

4 Rethink Canadian foreign policy for a changing world

Canada should adopt a more pragmatic and realistic approach to foreign policy that advances the country's national interests and strengthens our defences against emerging risks, including digital and cybersecurity threats.

The most recent review of Canadian foreign policy began in 2001 but was interrupted by 9/11 and then largely ignored. Since then, the geopolitical context has changed dramatically, undermining global stability and leaving Canada more isolated and vulnerable than it has been in decades.

Canada is more isolated and vulnerable on the world stage than it has been in decades

It is time to update Canada's foreign policy in light of these changes. The United States is and will remain our country's pre-eminent economic and security partner, and the management of the bilateral relationship must remain at the top of our country's foreign policy agenda. But in our dealings with the rest of the world, we can no longer automatically assume that the United States will take our side. We must be prepared to fend for ourselves.

Canada will always stand for freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. But as a middle power we can best promote our values through active and creative diplomacy and patient relationship-building. We should resist the temptation to preach

or to engage in conspicuous moral posturing that may play well at home but is detached from achievable outcomes.

In an uncertain and unpredictable world, Canada needs strong multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. At the same time, if we are serious about protecting democracy and expanding Canada's role in the world, we have to be prepared to pull our weight. A more robust defense of our sovereignty will require significant increases in spending on defence and national security. This includes strengthening our cyber defence capabilities, working with like-minded allies to protect Canadian institutions from digital attacks, and limiting our vulnerability to retaliatory economic measures by diversifying our trade.

Over the past year, a growing number of foreign policy experts and former senior Canadian diplomats have called for a comprehensive review of the country's foreign and defence policies. Bearing in mind the changing politics of international affairs, the absence of predictable global leadership, and the evolving threats to Canadian sovereignty, we believe such a review would be both timely and necessary.

What others are saying

“Given the country’s historical evolution and today’s geopolitical realities, Canada could only benefit from an opportunity to define and pursue its national interests more clearly and purposefully. Change is being thrust upon the country and Canadians should have a voice in how their government is handling it.”

– **Randolph Mank, a three-time former Canadian ambassador in Asia, in a recent [paper](#) for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

“Before the Second World War, Britain had our back. After the war, the United States had our back. Now, no-one has our back.”

– **Roundtable participant in Toronto, June 4, 2019**

“The changing politics of international affairs and the volatile nature of U.S. politics right now make it incumbent on whichever party holds power after October 2019 to analyze and prioritize the country’s foreign policy objectives.”

– **Jennifer Levin Bonder, Fulbright Visiting Scholar with the Johns Hopkins Center for Canadian Studies, in *Policy Options*, July 2019**

“With the ground shifting internationally, Canada requires a root-to-branch rethinking of its international strategy.”

– **Roland Paris, Professor of International Affairs, University of Ottawa, in *The Globe and Mail*, October 6, 2019**
