

Challenging Assumptions: Repositioning Canada in the Multilateral Order

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Issue

By the mid-twenty-first century, Canada may no longer be able to rely on the strength of multilateral institutions in their current form to advance its interests and achieve its goals.

Context

Multilateralism, the international rules-based system, diplomatic practices, and institutional instruments by which Canada advances its interests in concert with other actors, is undergoing a crisis caused by repeated failures in dealing with COVID-19, climate change, and conflicts driven by the resurgence of Great Power geopolitics demonstrate that international cooperation relies on increasingly fragile and unpredictable foundations. The volatility of a changing multilateral system will severely curtail Canada's ability to achieve its strategic interests. In addition, Canada's own capacity shortcomings and our allies' perceptions of our contributions threaten to undermine our reliance on the multilateral system. The challenges of a highly dynamic international environment, including forces of global illiberalism and digital mis/disinformation, combined with static assumptions about Canada's international influence and position, create risk for Canada. If Canada is to successfully reposition itself, there is an urgent requirement for a deliberate and systematic adaptation to account for new strategic realities.

Background

Given its limited abilities to unilaterally exert or project political, economic or military power, Canada requires stability from the rules-based multilateral order. Canada has used strategic multilateralism to advance its security, social, and economic interests in cooperation with compatible nations. While there are no easy or straightforward solutions, adapting to any disruption of the traditional order will require challenging the underlying assumptions about Canada's role in the multilateral order and repositioning Canadian capacities in order to better reflect changing global realities (Canada 2021; Greenspon 2010).

The multilateral order is currently facing faltering U.S. leadership, which potentially threatens international cooperation and peace, and introduces worrying uncertainty into the international system. For Canada, intimately linked and allied to the U.S. across trade, defence, political and cultural sectors, any disruption in U.S. behaviours will significantly impact Canadian interests both domestically and internationally. Globally, the uncertainty and unreliability of American leadership have already allowed other powers to take advantage of this apparent lapse: China may threaten Taiwan; Russia has invaded Ukraine; and the U.S., distracted both at home and abroad, may lack the political will for pushback.

This cannot be overstated, as the mechanisms central to maintaining predictability and order including shaping and constraining the behaviour of major players – security alliances such as NATO, economic instruments such as the WTO and IMF and even the UN and WHO – have been substantially weakened by the steady rise of authoritarianism and digital mis/disinformation, even within the US political process (Kraft 2017; Abramowitz et al. 2018). The digital era is inflaming global illiberalism through the polarization and the distortion of information, and the pervasive spread of false narratives which embolden the rise of autocracy. As technology further divides societies, the digital age requires that states not only vigilantly respond, but take preventative action to mitigate the impacts these threats pose (Colomina et al. 2021). Therefore, digital mis/disinformation and global illiberalism represent twin hydras that have the potential to undermine faith in multilateral solutions and democracy. In short, the multilateral system of 2050 will look different from that of 2020, and Canada must be prepared to engage with new assumptions and perceptions about its behaviour and objectives.

Challenging Assumptions

Changing Perceptions

Despite a historical self-image as a nation of peacekeepers, both external and domestic perceptions of Canada's global influence have changed in the last decade (Matheson 2020; Buck 2022). Domestically, a recent poll by the Angus Reid Institute indicates that half (49%) of Canadians believe that Canada's reputation has worsened over the last decade and a third (33%) believe it has stayed the same, while only 14% think that it has improved (Angus Reid Institute 2022). This self-perception of Canada's declining reputation on the international stage reveals that at home, Canada's presence is seen as weakening abroad in the face of events spanning the last decade. Additionally, although in the past Canada has made a name for itself with Canadian values driven by real action, currently, there are rising concerns about the translation of policy and discourse to practice. Put simply, Canada likes to promise action, but often does not follow through on its commitments in a concrete fashion.

International perceptions of Canada's role and contributions around the world are little better, as Canada is perceived as having a largely reactive foreign policy, one particularly shaped by deep integration with, and

often, dependence upon, Washington's leadership (Mank 2019). Canada's feminist foreign policy and values-based approaches have also been criticized for having unclear goals (Matheson 2020; Buck 2022). Canada has not had an integrated foreign policy review since 2005, nor a national security policy review since 2006, and this failure to clearly articulate Canadian interests and priorities impacts the seriousness with which Canada is perceived and engaged on the global stage (Buck 2022).

Canada's allies, and its citizens, expect Canada to meet its commitments. For instance, to support defence obligations, Canada could increase its contributions to meet NATO's 2% funding level; or, to sustain its environmental objectives, could implement its carbon-cutting requirements under the Paris Agreement. There is also concern that Canada may even lack the diplomatic capacity and wider government expertise to effectively advance Canadian interests. Many key positions at Global Affairs Canada are filled with temporary staff, and policies to support the promotion and retention of diplomats have been criticized for not reflecting the value of their knowledge or their international networks (Buck 2022). This deficient diplomatic capacity combined with a lack of coherent messaging between departments, and a predominantly risk-averse position on international affairs, contribute to Canada's failure to identify and maintain priority partnerships and project an image of reliability in international arenas.

Leveraging Canada's strengths

The potential instability of a changing multilateral system presents an opportunity for Canada to effectively draw on two of its enduring, foundational core strengths: its democratic institutions and its trustworthiness.

In the face of rising global illiberalism and authoritarianism, Canada's democratic stability – based on transparency and accountability – is an asset that can be brought to the multilateral system (Buck 2022; Petrou 2022). Although COVID-19 heightened polarization and political destabilization globally, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index report, Canada rose to fifth place in 2020, which was attributed to a robust engagement in politics among Canadians (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). Canada could more effectively leverage this attribute in its efforts to legitimize and strengthen multilateral institutions and foster credible responses to future international crises and challenges.

Canada's own historical experience also positions it for international leadership. Being itself a product of colonialism, Canada enjoys a "trust factor" with international partners that brings legitimacy and authenticity to its global values and interests' agenda. In this sense, Canada continues to be able to act as an 'honest broker' in facilitating or helping to create conditions to mend faltered relationships. Also, Canada draws on its own experience and ability to learn, including the new awareness of its own failure in the treatment and respect of its Indigenous peoples. This open recognition and approach to addressing these failures is, in the view of many, an act of leadership which strengthens Canada's voice and influence for example, on issues of human rights. Finally, Canada's diversity and its policy of inclusivity allow it to create a rapport with different like-minded nations, thus strengthening its range of relationships and improving its leverage to advance Canadian interests in the international arena (Greenspon 2010; Devlen 2022).

Recommendations

To position Canada effectively in a dynamic global environment, two interrelated sets of recommendations are presented below. Considering the rapid changes taking place in the international arena, the recommendations presented in this policy brief are applicable to more general trends. They are designed to enable Canada to move from a reactive to proactive international posture and to reinforce Canada's ability to engage, shape, influence and lead:

I. Strengthening the Foundations

1. **Establishing an Integrated International Policy Framework:** Canada should develop a practical, purposeful, comprehensive whole of government framework that brings clarity to Canada's international objectives and priorities, based on inclusivity and engagement of all levels of government, civil society and private sector; articulates these objectives to Canadians and international partners in a transparent and accountable way and aligns to the instruments and means to ensure they are achievable. GAC can engage with and coordinate with the relevant federal departments such as DND, NRCAN, IRCC, and FIN, to participate in collaboration with the private sector, with the intent of creating a national dialogue about defining Canada's strategic interests.

2. **Creating Capacities to Support Multilateral Solutions:** Canada should invest deliberately and urgently to enable it to take an active leadership role by increasing its capacities to project political, military, or social power in its interest areas. In terms of defence, for instance, increasing DND funding is key to building capacities to deal with twenty-first-century threats to Canada: climate realities require strengthened monitoring of the Arctic, including the Northwest Passage, while Russian aggression in Europe necessitates bolstering Canada's defence contribution to meet NATO's 2% requirement to more effectively support our Eastern European allies. Bilaterally, settling the Northern Warning System issue with the United States would improve our image as a legitimate partner in matters of continental defence, which suffered as a result of the F-35 and BMD debates. GAC may act as a liaison with other nations to target and resolve these challenges, including through the Arctic Council, NATO, or bilateral US-Canada summits. By additionally addressing excess temporary and high-turnover diplomatic staffing, and otherwise demonstrating consistency and attentiveness to these relationships, these actions ensure that Canada will have the ability to fulfil its bilateral and multilateral commitments.

II. Aligning Our Actions with Our Strengths

3. **Combating Global Illiberalism - Investing in Diversified Development and Diplomatic Efforts:** Canada should further develop and maintain strategic partnerships with developing countries to foster and ensure that their support of the rules-based multilateral system can adequately align with their economic and security interests and resource requirements in the long-term. GAC should leverage Canada's strength as a trusted, democratically stable partner by using targeted development investments to forge closer ties with developing countries with the aim of strengthening their democratic processes and increasing their stake in multilateral institutions and a rules-based international order. This will require a deliberate strategy; investment in predictable long-term relationships; capacity building programmes in democratic governance, security sector, justice and building resilient civil society and private sector.

4. **Combating Digital Mis/Disinformation and Cybersecurity Threats:** Shoring up Canada's democratic institutions and resilience in the face of cyber threats is key, there we should bolster our resilience against digital age threats by enhancing Canadian understanding of, and creating partnerships to combat digital mis/disinformation and cyber-based menaces. This will require collaboration well beyond the traditional players. GAC will need to work even more closely with CSE, CSIS, PSC, DCI as well as with FIN, PCH, as well as non-governmental stakeholders, particularly civil society and social media platform owners and operators to create a broad and inclusive approach. This represents an opportunity to strengthen multilateralism by exploiting and reinforcing existing relationships to combat cyber-based threats.

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