

# Canada's Future Multilateral Pathway: Interest-Based 'Like-Mindedness'

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## Issue

Canada's long-time like-minded partners are diverging on political and economic values, with implications for Canada's multilateral approach to coalition-building and like-mindedness over the next 50 years.

## Background

Historically, Canada's multilateral engagement has manifested through the promotion of shared values such as peace and security, international development, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.<sup>1,2</sup> Since serious discussions on Canadian foreign policy arise most often in contexts where Canadian interests are threatened, Canada's post-World War II historic focus on "peacekeeping" and other values-based postures has historically diminished in these contexts. For example, in adherence to the re-organization of global interests around post-2003 anti-terrorism efforts, and under the Harper administration, Canada veered more towards interest-based multilateralism.

Since the election of Trudeau in 2015, Canada has projected a renewed commitment to multilateralism.<sup>3</sup> Guided in part by Canada's strategic interaction with the United States (US) and a renewed sense of disillusionment with formal multilateralist structures under President Trump, Canada was forced to focus on more tangible and absolute gains.<sup>4</sup> A heightened reliance on informal settings for multilateral dialogue signalled the emergence of minilateralism and microlateralism<sup>5</sup> geared around four key geopolitical regions: the US, Russia, China (and the broader Indo-Pacific region), and the European Union (EU). There has also been a renewed sense of engagement in other subregions, especially in the developing South.<sup>6</sup> This push for diversification better aligns Canada with some of its European partners, like Norway and the United Kingdom (UK), which have large overseas development commitments.<sup>7</sup> Since Canada's strength comes from its partnerships, acting in concert with its like-

1 This engagement grew in the 1950s and 1960s, peaked in the 1980s, and then gradually slowed. From the late 1990s to 2006, Canada re-asserted itself internationally through both its human rights and climate change agendas.

2 Given Canada's limited influence and capacity as a middle power, in 2003 a Canadian foreign policy review called for an examination of Canada's emphasis on the projection of values abroad and recommended the prioritization of Canadian national interests (Stairs et al., 2003).

3 For example, this return to multilateralism can be seen in Canada's re-engagement at the United Nations (UN) and its participation in climate agreements.

4 This disillusionment can be seen, for example, in the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

5 Naim, M. (2009).

6 In Canada's case, for example, in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Jamaica.

7 Though Canada's engagement in emerging economies is often motivated by the desire to promote democratic values, it can also be motivated by national interest. Canada's activities in Senegal and Ethiopia, for example, were part of its bid for the UN Security Council seat (Cullen, 2020).

minded partners strengthens not only Canada's reputation, but its ability to influence national policies of emerging powers.<sup>8</sup>

### **The interpretation of values and trade-offs between values and national interests**

National interests derive from the interpretation of values. Thus, multilateralism can be understood as the projection and pursuit of those values abroad. While values are often discussed in a universal sense, the translation of values into interests is not universal, even among like-minded partners. In Canada's case, there is generally a tight connection between the values it promotes, its multilateral aspirations, and how it interprets opportunities and challenges. This approach relies on a strict interpretation of values and may limit room for agility and flexibility in the pursuit of multilateral interests.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Canada's more absolutist and reactive approach may not always intersect well with the countries Canada must engage with, which may take a more pragmatic and proactive approach. For example, though the UK promotes human rights in its relations with China, it also seeks to engage China for its economic interests. In contrast, it appears unlikely that Canada will engage meaningfully with China until the "two Michaels" return to Canada.<sup>10</sup> As another example, the EU has collectively expressed criticism of Saudi Arabia's human rights record, yet EU-Saudi relations are dominated by interest-based bilateral relationships with the UK and France.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Canada-Saudi relations worsened when Saudi retaliated against Canada for publicly criticizing its human rights record.<sup>12</sup> As a final example, Canada has limited its relationship with Russia, whereas many Western European countries have opted for a strategy of "selective engagement."<sup>13</sup>

Increasingly, trade-offs must be made between interests and values. For example, the Biden administration recently announced its support for lifting intellectual property patent protections so that Covid-19 vaccines could be produced globally, despite its generally 'pro-patent' stance. Understanding how trade-offs between interests and values are managed by Canada's existing and potential partners would support a better understanding of like-mindedness.

### **The detail of national interests**

One measure of like-mindedness is how national interests are articulated through foreign policy. Canada is like-minded with its partners in many ways, but where it diverges from them is significant. The US, for example, places less of an emphasis than Canada does on the preservation of the rules-based order, because it wants to retain the flexibility to act according to its own interests whereas as a middle power, Canada depends greatly on the predictability of a rules-based order.<sup>14</sup> Like-mindedness is also affected by a country's size, power, and geography. For example, though Japan and Canada share many values such as democracy and rule of law, Japan's interpretation of these values reflects its regional concerns in a way that diverges from Canada.<sup>15</sup> As another example, the inclusion of China in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement demonstrates how Asia-Pacific states, including Australia and Japan, may prioritize economic relations over security concerns.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of shared values to Canada's global image is evident in the emphasis placed on them in Canada's 2021-2022 developmental plan<sup>17</sup> in which Canada's interests are not as clearly articulated as either the UK or Japan's interests in their respective foreign policies.<sup>18,19</sup> For example, in its security review, the UK clearly identifies the specific threats posed by China and Russia to its own interests.<sup>20</sup> It also articulates its ambition to achieve global leadership in various sectors, and the steps it will take to achieve this. For its part, Japan emphasizes threats

8 Keukeleire, S. and Hooijmaaijers, B. (2013).

9 Chrystia Freeland's 2017 foreign policy speech exemplified Canada's failure to clearly express a plan for pursuing interests (Global Affairs Canada, 2017).

10 The arrests of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, both Canadian, in December 2018 were seen by many as retaliation by China for the arrest of Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver. So far, there has been no verdict in either case, and both their trials are closed to the public and the media. For further reading, see: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/trial-michael-kovrig-china-1.5958648>.

11 Oppenheim, B. (2019).

12 The Canadian Press (2019).

13 Gressel, G. (2021).

14 "American Leadership" (2020).

15 "Diplomatic Bluebook" (2020).

16 Reeves & Horton (2021).

17 "Departmental Plan 2021-2022" (2021).

18 "Global Britain in a Competitive Age" (2021).

19 "Diplomatic Bluebook" (2020).

20 Fitz-Gerald & Segal (2021).

to the rules-based order and regional issues, especially regarding its relationship with China, and clearly identifies how these affect its interests. The Biden administration has been similarly clear in its articulation of threats to its national interests. In its recent security plan, the US emphasizes the fundamental link between economic and security interests, framing economic security as national security, and explicitly linking American leadership, the renewal of alliances, and other goals to the pursuit of American interests (e.g., investing in economic development overseas to create new markets for American products and reduce the likelihood of instability).<sup>21</sup>

### The practice of national interests

Like-mindedness should be measured not just in terms of how interests are detailed, but how they are practiced. One indicator of how interests are practiced is how civil society functions.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, key considerations are whether the practice of civil society is encouraged; the general pillars of civil society's mandates; how civil society operates; and how its outputs are used by government. An analysis of these four considerations across a sample of countries, which include some of Canada's closest allies, emerging partners, and difficult partners, indicates that while civil society may be encouraged in each country, the rules and norms under which civil society functions vary across the countries. These rules and norms usually relate to funding sources, the independence of the research conducted, and the relationship civil society has with government. While civil society organizations are an interlocuter between the people and the government, there are indications that in some cases, their outputs are more for government consumption than for popular consumption.

Some civil society group mandates are less about promoting specific research themes and more about promoting values and principles. For instance, in the UK and Canada, there appears to be a focus on the principles of good governance – such as transparency, accountability and fairness – and, in addition to research on the content of government policies or general government policy direction, useful tools to support the realization of these

principles. When the pillars of civil society are focused more on process than on content, like-minded tools are developed and socialized within those societies much in the same way that they are at the government level. On the other hand, in countries like China where the focus appears to be more on thematic-based research areas, there may be an absence of tool kits to ensure that the outputs of civil society are optimized. Such thematic-based approaches risk only reinforcing government policies and research agendas without critically challenging them at either the strategic policy or program levels. In such scenarios, the civil society “interlocuter” may ultimately serve to reinforce the position of the government, rendering it more ‘quasi-governmental’ in nature.

Arguably, a purely principles-based approach to challenging governance and policy issues raises the opposite problem: civil society may fail to meaningfully inform government priorities identified as key to the national interest. For countries like Canada with comparatively less international strategic intelligence gathering capability and a more domestic-focused intelligence function, policy-relevant input from civil society is critical. This analysis revealed that the UK experience appears to address these opposing risks by balancing a close civil society interface aligned with government priorities with an ongoing commitment to principle-based approaches to support the transparency and accountability of both government and civil society.<sup>23</sup> Japan also appears to take a more balanced approach to supporting both policy content and policymaking tools and processes.

In Canada, there are indications that civil society activity has a comparatively weak alignment with government themes. The absence of codified national security/foreign policy strategic priorities and supporting objectives further challenges this alignment. Clarity on both policy priorities and supporting objectives could enable a more productive alignment between governmental priorities and civil society mandates. This would, in turn, serve to further the pursuit of Canadian interests in practice. It would

21 Biden (2021).

22 According to the World Bank definition, civil society refers to “community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (Jezard, 2018).

23 Since 2010, the UK Government has recruited ‘deployable civilian experts’ who are retained by government, given mandatory annual training, vetted through security clearance processes and regularly drawn down by government offices to provide advisory services, undertake desk-based research and/or engage in-country. The outputs produced by this cadre of experts include tools and methodologies as well as issue-based (thematic, regional, country-based) studies.

also ensure that focused and critical research continues to maintain Canada's relevance at the international table. Maintaining 'relevance' is key for a middle power country vying to retain its strong middle power status.

Thus, an analysis of the actual 'practice' of national interests in other countries, focusing on the nature and functioning of civil society, provides some insights into how tensions and trade-offs between national interests and values may be managed by national governments. As discussions on interests and values become more universal, and as trade-offs and tensions between interests and values become the norm, the actual practice of the pursuit of national interests provides a useful indicator of true like-mindedness. Building coalitions around a more practical form of like-mindedness would assist Canada in both formal and informal multilateral interactions and inform where new and reconfigured multilateral investments are required. By providing Canada with a stronger ability to predict how its partners are likely to respond to global changes, it would also enable Canada to bring stronger leadership and a more strategic perspective to multilateral discussions. Finally, it would reveal the extent to which Canada's partners are willing to make significant trade-offs between their interests and values.

## Recommendations

1. Clarify specific national interests which reflect the uniqueness of Canada's position in the world and help define the space for manoeuvrability.
2. Include 'supporting objectives' under each foreign policy priority in order to link these critical enablers of broader policy goals to civil society mandates.
3. Build on this exercise looking at the functioning of civil society in other countries to evaluate how interests are practiced and how tensions between interests and values are managed.
4. Foster a stronger relationship between Global Affairs Canada and leading civil society organizations by developing two groups of civil society experts: One to be kept on a database and engaged with regularly and one that includes those free to travel overseas.
5. Have Canadian embassies gather strategic intelligence on the functioning of civil society overseas to inform Canadian foreign policy implementation.

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