upon the skill and talent of Canadians to negotiate, advise, organize and create, solve problems peaceably and look for practical solutions.”¹⁷ In addition, soft power diplomacy under Axworthy recognized that the revolution in communications and technology made it more difficult for states to control flows of information and influence. This opened up opportunities not only for interaction *between* national civil societies but also for the creation of a global civil society that could push for change on controversial issues such as child soldiers and land mines. The Axworthy years proved that, sometimes, effective persuasion and advocacy can convince states to “do the right thing.”

While Axworthy was a convert to the doctrine of soft power, another main driver of his approach was the brute fact of federal government downsizing. During the middle to late 1990s, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade lacked the raw material with which to build a traditional international agenda. As minister of foreign affairs, Axworthy responded to this constraint in an entrepreneurial fashion: he started up a new game of foreign policy, based on the idea that soft power, rather than hard power, was *the* new currency in international relations. Not everyone took the bait. Axworthy was criticized by some for resorting to self-righteous moralism and by others for trying to wage foreign policy “on the cheap.” While his approach produced some very impressive results, it did nothing to address the growing credibility gap in Canadian foreign policy. It’s worth remembering that Nye has never advised that soft power works in a “stand alone” fashion. “A country that suffers economic and military decline,” he writes, “is likely to lose its ability to shape the international agenda.”¹⁸ Indeed, in the past soft power has worked so well for the United States precisely because of the economic and military power that it holds in reserve.

If we accept that soft power is intimately related to (and somewhat dependent upon) hard power, then it is more difficult than Axworthy suggests to apply the concept to a country such as Canada, whose coercive capacities have eroded so significantly. It is not enough for a country to have attractive values and ideas. It also needs

the capacity to disseminate and, more important, implement them. And implementation of a normative agreement—for example, that ethnic cleansing is impermissible—may require the deployment of substantial military forces to end it where it is occurring.¹⁹

Here, Canada could learn from its former colonial master, Great Britain, which has arguably become the world's most active state in the fields of peacekeeping and "humanitarian intervention." In Kosovo, Macedonia, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, Britain was able to deploy its troops quickly and provide a common structure for force contributions from a variety of states. Today, while the British can deliver a brigade headquarters into the field within 48 hours, it would take Canadians several weeks to do the same thing.²⁰

This disparity between Canadian and British capabilities was revealed most visibly in the case of Sudan's Darfur region, which was the focus of heated diplomatic activity during the summer of 2004. Darfur has been racked by a civil conflict that has claimed the lives of almost 30,000 people and forced more than a million civilians to flee their homes. These facts, and testimony from Sudanese refugees, led US secretary of state Colin Powell to describe the atrocities as genocide—something the US was unwilling to do ten years earlier in Rwanda.

Three years ago, a Canadian-sponsored international commission issued a report, entitled *The Responsibility to Protect*, in which countries around the world were urged to prevent another Rwanda from "shocking the conscience of mankind." The essence of the commission's conclusion was this: where a state's population is suffering serious harm (whether through civil war, repression or state breakdown) and that state is unwilling or unable to halt it, the international community has a responsibility to intervene—with military force, if necessary.²¹ Sudan, it would seem, is a textbook case for applying the commission's findings.

Canada, which in a past life would have contemplated a leading role, has been in no position to deliver on this responsibility in Darfur. The highly successful tour of duty by Canadian forces in the International Stabilization Assistance Force in Afghanistan has taxed its military resources. In September 2004, Canada's overseas deployment was reduced by 75 per cent. The Canadian government has, however, announced that it plans to give \$20 million to support the efforts of African Union peacekeepers, after facing criticism for its previously announced contribution of \$250,000.

While the British army is also experiencing "overstretch" (with 9,000 of its personnel still in Iraq), Prime Minister Blair was active-

ly considering three options that would engage British forces: assistance in the delivery of aid, logistical support for an African Union force being deployed in Sudan and protection of the refugee camps being harassed by roaming militias. This last option—which effectively amounts to the creation of “safe zones”—was the most risky of Blair’s alternatives and would give ammunition to critics who have labelled him as too interventionist. Nevertheless, in this instance members of the international community (particularly Canada) should be thankful for Blair’s willingness to entertain military solutions. They should also be grateful for Britain’s capacity to act on its commitments. In short, “hard power” can come in handy.

A regional destiny

Another contending vision for Canadian foreign policy in this new century is a regional one, based on what a former Canadian Ambassador to the US, Allan Gotlieb, calls “the paramountcy of Canada–U.S. relations.”²² Gotlieb argues that in a post-9/11 world, all foreign policy issues and initiatives need to be examined within the framework of Canada-US relations. This view rests on two premises: first, that Canada will not be able to contribute significantly to international peace and greater justice without being able to influence the United States; and, second, that its influence in other important countries and organizations is directly correlated with how much it has the ear of Washington. Gotlieb argues that Canada’s best foreign policy years were those in which it enjoyed a close relationship with US government officials. (The fondness between Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan is the most obvious example.) The trust Canada earned in the US through these relationships allowed it to “collateralize [its] bilateral assets” and enjoy greater influence beyond North America.²³

In Gotlieb’s view, the key issue that will determine Canada’s influence with Washington going forward is security. In a post-9/11 world, Canada must prove that it poses no threat to the safety of Americans by making its territory secure from terrorists who could make their way across the border. The immediate aftermath of 9/11, when the border was closed, demonstrated just how vulnerable Canada is to the disruption of commercial traffic. The 49th parallel runs right through the middle of a “just in time” assembly line, making the ability to move goods and people across the border in a quick and unfettered way a key factor when businesses decide whether to invest in Canada. If the risk of disruption to that flow becomes too high, risk-averse investors might choose to invest in the United

States. Canada needs to move aggressively to address US concerns, so the argument goes, but also to ward off potential closures.

But if the United States now needs Canada to secure the “North American perimeter,” Canada has a golden opportunity to negotiate something in return. Gotlieb calls it a “Grand Bargain”: a mega-treaty for the 21st century that puts all elements of the Canada-US relationship under one all-encompassing rubric. In this post-9/11 moment, when the US needs allies in its war on terror, Canada has a rare chance to “play its cards.” If it seizes the day, it can define the next phase of economic integration in ways that serve Canadian interests. According to Gotlieb, the initiative “must be bold, it must come from Canada and be espoused at the highest level.”²⁴ Such an ambitious agenda would, by necessity, be the focal point of Canada’s international agenda.

A variation on the Gotlieb approach has been forwarded by the former senior Canadian trade official Michael Hart, who argues that—given the size of Canada’s population and dependence on trade—foreign policy should effectively be about trade relations.²⁵ Since the US is by far Canada’s largest trading partner, it logically follows that foreign policy can be reduced to our relationship with the United States.

Not surprisingly, Hart is critical of the Axworthy era and of what he calls its “romantic quest” to chart a foreign policy course independent from the direction being taken in Washington. Policies under Axworthy, he contends, drew Canada away from the United States and therefore reduced our influence. For Hart, the “relationship with the United States is the indispensable foundation of Canadian foreign policy in all its dimensions.”²⁶ To muster support for this view, he quotes Rodney Grey, the chief negotiator for Canada during the 1970 GATT talks: “If a small country dissipates its foreign policy bargaining power on issues that concern it primarily as a member of the international community, it might not have the resources, the credibility, or the leverage to protect its trade policy interests.”²⁷ In other words, soft power initiatives might make Canadians feel good but are in conflict with Canada’s *real* interests.

There’s no doubting Canada’s heavy reliance on the US market. And that reliance has only deepened since the controversial signing of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (1988) and North American Free Trade Agreement (1993). In the run-up to the signing of the first agreement, it was predicted that Canada-US free trade would change the way in which the two countries’ economies operate, leading to the rationalization of industries and increase in investment

flows across the 49th parallel.²⁸ But the period since the FTA has outstripped all expectations. Canada's exports to the US have doubled as a percentage of GDP (from 18.6 per cent to 37.6 per cent), and today more than 80 per cent of Canadian exports go to the United States. This dramatic growth in trade has led economists to characterize the FTA and NAFTA as transforming the Canadian "geo-economic space from the traditional east-west trading axis to a north-south trading axis."²⁹

Does all this mean that Canada's foreign policy destiny is now regional? The arguments of Gotlieb and Hart make perfect economic sense. But that's precisely their problem: they conceive of the Canadian government as solely a profit maximizer, and the Canadian public as motivated predominantly by the desire for greater prosperity. The realities of government decision-making and the aspirations of the Canadian people are much more complex. As the respected scholar of Canadian foreign policy John Holmes once wrote: "No country survives ... by limiting its associations to the one power with which it does the most business."³⁰

There is also a more hard-headed case against conceiving of foreign policy solely as trade policy. While Hart's argument may have had some resonance during the 1990s, when the west had won the Cold War and was enjoying an unprecedented level of security, the post-9/11 era presents a host of new threats to international peace and security for all states that make up the so-called west. Canadian foreign policy must actively address these threats, in collaboration with other actors on the international stage. In short, Canada must do more than buy and sell. It must contribute to the creation of new rules and structures to manage global problems. It must build capacity in other members of the international community so that they too can contribute, economically and politically. And if the Canadian view on how to address new threats and problems differs from that of the United States, as it did during the recent campaign to unseat Saddam Hussein, it must be willing to go its own way.

Above all, Canadian policy-makers must dare to entertain the notion that the United States will not be the world's only superpower forever. This is not to invite decline or ruin for the US. Rather, it is to do some prudent long-term planning. Canada's interests are best served if future superpowers are firmly embedded in international institutions and have been "socialized" to co-operate with others in the management of common problems. This will require us to remain engaged in the world beyond North America's shores and to monitor the development and policy direction of powers such as China and India.

CONCLUSION: CANADA'S REGIONAL AND GLOBAL DESTINY

Pointing out the shortcomings of a middle power vocation is relatively easy. But crafting a new vision for Canada's international role in the 21st century is much harder. The reality is that Canada faces a host of new pressures and challenges barely envisaged when it took control over its external relations in the 1930s.

One thing is clear: Canada cannot retreat into a new Fortress North America. As Nigel Lawson once put it, Canada is "the one country that cannot become part of a regional bloc and remain herself."³¹ There are a number of factors that require Canada to be more than a regional player. The first and very basic one is geography. Because of its location and massive coastline, Canada is both isolated and exposed. Couple this with only one very powerful neighbour, and you have an argument for developing a wide set of international relationships. The second factor is the size and nature of the economy. Canada's impressive rates of GDP growth and budget surpluses during these first years of the 21st century have made it a valued member of the G8 and a potential contributor to international initiatives.

But there are two more significant reasons why Canada has aspired—and should continue to aspire—to more of a global role. Its immigration and refugee policy, combined with its changing ethnic makeup, constitutes one of these key drivers. Canada has quite literally opened itself to the world, and many parts of the world live within its borders. The other salient factor is Canada's history and national identity. Though Canada's presence as an independent actor on the international stage has been relatively short, it is a riveting story that calls for an encore. As polling research indicates, internationalism has become a deeply ingrained feature of the new Canadian identity. Indeed, surveys indicate that Canadians believe their country has a moral obligation to the world. The past involvement in activities such as peacekeeping and multilateralism is a major source of pride for Canadian citizens. As a consequence, Canadians—to a greater degree than Americans—want more spending on overseas development assistance, more engagement with the UN and more involvement in trade agreements.³²

The problem, of course, is that Canadians have not been asked to make the difficult trade-offs: if more money is to be given to these externally focused policy areas, what are Canadians willing to spend *less* on? If Canada can no longer promise to be all things to all people, where will it focus its international role to have greater impact?³³ This is the challenge for all foreign-policy-makers today, not just for those in Canada.

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Postage paid at Scarborough