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Positioning Canada in a Messy and Meaner World

**by Colin Robertson
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

POSITIONING CANADA IN A MESSY AND MEANER WORLD

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Canadians live in a messy, increasingly meaner world. It's a three-ring circus characterized by disruptive powers, drifting multilateralism and transnational threats. Each of these overlapping rings requires constant diplomatic care. Statecraft must be tailored to each circumstance, mindful that what is taking place in one ring has implications for each of the others.

For the disruptors, most notably China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, it means engagement, containment and deterrence. Multilateralism needs reinvigoration and reform of its institutions, especially those responsible for trade and security. The transnational threats – climate, nuclear proliferation, migration, pandemics and terrorism – are probably a chronic condition but they must be curbed, controlled and mitigated depending on means and circumstances.

Both the nature of power and relative power among nations are changing. Global power is no longer homogenous. Borders are back. So is nationalism. In the absence of the guard rails that the United States provided during our lifetime, a world in disarray risks descending into chaos and conflict. Constructive powers – big, middle and small – need to stand up regardless of when, whether or how the U.S. re-engages.

Positioning Canada in this changing, uncertain environment will take skill, strategy and new investments in security and diplomacy.

Changing circumstances mean that the free ride Canadians enjoyed with the end of the Cold War now requires investment in dollars, people and kit, starting with our armed forces and diplomatic service. They need to get bigger, better and sharper. Smart power blends hard and soft elements. Smart power, for Canada, also means active multilateralism and constantly looking for niches where we can play a constructive role. Canadians expect it. Our self-identity draws from how we are perceived abroad. As a nation, we will always also depend on talented settlers.

When it comes to relationships providing trade and security, for Canada it is still the U.S. and then the rest. We can't change our geography, nor would we want to. Notwithstanding its increasingly polarized politics, the U.S. remains the innovation nation and robust economically and militarily. As a first step, Canada needs to invest more in understanding the U.S. We also need to recognize that its changing domestic circumstances – currents of nativism, protectionism and isolationism – make it, for now, a less reliable partner.

Within the democracies, pollsters [find](#) that their publics are angry with their political elites and suffer economic dissatisfaction and anxiety about rapid social changes. Many feel adrift in uncharted waters. As we grasp for hope, there is a hankering for simpler times and strong leaders who say they can fix things. Whether traditional or new age, movements that give comfort and meaning have increased appeal even when rooted in intolerance. Where once the main political divides were between the right and the left, the new divide is more about political systems that are open versus those that are closed.



Ours is a world filled with both “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns”. Our digital age, on the cusp of broadly applied artificial intelligence enabled by Big Data and quantum computing, brings new meaning to complexity. These are areas where Canadian know-how and technological skill must be applied, not only for our own interests but also because know-how in the new domains of space and cyber-space gives us a place at the tables where decisions are made. But again, this requires strategic, sustained investment and leadership. The world as we knew it is changing.

We need a strategic approach to our global policies. We need to think about where we want to wind up, see how the pieces fit together, and know what are the issues and linkages from one country to another. Reacting only to single events and thinking tactically is not good enough. Values infuse our interests, but moralizing – a regrettable Canadian tendency – wins us neither friends nor influence. We do best when we are a helpful fixer and a linchpin, and focus on “getting it done”.

Dealing with global complexity is a trial and a test of our ingenuity. The challenges, especially around climate and migration, are daunting. History says we have the capacity to find a way out of our problems but time is not our friend. There may be no winners but there could be lots of losers. In this new era, we need realism, a sense of history and humility.

I. A Messy and Meaner World

America First

For Canada, it is America first – first for our trade, first for our security, first for stewardship of our shared environment and first for people-to-people connections in everything from business to popular culture. We are different but close enough that Americans always rate Canada as their [favourite nation](#). That they like us more than [we like them](#) is something we under-utilize.

Life with Uncle Sam is never easy, especially with President Donald Trump, but we have preferred access to the U.S. market – still the biggest in the world – and thanks to our NORAD alliance, the U.S. military provides our default security umbrella.

If Trump has taught us anything, it is that Canada needs to mount a permanent campaign to remind Americans of our mutually beneficial commerce. American jobs and prosperity depend in part on trade with Canada. We think we know everything there is to know about Americans. We are wrong. We need a better understanding of our neighbour. Understanding starts with the U.S. Constitution – its checks and balances and separation of powers. It is shocking that we have no significant research institutions devoted to the study of the U.S. We need to pay more attention to Congress and the states. We should have someone – consul, honorary consul or representative – in every state. Better understanding also means links to the various interests and institutions that fund the U.S. system and provide it with ideas.



Great Arsenal of Democracy

U.S. presidents since Franklin Roosevelt persuaded Congress and Americans to step away from tariffs, to embrace large, standing military organizations, to surrender some elements of sovereignty, to give up their aversion to permanent international arrangements and to carry the burden when others fell short. The U.S. became the “great [arsenal](#) of democracy” dedicated, as Roosevelt proclaimed, to the [four freedoms](#): freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. The U.S. shouldered the burdens that brought peace and prosperity. Its security blanket, especially protection of the sea lanes, made possible a globalization that lifted billions from poverty and created a global middle class.

The U.S. designed and led military alliances – notably NATO – that bolstered this outward-bound approach. This new strategy formed the foundation for the post-Second World War operating system that was liberal in its economic orientation and rules-based. It provided stability, relative peace and rising prosperity. Its economic performance stood in contrast to the statist command-and-control communism of Maoist China and the post-Stalinist Soviet Union with its satellites in the Warsaw Pact. Its advantages – open markets and freedom of choice – increasingly drew in the non-aligned. After 1989, most of the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe scrambled to join the European Union and NATO. The exuberant application of the Washington consensus saw its deregulatory flaws revealed in 2008-2009 and subsequent recession, but capitalism, in its variant forms, enjoys global embrace. As Deng Xiaoping famously said, it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice. But the problem was that only the fat cats were catching the mice and when things went badly, it was the fat cats who escaped scot-free while the 99 per cent paid the bills. In the wake of the great recession, increasing numbers in the great democracies lost faith in their systems and the elites who managed it and turned to those who said they felt their pain and promised to fix it. No matter that most of them were charlatans who played on prejudice and the politics of fear and division.

... And Then Came Trump

American ascendancy after the end of the Cold War was supposed to usher in the triumph of democracy, or as political scientist Francis Fukuyama put it “not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but [the end of history](#) as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

But it did not work out that way. 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the great recession shook American self-confidence, and in 2016, Trump became president. Despite record low [unemployment](#) and a buoyant economy, Trump appeals to [populism](#), protectionism and nativism. Daily, through tweets, speeches and statements he vindicates those in the Republican foreign policy establishment who [warned](#) of his recklessness and declared him unfit for office. His actions on his signature themes have worsened the immigration crisis, disrupted trade and poisoned alliances.



Speaking for the first time to the United Nations, Trump told the General Assembly that the [sovereignty, security and prosperity](#) of the American people are his sole objectives, and that these – not world order, not human rights – should also be other nations’ priorities.

Trumpism was perhaps best expressed by then-national security advisor H.R. McMaster and former national economic director Gary Cohn (both of whom have since left the administration) when they [wrote](#) that for Trump “the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage” and that the U.S. would practise “reciprocity in trade and commerce. Simply put, America will treat others as they treat us ... America First signals the restoration of American leadership and our government’s traditional role overseas – to use the diplomatic, economic and military resources of the U.S. to enhance American security, promote American prosperity, and extend American influence around the world.”

Americans tell pollsters that they are [tired](#) of foreign adventures with their cost in blood and treasure. Reform of the health system – the [most expensive](#) in the OECD – continues amid controversy. Other well-documented problems include [obesity](#) and the [opiate](#) crisis, [gun violence](#) and continuing [racial](#) tensions.

Will a post-Trump U.S. return to its role as champion of liberal democracy and internationalism? It is unlikely.

Canada and the allies should strive to be reliable partners to the U.S. As former Defense secretary James Mattis wrote in his resignation letter: “the US remains the [indispensable nation](#) in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies ... the armed forces of the United States should not be the policeman of the world. Instead, we must use all tools of American power to provide for the common defense, including providing effective leadership to our alliances. NATO’s 29 democracies demonstrated that strength in their commitment to fighting alongside us following the 9-11 attack on America. The Defeat-ISIS coalition of 74 nations is further proof.”

But even when a president is prepared to lead, unless it is an attack on the homeland, there will be countervailing pressures in Congress and among the American people. Reliance on the U.S., as John F. Kennedy proclaimed, to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty”? Those days are done.

The Disruptors

Even if no one else can match the U.S. for power and reach, a resurgent China and revanchist Russia are disrupting the global operating system and challenging its norms and mores. The Russians and the Chinese are different in background, history and culture. They think differently. And they both resent the West.



Situated in the middle of a great plain, the Russians are conscious of threats from the west (and the east). To be safe, they extend their frontiers as far west as they can. As Henry Kissinger has [observed](#), a unique characteristic of Russia is that “upheaval in almost any part of the world affects it, gives it an opportunity and is also perceived by it as a threat.”

For the Chinese, the “century of humiliation” at the hands of the West and Japan is current history and thus they are pushing their boundaries to the traditional Middle Kingdom, including the South China Sea and Taiwan.

China will be the strongest competitor and the U.S.-China relationship in the 21st century will be the most consequential global relationship. There will be intense competition, brinkmanship and tension especially in the Indo-Pacific, likely centred around the South China Sea. Unless there is miscalculation, violent conflict – the [Thucydides trap](#) – probably can be avoided. For now, China’s aspirations are essentially regional.

The cultivation of aggressive nationalism and identification of foreign threats are part of Chinese and Russian statecraft. Their behaviour encourages others who emulate it – Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Venezuela and other authoritarian leaders who see the opportunity for regional gain and to solidify their power.

Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin claim that the current system is tilted against them and does not serve their interests. They are a throwback to the old system based on a concert of [great powers](#), each with hegemony in its own neighbourhood – complete with vassal or tributary states.

For Xi, it is all about the stability of the People’s Republic of China, based on an order that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has directed and led since 1949. For Xi and the CCP, the state is indivisible from the party and the party’s job is to ensure the state’s stability.

For Putin, the “[greatest geopolitical catastrophe](#)” of the 20th century was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin would like to re-establish a greater Mother Russia, positioning himself as champion of the revived conservative and nationalist Russian Orthodox Church. He prefers stealth and subversion, but he will also employ force, as demonstrated in Georgia, Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Russia is [upgrading](#) its armed forces and weaponry – nuclear, conventional and



Source: Angus Reid 2018 <http://angusreid.org/g7-summit-2018-world-leaders/>



unconventional (“little green men”). Using artificial intelligence and machine learning, Russia has developed hybrid capacities which it employs to disrupt democracies, especially their elections.

That said, both Russia and China have their own internal problems that could potentially spill over into the international arena if they lose control of them.

Russia is a power in decline. This makes it more dangerous, especially because it has weapons of mass destruction. There must be continued vigilance and deterrence through a reinvigorated NATO alliance. Russia suffers from a sclerotic petro-based economy. It has an aging population with a high rate of alcoholism.

China’s population is also aging. Despite abandonment of the one-child policy, the ethnic Han Chinese population is in decline. China is dependent on imports of food and energy, and its Belt and Road Initiative is designed to create a secure land and sea supply chain.

Chinese and Russian leaders each rely on a pervasive internal security apparatus to maintain their hold on power. They are betting that the bulk of their citizens prefer stability and rising economic standards to nebulous democratic rights. They may be right. Increasingly, they think their security-state model is ready for export into the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Canadian relations with both China and Russia are currently in the deep freeze. Just because these countries are big does not give them a pass on bad behaviour. Whatever our economic interests, they must also reflect core values, notably human rights. Canada sanctioned Russia for its occupation of Crimea and continuing incursions into Ukraine. Targeting the responsible individuals rather than nations, as we do through the *Magnitsky Act* sanctions for human rights abuse, is smart diplomacy. We are applying sanctions against the Russians and Venezuelans. Sanctions should also be applied against those Chinese officials responsible for keeping Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor hostage in inhumane circumstances.

We should, nonetheless, look for areas to engage – with Russia, for example, on Arctic safety and environmental protection. With China, we need to keep the lines open using established conduits like the annual heads-of-government and ministerial meetings and through co-operation on issues like climate change and containing pandemics. Astute diplomacy should be able to contain or constrain China’s rising power. But it will depend on robust alliances – an expanded NATO, for example – and a continuing strong U.S. naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific is America’s to lose, not China’s to win. It will take a lot for China to disrupt this, although Trump’s cavalier rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership was a strategic unforced error. Chinese leaders are not omnipotent and their aggressive overreach is alarming their neighbours. Recipients of BRI assistance are also longing for the days of Western conditionality. Chinese conditionality comes with more strings than many realized.



Three Cheers for Multilateralism

The international system – liberal and multilateral – is shifting and drifting. If we are not careful, like Humpty Dumpty, it is headed for a very big fall.

Created by the U.S. and its allies after the Second World War, the system has overseen an extraordinary period of global peace and prosperity. This operating system is characterized by freer trade and the market economy, alliances of representative governments and rules-based international institutions with multilateral membership. Although imperfect, it is better than previous systems and there have been continuous incremental improvements.

Multilateralism, the means by which medium and small powers level the field against big and super powers, is the greatest diplomatic innovation of recent times. Born out of Wilsonian idealism, its first manifestation in the League of Nations was handicapped from birth when the U.S. Senate rejected involvement. Franklin Roosevelt's and Winston Churchill's [Atlantic Charter](#) gave multilateralism new life that was elaborated upon at the Quebec conference hosted by Mackenzie King. It took form in the Bretton Woods twins – the International Monetary Fund and World Bank – then the United Nations and its alphabet soup of agencies and, later, within the Geneva-based World Trade Organization.

Multilateralism has been at the core of Canadian foreign policy since the Second World War. It serves Canadian interests because, by acting in concert with like-minded friends and allies, Canada is able to achieve its shared objectives. Applied through treaty, agreement or norm it has worked to further Canadian objectives in vital sectors including trade (WTO and MFN), security (NATO), climate (Paris Accord), and migration (Global Compact). Canada and other constructive powers must keep these institutions relevant and efficient through constant vigilance. This means permanent efforts to cut waste, check corruption and streamline the tendency to mind-numbing bureaucracy.

The Germans and the French are launching an [alliance for multilateralism](#), which will include [Canada](#), at the UN General Assembly this fall. Its intent is to create a “[global network](#) of like-minded states which are convinced that pursuing legitimate, national interests and protecting the collective property of humankind are fully compatible, not mutually exclusive.” It deserves three cheers.

Just as in 1945, when 40+ future members of the UN contributed to creating it and its functional agencies, so today, liberal democracies, regardless of size, need to stand up and make functional contributions. The functional principle – nations contribute based on competence and capacity – rather than on sheer size, guided Canadian policy-making at that time.

Multilateralism is imperfect. It has not met the ambitiousness of its original design. It often limps along and disappoints. But that is the reality in a world order where great powers will always play a disproportionate role and where there is a trapdoor for the superpowers, especially in advancing their own interests. The wonder is not its flaws, but that it operates as well as it does.



Essential Relationships

The essential relationships for the West in the 21st century span three oceans. There is the traditional transatlantic relationship of the U.S., the EU and Canada and now the transindopacific relationship of these nations with Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand and like-minded liberal democracies in Asia and the Americas. With global warming, a fourth ocean, the Arctic, will come into play.

The India relationship could become indispensable in the pivotal Indo-Pacific region. Borders with China and Pakistan are contested. India is cacophonous, unruly and as much riven as united by its colourful diversity. But as the “great game” enters a new chapter, India matters.

Both NATO and the G7 are open communities of shared democratic scope. NATO membership should be broadened to include partner countries, starting with Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The G7 should broaden its membership to include India and Mexico and, in time, Brazil. Membership in NATO needs a litmus test to weed out the authoritarians. The G7 booted out Russia when it invaded Crimea. Should Turkey and Hungary be suspended from NATO until they clean up their acts?

Adam Smith is Still Right

Trade, the lifeblood of globalization, is being [blamed](#) for de-industrialization in the U.S. and Europe, even though the economic evidence points to technological innovation and automation as the real reasons. However, there is no doubt that a significant percentage of manufacturing jobs in traditional industries like steel, textiles and household appliances have moved to Asia, especially to China.

[Nearly half](#) of Canada’s national income depends on trade. With the Canada-U.S. FTA and then NAFTA, trade-led growth has generated continuing prosperity for Canadians, notwithstanding internal trade barriers that remain the unfinished business of Confederation.

While trade helped to lift a billion people from poverty in Asia, it contributed to unemployment in the West at the same time that companies restructured to shed costs like pensions and health benefits for their employees. Trade, which led global economic growth, has slowed in recent years and there are counter-forces – in-shoring, piracy, protectionism – that threaten to upend global supply chains. This has particular implications for Canada as more and more of our manufacturing trade is in what economists call intermediate goods – the parts, for example, produced by Canadian auto parts champions like Magna, Linamar and Martinrea, that move back and forth across borders.

With the Doha round of global trade talks going nowhere and the WTO dispute settlement approaching impotence as the U.S. withholds agreement on the appointment of new judges, global trade policy will go into limbo. Trade will be managed more through quotas, voluntary restraints



and other mechanisms. Future progress will depend on and take place within groupings of like-minded nations.

For Canada, regional trade blocs, like the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) are the best option to keep trade flowing. This is where new standards on intellectual property and e-commerce, and disciplines of state-owned enterprises, will be developed and then tested.

The China Problem

There is a genuine problem with China. It is a highly non-transparent and less-than-free market economy. Its accession to the WTO was dubious. It was given privileges on intellectual property and industrial policies without any enforcement mechanisms. These things continue to violate the understandings that make the trading system's political economy work.

Can China and the U.S. work out their differences on regulating state-owned enterprises, intellectual property and technology transfers? Will China recognize the value of protecting its own intellectual property? Self-interest would suggest an eventual deal, especially if China is to succeed with its 2025 made-in-China initiative. If this happens, there will likely be a critical mass to restore a rules-based global trading system because China will have skin in the game. For now, it's a messy world.

The Democratic Deficit

While the losses are still shallow compared with the gains in the 20th century, [Freedom House](#) has recorded a decline in global freedom for 13 consecutive years. The decline is recorded in longstanding democracies like the U.S. and through the consolidation of authoritarianism in China, Russia, Turkey, Hungary and elsewhere.

This decline is accompanied by an increasing loss of popular confidence in the ability of liberal democracies to solve problems. Citizens feel that the next generation will be worse off than they are. They blame growing inequality, seemingly uncontrolled migration, terrorism and climate change. These are the factors that fuel populism, nativism and protectionism and the appeal of strong men with simple solutions. There are a host of international organizations – America's National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, the German Stiftung and Canada's own Parliamentary Centre – that do good work in helping to build and nurture democratic norms and institutions. It's a smart investment.



Addressing Inequality

The middle class feels it is slipping. A small percentage has moved upward to enjoy Chardonnay and foreign chateaux, but the larger percentage of what used to be the middle class is drifting downwards into a precarious blue-collar existence that is one or two misfortunes away from poverty. They are employed, but their lives are full of worries: aging parents, insufficient pensions, inadequate health care and education. Most are [pessimistic](#) about the prospects for the next generation.

Meanwhile, public trust in government [remains at near historic lows](#). Democracies are particularly vulnerable because of growing [polarization](#) and the time it takes to get stuff done. The safety nets that government is expected to provide – public education, public health, pensions – are fraying because there is also a growing allergy to taxation (always the case in the U.S.) and because of the growing perception that [special interests](#) like Big Business get their way.

Big Business' Reputational Problems

Big corporations – Boeing, Monsanto, Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo and SNC Lavalin – are increasingly [perceived](#) as corrupt and their products and services as rotten, if not dangerous. There is also a perception that they have undue influence on governments. Companies need to take social responsibility seriously, starting with their own employees. The balance between workers and shareholders is seen to have skewed too much toward investors and the investment class.

Climate Change is Real

The science is unambiguous [globally](#) and [in Canada](#). Global warming also contributes to [inequality](#) with hotter, poorer countries becoming less productive, while cooler, wealthier countries have benefited.

Carbon mitigation is complicated. Environmentalists with an understandable impatience for action want governments to act now. Governments employ various strategies: mitigation through housing and transportation codes, research into carbon sequestration and battery storage, a shift to renewables and nuclear power, and taxing pollution. It's all about getting the right balance so as to carry the public with them.

For a [brief moment](#), Canada looked like it had its act together. Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg gets it right when she says: “Since our leaders are [behaving like children](#), we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago.”

Renewables must be part of the solution as we shift from fossil fuels in the same fashion we shifted from whale oil for ships in the 19th century. But it will take time. As the International Energy



Agency observes, the “overall share of clean energy sources in total electricity supply in 2018, at 36%, was the same as it was 20 years earlier”. Until we master battery storage – vital for solar, wind and tidal power generation – we need to look to other sources. The mix must include nuclear power. It is still the largest source of low-carbon energy used worldwide in advanced economies.

Loose Nukes

Climate change may have replaced nuclear winter as the existential threat of our time, but nuclear proliferation kept every previous postwar American president awake at night. [Three-D printed weapons](#) could mean the end of non-proliferation, which is yet another reason the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) has reset the Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight.

Arms control is heading south as the Russians and the U.S. set aside the [INF treaty](#) and reinvigorate their nuclear capacities, as [others](#) are doing. Pakistan, India and China are adding stock and North Korea’s Kim Jong-un has demonstrated his new capacity in spectacular fashion. With the Iran deal in jeopardy, Saudi Arabia wants nuclear capacity. Reinstating the regular Obama-initiated [nuclear security summits](#) would be a worthwhile Canadian initiative.

An even more useful initiative: Kazakhstan, Australia and Canada account for [more than two-thirds](#) of global uranium production. What if the three agreed to become permanent stewards of used uranium products? They would permanently “own” their uranium and ensure that its waste, including radioactive and fissile material, was properly disposed of, perhaps in mines no longer in production. While this doesn’t solve the problem of existing nuclear waste, it would control most new supply. The International Atomic Energy Agency would provide on-site accounting oversight and supervise the transportation of all uranium. Rates would reflect risks to make it commercially and politically viable. Given their secure geography, Canada and Australia would have to take the lead in long-term global disposal.

Digital Conflict

The new warfare is already in use. Kissinger wrote a terrifying piece, “[How the Enlightenment Ends](#)”, on artificial intelligence for *The Atlantic Monthly*, in which he compared humanity today to the Incas before the arrival of smallpox and the Spanish. Kissinger argued for a presidential commission on AI, concluding that “if we do not start this effort soon, before long we shall discover that we started too late,”

China, Russia, North Korea and Iran regularly apply hybrid tactics and cyber-sabotage. They subvert our democracies and can disrupt our critical infrastructure. The U.S. has argued for [closer collaboration](#) among allies to “name and shame” and make it clear that the costs of such actions outweigh the benefits for the perpetrators. This should be a priority at the next NATO summit.



We need commonly agreed-upon standards on hybrid and cyber-warfare. Should we negotiate a Geneva convention with our adversaries on cyber-weapons? World leaders did it on the use of chemical and biological weapons after the First World War and while there have been violations, it has mostly endured.

II. Positioning Canada

Canadians faces increased global disruptions. What can the next prime minister, and Canada in general, do to navigate these unfavourable winds?

Every prime minister's desk has three permanent files: national security and well-being, national unity and Canada-U.S. relations.

The nation's security and well-being depend on managing the economy and attending to defence and security needs. This means prudent fiscal stewardship and monetary oversight, investments in public infrastructure, open trade, a skills-based migration policy and ensuring the provinces have sufficient funds for education and health. All of these contribute to generating national income. National security means investments in vigilant border security, in NORAD and our air and maritime defence, and in hardening cyber-defences for critical infrastructure – transportation, electricity and energy, and banking. Given the changing security environment, it should also mean investment in ballistic missile defence through NORAD.

A Clubbable Country

Canada belongs to almost every multilateral club, be it economic, security, general or specific purpose in creation. On balance this is a good thing, but prioritization of attention and resources is overdue. The first tier would include Five Eyes, NORAD and CUSMA. The second tier would include the G7, G20, NATO, CETA, CPTPP, the Pacific Alliance and the Arctic Council. The UN, OECD, APEC, the Commonwealth and the Francophonie would be the third tier.

We should also invest more in some of our relationships. If the future is Asia, then India, Japan, Korea and Indonesia should be priorities. And the entrée into the Americas is Mexico.

YCDBSOYA

When George Hees was Canada's minister of Trade and Commerce, he had cufflinks and tie clips prepared for his trade commissioners, who in this earlier age were all men. The cufflinks were initialled [YCDBSOYA](#): You Can't Do Business Sitting On Your Ass. The motto should be resurrected for today's trade commissioners and engraved on the backs of their iPhones or BlackBerries. The same should be done for the prime minister, his cabinet and Canada's premiers and trade ministers, as this needs to be a Team Canada Inc. effort.



While we have done a good job in opening the doors to trade, we need to generate more trade deals. This is hard in a nation with a few big enterprises and lots of SMEs. There is no magic formula. All levels of government need to work with local business to identify opportunities. We could learn from Asian nations – Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Japan – in their ability to aggregate capacities and then bid on big projects.

Canadians are skilled at the extraction of minerals and growing and harvesting food from land and sea. We are not so good at getting our products to market. “Build Canada” should be a Team Canada Inc. project. Stranded assets shortchange the nation and ignore its geopolitical value.

Attracting Talent

Our skills-based immigration program has netted us a lot of talent. Expanding the annual target to about one per cent of our population makes sense. Canada’s birth rate does not replenish our population.

Our refugee policy is generous, but Canadians expect people to play by the rules. Enforcement, including deportation of queue-jumpers and those found inadmissible, is necessary to sustain public confidence. It is also vital to preserving U.S. confidence that Canada holds up its end in a perimeter approach to who and what come into North America. The [9/11 Commission](#) report worried about Canadian immigration, especially from the Middle East and North Africa (the Millennium Bomber, Ahmed Ressam, was from Algeria) and it has remained a [recurring](#) American worry.

Canada needs a [global education strategy](#). More Canadians should be encouraged to [study abroad](#). Canada does well in attracting foreign students, but we could do better. Foreign students and foreign studies not only make our universities more cosmopolitan but they are also potential future talent for Canada. Those who return to their native lands are usually very positive about their Canadian experience and they become valuable bridges between our countries. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [recently ranked](#) its member countries as to attractiveness to highly skilled immigrants, on a range of metrics like quality of opportunities, inclusiveness and quality of life. Canada did well in all three categories. This is an advantage we can use.

Spooks, Geeks and Thugs

The British military historian [Sir Michael Howard](#) has said that to secure the realm in our age, a nation needs spooks, geeks and thugs. He explained that nations need a superb intelligence and counter-intelligence service. The geeks are the information technology wizards who can prevent, mitigate and pre-empt a cyber-attack. The thugs are the hard men and women in the Special Forces who can take down evil-doers. We celebrate our military heritage: Vimy Ridge, Dieppe and



Juno Beach, and the Battle of the Atlantic that Churchill said was essential to keep Britain from starving; Kapyong in Korea; Iraq and Afghanistan.

We were good at peacekeeping but it became mythologized and erased the reputation we had earned as “hard men” or “storm troopers” as the Germans labelled them during the First World War. Our Special Forces are very well-known with decorations aplenty including from the U.S. We meet the minimal requirement for expeditionary capacity and our soldiers proved their worth in Afghanistan. But a lesson of Afghanistan is the limitations of how much you can remake another society and the realization that while the Armed Forces can provide stability, they cannot make the peace.

You might be able to do it if you have a lot of time and are subtle and use development and soft power, but it is hard and it takes time, patience and a tolerance for body bags. All of these factors give politicians headaches and Canadians heartache. It’s especially hard when you are dealing with a corrupt power.

The paradox is that the harder you try, the less the recipient usually does and the more dependent they are on you. And then it is more your war and not their war. The enemy makes it a war of nationalism and liberation from occupation, not a war against aggression.

It is especially hard when your troops are a different complexion than the people you are trying to save. For this reason, peacekeepers will continue to be primarily from [nations](#) like Ethiopia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Canadians can provide logistical and training support, but the days of the Canadians as the dominant group of blue berets is over.

More Navy with More Attention to the Indo-Pacific and Arctic

We are ringed by three oceans and, as former prime minister Stephen Harper observed at the dedication of the Canadian Naval Memorial in May 2012, Canada and its economy “[float on salt water](#).” Maritime transport is the backbone of international trade and the global economy. Around 80 per cent of global trade by volume and over 70 per cent of global trade by value are carried by sea and are handled by ports worldwide.

Canada needs to embrace digital sea power and be better prepared in the Indo-Pacific and Arctic. Given the time it takes to create a fleet, we need to act now because when future crises arise, the navy you start with is probably the navy you finish with.

By harnessing technology and the application of Big Data, we will create the next generation of surface and underwater naval combatants. Manned and unmanned, these warships and submarines are the weapons necessary to meet traditional and grey-zone threats

What the Atlantic was to the 19th century, the Indo-Pacific will be to the 21st century. And it’s a big ocean. It takes roughly two weeks to sail from Esquimalt to the South China Sea. We currently deploy a frigate on a regular basis. We should be thinking about a task group of warships, supply



ships and a submarine with aerial support. Exercising together builds trust and interoperability when you need it. Being there reinforces and underpins our commitment. But this costs money.

Canada needs to re-imagine our naval base in Esquimalt and our air base in Comox. Roughly [80 per cent of global trade](#) is transported by sea. [Sixty per cent](#) of maritime trade passes through Asia, with the South China Sea carrying an estimated one-third of global shipping. Annual defence spending in the Indo-Pacific has [doubled](#) since 2000 to \$450 billion – more than \$200 billion of that by China – and the region is forecast to surpass the U.S. as the world's biggest spender on weapons by 2029. By 2035, half the world's submarines will patrol Indo-Pacific waters, according to Australia's [2016 defence white paper](#).

Then there is the Arctic. As the Americans regularly remind us: if you claim sovereignty in the Arctic, then exercise that sovereignty. We need an Arctic naval base – the [Harper government](#) proposed Nanisivik, Nunavut – and search-and-rescue posts for the Coast Guard. The next NORAD review will require more attention to maritime security and the security of maritime approaches. The northern distant early warning systems that we have relied on for decades are no longer adequate. Most are coming to the end of their useful lives. The next generation will be expensive. We either do it willingly and collaborate with the U.S. or it becomes the next pinch point with the U.S. administration.

We must decide what capabilities we need to exercise our sovereignty. If this means a northern base, then we need to spend the money, build it and sustain it. The tendency is always to do it on the cheap and then starve it. We need to set standards around response time for search and rescue or a marine disaster and then define the capabilities required. Form will follow function.

Although Canadians take justifiable pride in our armed forces, the U.S. bears the burden of continental defence (through NORAD) and collective security (through NATO). Successive presidents have complained about sharing the burden. Trump doesn't like multilateralism, nor will he underwrite the allies.

We are making investments now but historically, these investments are stretched over many years. The enthusiasm for them has a short political life and they inevitably fall victim to budget constraints. We are unlike the U.S., Australia and our Nordic European allies, for whom there is a consensus across party lines on sustained support for defence and security investments. Somehow, we need to develop a consensus on the core military capability the country requires. What we have not had is clear agreement, at least among the major parties, on the core elements of defence requirements. Develop this and we can then decide on how many shipyards we need, how many fighter jets we require and what sort of expeditionary capacity we need for our Forces.

Self-interest and self-respect should oblige Canada to invest more. This means air defence – satellites, drones and fighter jets – but the focus should be on our naval forces. This means completing the promised Arctic patrol ships, icebreakers and new surface combatants. It means commissioning the next generation of submarines and more multi-purpose ships.



Keeping it Together

National unity is not easy in a nation that, by comparison to Europe or Asia, is new, covers more time zones than any mainland nation but Russia and aims to make a virtue of its diversity. Canadians are progressive but prudent. The challenges of geography and climate mean that we also understand compromise. Unlike Americans, who run the attitudinal gamut from A-Z, the Canadian spectrum would be F-M.

For the poet-philosopher Frank Scott, the mantra of our longest serving prime minister, Mackenzie King, was “do nothing by halves that can be done by quarters.” Scott feared it encouraged mediocrity, but for a nation in continuous development, initiatives like reconciliation with First Nations take time and patience. In contrast to the American mantra of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, Canadians are well served sticking with “peace, order and good government”.

Managing Uncle Sam

Life with Uncle Sam is never easy. Former prime minister Brian Mulroney’s advice stands: “The golden rule of Canada-US relations is very simple. We can disagree without being disagreeable. The Americans are very important to us. We know they are, notwithstanding the differences, our best ally, our closest neighbour, our biggest customer. There is also a rule of global politics – Canada’s influence in the world is measured to a significant degree by the extent to which we are perceived as having real influence in Washington.”

The coda to the golden rule is that serious Americans (not Trump) appreciate the insights and intelligence our foreign service can bring to the table. This is why we need ambassadors in Tehran, Riyadh and Pyongyang. Diplomatic recognition is not a Good Housekeeping seal of approval. It’s how we conduct business and protect Canadian interests. It’s also why we need to invest in our diplomatic service and develop expertise and empathy in foreign cultures.

This also means making investments and sharing the burden. A 2015 study for the Canadian International Council concluded that “Canada’s engagement is so low that today it meets the statistical definition of an international [‘free rider’](#).” Is Canada really back? If you want to play, you have to pay.

Former Foreign Affairs minister John Manley [observed](#) that as the waiter bringing the tab approaches the table, the Canadian tendency is to head to the toilet and leave the bill to others (usually Uncle Sam). We still fall short ([1.23 per cent of GDP](#)) of the NATO target of two per cent of GDP on defence spending. Our international development assistance ([0.26 per cent GDP](#)) remains well short of the [0.7 per cent](#) endorsed by the G7. If the British can manage it, why can’t Canada?



Avoid Temptations

Canadian leadership needs to avoid three temptations:

First, avoid smugness and the temptation to preach. In former U.S. secretary of state Dean Acheson's memorable phrase (recalled from William Wordsworth's poem [Ode to Duty](#)), Canadians have a tendency to act like the "the [stern daughter](#) of the voice of God". Virtue is a quality but it won't win us a UN Security Council seat. Humility, being constructive and paying our way is better statecraft.

Second, recognize our limitations. Championing the cause of the Rohingya, participating in the Lima Group's efforts on Venezuela, hosting meetings on North Korea and working to improve the WTO's dispute settlement are examples of constructive diplomatic entrepreneurship. But we can't fix everything. Canadian achievement: Louis St. Laurent and Lester Pearson and peacekeeping in 1956; the Brian Mulroney-Joe Clark work on South Africa and German reunification; the Jean Chrétien-Lloyd Axworthy security agenda that produced the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines, and the International Criminal Court; Harper's work on maternal health and John Baird's "girls, not brides" initiative – came about through a confluence of time and events. They cannot be planned and even then, they require strong leadership – a dedicated prime minister, an energetic foreign minister and a foreign service at the top of its game. There are no guarantees of success. Not everything endures, as we have learned with Responsibility to Protect. Thus the need to focus and decide what best serves Canadian interests. It means hard choices and hard questions: Why peace operations in Mali? Why not more in Haiti or in Central America?

Third, playing diaspora politics hurts national security and bilateral relations. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau learned this during his magical mystery tour of India.

With [one in five](#) Canadians having been born abroad, including half of our biggest city, Canadians are the people of the world. The Aga Khan set up his centre for [pluralism](#) in Canada because he thinks we get it right in how to manage diversity. Canadian citizenship is like winning the lottery, but sometimes it is taken a bit casually. We are more than the "[greatest hotel](#) on Earth".

Looking Forward

Canada is a blessed nation – in its neighbour, in its resources, in its people. This good fortune can be sustained through prudent but progressive policies at home and constructive internationalism abroad.

In a messy world, providing good government and managing diversity at home will make Canada a country from which other nations can learn. Canada must always look outward. Internationalism and multilateralism serve the national interest. These were the principles behind the speech that defined Canadian postwar policy. Delivered by St. Laurent in January 1947, it still resonates. National unity, political liberty, values and "the [acceptance](#) of international responsibility".



These principles still justify an active Canadian role in international affairs and every international organization which contributes to the world's economic and political stability.

As a middle power, we accomplish more when we work with other constructive nations. This means reinvigorating our shared multilateral institutions to set and enforce the rules that level the playing field. It means finding niches where helpful fixing and diplomatic entrepreneurship can be constructively applied.

It also means investing money and muscle in our alliances. But we must do this always with recognition of our limitations and a realistic appreciation of the world as it is, not as wishful thinking imagines it to be.

Most importantly, it requires us to get our act together at home. This means exploiting and hardening our energy resources against threats, investing in practical education from K-12 and in our colleges and research institutions, building the infrastructure on land, sea and space, investing in science and technology.

The arc of history may bend toward justice but human nature being what it is we need checks and balances to support the better angels and contain the dark side.

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Further Reading

Robert Kagan's *The Jungle Grows Back: America and our Imperiled World* argues that the world is inching closer to a dark jungle of competing interests, clashing nationalism, tribalism and self-interest. Two other Brookings scholars' books are Stewart Patrick's *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World* and Thomas Wright's *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power*. In a similar genre are Ivo Daalder's and James Lindsay's *The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership*, and Michael Mandelbaum's *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth*.

Gideon Rachman's *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond* argues that Asian nations' growing wealth is a trend that will only continue, challenging Western power and influence. Parag Khanna's *The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century* argues that the Asian century is dawning as Asia becomes more than the sum of its parts (and he argues the Belt and Road Initiative has done this). Kai-Fu Lee, in *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order*, says that China will soon overtake the United States as the world leader in innovation. For a harsher view on China, read Michael Pillsbury's *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* and for another provocative view, read Kishore Mahbubani's *Has the West Lost It? A Provocation*.



On grand strategy: Taking the long view of history are Hal Brands and Charles Edel, in *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*, John Lewis Gaddis in *On Grand Strategy* and Lawrence Freedman in *Strategy*, Charles Hill's *Grand Strategy: Literature, Statecraft and World Order*, and Henry Kissinger's books: *World Order*, *Diplomacy* and *On China*.

On sea power: Admiral James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans*.

Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* argues that in 12 of 16 cases over the past 500 years, things have ended badly, often for both nations. When the parties avoided war, it required huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions, not only on the part of the challenger, but also the challenged.

J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* is a riveting account of the forces that Trump channels.

If you despair, reach for Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*.

For annual global threat analysis, look to the Council on Foreign Relations' annual [Preventive Priorities Survey](#) and the Munich Security Report's aptly named "The Great Puzzle: Who Will Pick up the Pieces?" The New America Foundation's Peter Singer has a very good essay entitled [Insurgency in 2030](#).

As for Canada: Randolph Mank asks whether Canada needs a foreign policy review, in a [CGAI policy paper](#) (2019). Roland Paris's letter to the prime minister, "Time to Make Ourselves Useful", in the [Literary Review of Canada](#) (2015) has continued relevance, as does [A Global Positioning Strategy for a Networked Age](#), by Edward Greenspon of the Centre for International Governance Innovation (2012).

► About the Author

A former Canadian diplomat, **Colin Robertson** is Vice-President and Fellow at the [Canadian Global Affairs Institute](#) and hosts its regular [Global Exchange podcast](#). He is an Executive Fellow at the University of Calgary's [School of Public Policy](#) and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the [Norman Paterson School of International Affairs](#) at Carleton University. Robertson sits on the advisory councils of the [Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy](#), [North American Research Partnership](#), [the Sir Winston Churchill Society of Ottawa](#) and [the Conference of Defence Associations Institute](#). He is an [honorary captain \(Royal Canadian Navy\)](#) assigned to the Strategic Communications Directorate. During his foreign service career, he served as first head of the Advocacy Secretariat, minister at the Canadian Embassy in Washington and consul general in Los Angeles, as consul and counsellor in Hong Kong and in New York at the UN and Consulate General. A member of the teams that negotiated the Canada-U.S. FTA and then NAFTA, he is a member of the Deputy Minister of International Trade's NAFTA Advisory Council and the North American Forum. He writes on foreign affairs for the [Globe and Mail](#) and he is a frequent contributor to other media. The [Hill Times](#) has named him as one of those who influence Canadian foreign policy, most recently in their 2018 top 40.

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