



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **Canada and Russia: No Room to Manoeuvre**

by David Carment and Dani Belo  
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# NATO SERIES

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## **CANADA AND RUSSIA: NO ROOM TO MANOEUVRE**

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**D**uring the Cold War, Canada's relationship with Russia (then part of the Soviet Union) was marked by ideological hostility, strategic containment and deterrence. In the last 10 years we have witnessed a shift to an even more direct and confrontational strategy that has left Canada with less room to manoeuvre than ever before.

Much of that can be attributed to a lack of strategic foresight and ill-advised decisions to put NATO on an offensive footing as it slowly encroached on Russia's spheres of influence.<sup>1</sup> When the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the Soviet Union collapsed, unleashing a torrent of ethnic nationalist violence from the Balkans to Central Asia, Conservative and Liberal governments alike were swept up in a wave of changes that would bring Russia and its former satellite states into closer, sometimes uncomfortable, contact.

The Conservatives under Brian Mulroney and the Liberals under Jean Chrétien were caught off guard by this monumental shift in geopolitics, forced to recalibrate the government's security posture and rethink how Canada would engage the world and Russia in particular. UN peacekeepers would be deployed in a variety of failed states, many former clients of the Soviet Union, from West Africa to the Horn of Africa, from the Middle East to Central Asia.

Chrétien would continue co-operative engagement, working hard to strengthen both the G8 and the G20 in which the Soviet Union's primary successor state, Russia, and Canada would participate as equals. By the time Paul Martin came to power as prime minister, Canada's commitments to UN peacekeeping were clearly on the decline. The bulk of Canadian forces abroad would almost exclusively be tasked under NATO command with a focus more on war fighting than conflict prevention in those areas of strategic importance to Russia: the Balkans, Libya and Afghanistan. Canada's contributions to these missions would become particularly important when Chrétien and his successor, Martin, decided to engage Afghanistan's shaky government in support of a comprehensive but misguided state building project in Russia's backyard.

Stephen Harper became prime minister, propelling himself to majority government status substantially by generating popular support from those Canadians who had fled eastern bloc nations. There was the oft-repeated slogan of taking a "principled stand" in a world divided by "good and evil" and "black and white." Concurrently, a more confrontational policy would begin to match the rhetoric, starting with claims that Russia was poised to become an energy superpower at the expense of Canada's interests. Perhaps because of the media's portrayals of Russia as a threat to Canada's Arctic, the Harper government ignored the fact that Russia was the only Arctic state sympathetic to Canada's characterization of the Northwest Passage. This would

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523269508404121?journalCode=fcsp20>



be consistent with the Harper government's ideological stance overlooking some realities which were not consistent with that world view.

These changes were further amplified by Canada's response to the conflict in Libya in 2011 despite Russian opposition. China and Russia supported UN Security Council Resolution 1973, authorizing the use of force, with the understanding that NATO's role would be extremely limited. Instead, NATO used the resolution to support the destruction of Moammar Gadhafi's forces. Vladimir Putin, then prime minister, defined the UNSCR 1973 as "defective and flawed", resembling "a medieval call for the Crusades". NATO's actions infuriated Russia and were seen as one of the main reasons that Russia (and China) refused to allow UN intervention later in Syria.

If the crises in Libya and Syria demonstrated incongruities in Canada's confrontations with Russia, Ukraine posed a new set of problems. With the onset of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, Canada-Russia relations permeated all aspects of Canadian defence policy. This included a decision to deploy Canadian trainers to Ukraine and NATO forces to the Baltics, coupled with sanctions against the Russian government for its role in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine conflict. A new dominant narrative in Canadian foreign policy emerged – one reminiscent of John Foster Dulles' Cold War mindset that saw the Russians as only capable of acting in bad faith.

By the time the Ukraine crisis was in full swing the Conservatives had clearly staked out their position, siding for the most part with the American narrative. Canada's confrontational stance was best expressed in a 2017 speech by Liberal Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland who suggested that Latvia faced an "existential" threat. However, it wasn't clear if she was referring to a threat from the substantial Russian minority within the country or externally.

The difficulty is that Canada is now bound to a commitment that will reap few dividends for Canadians at home. For Ukraine, a country that has received over half a billion dollars in loans and aid from Canada, there are real benefits to having the West exert continued pressure on Russia. There is even less room for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to manoeuvre due to his renewed commitments to training Ukrainian soldiers and deploying several hundred troops in the Baltic states under NATO command. Such policies are at odds with the Trudeau agenda to rejuvenate multilateralism, its commitments to diplomacy and its claims of bringing peace and stability to the world.

Though the Trudeau government terminated its air operations in Syria against the Islamic State under Operation Impact, it inherited and adopted much of the policies and world views from the preceding Conservative government. Canada maintained its support for U.S. airstrikes on Syria, seen by Russia as part of a co-ordinated effort to strangle and collapse the regime of one of its closest allies in the Middle East. Trudeau notably stated that Bashar Al Assad should not be included as a party in diplomatic efforts and dialogue for peace in the Syrian conflict – a position that Russia dismissed. Even though sanctions proved to be an ineffective instrument in forcing Russia to abandon its doctrines on Syria and Ukraine, Canada expanded the sanctions regime under Trudeau.



Like other NATO members Canada became concerned with large-scale cyber-threats commonly linked to Russia's security apparatus. Relying on the testimony of its international allies, such as the presidential election-related claims in the U.S., Trudeau's government contended the 2019 Canadian federal election could be subjected to interference through cyber-space. Freeland argued in Parliament that cyber-attacks would undermine Canada's vulnerable democracy and should be met with countermeasures which under NATO Charter law would be illegal if considered offensive rather than defensive. Freeland also supported the passage of Magnitsky-like legislation which caused Russia's trust in Canada to deteriorate sharply.<sup>2</sup>

Almost 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Canada's commitment to a hostile doctrine towards Russia has become branded by path dependence. It will yield few benefits as the lack of trust between the two states now inhibits substantial co-operation in the Arctic, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Without a change in course in which diplomacy and not confrontation wins the day, we can only expect further deterioration in those critical areas that bind the two countries together.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/russia-warns-canada-magnitsky-sanctions-would-be-blow-to-relations/article35054918/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>

## ► About the Authors

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