

# Our Diplomatic Identity: A Canadian Balance of Reason and Passion

Jeremy Kinsman

*Over the past century, Canada has evolved and matured as a nation out of the yoke of colonialism and beyond the geographic dominance of its relationship to the United States. Through its valour in wartime and value as an honest broker, Canada has weathered shifts in geopolitics and its own domestic politics to emerge with its long-standing imperatives of multilateralism and pluralism intact. Veteran diplomat Jeremy Kinsman recounts the journey that brought Canada to its current place as a reliably rational port in our current global storm.*

**D**uke Ellington once said that in his music, melody was his passion. But rhythm was his business.

Canadian foreign policy has long been described as having a similar divide. Our passion has been multilateralism—the binding together of the world’s nations in the spirit of liberal internationalism, as the antidote to competitive nationalist ambitions that caused the world wars of the 20th century, and as the platform for building common solutions to global and trans-national challenges.

Our “business” has been rooted in bilateral relations, especially key interest-based relationships that hold potentially existential implications, the most consequential of which is the one with the United States. After surges of bilateral economic tension in the 1970s and 1980s, NAFTA secured a productive economic relationship. Its defence from a new storm of “America First” impulses has

become the dominant preoccupation in Ottawa today.

The vulnerability of the relationship once caused worry that our preoccupations with shoring up liberal internationalism risked being an indulgent diversion, a deference to cosmopolitan values over the imperatives of self-interest. Our great ambassador to Reagan’s Washington, Allan Gotlieb, famously decried in a 2005 essay the long-standing collision between realism and “romanticism” in foreign policy. He feared our affection for the “melody” of internationalism risked under-representing vital national imperatives of business and geography. Today Gotlieb concedes that Trump’s throwback populist economic nationalism validates a renewed effort to diversify our economic relations to reduce our vulnerability.

In principle, a choice between bilateral and internationalist emphases is a false dichotomy. In practice, national interest insists we defend our economy, well-being, and sovereignty at

all times, while also throwing our shoulder behind the strengthening of international cooperation and the multilateral system.

The two impulses have generally been mutually reinforcing. Widely spread positive bilateral relationships earn support for Canadian initiatives in multilateral fora that in turn can enhance our influence, including in Washington. Influence in Washington augments influence elsewhere.

Canada’s defence of our geographic sovereignty goes back to the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 that set up the International Joint Commission, which provided a template for managing issues between two unequal partners, insulating Canada from the disadvantages of cross-sectoral linking of issues. In 1923, we signed with the U.S. the Halibut Treaty (signing for the first time without a UK co-signature).

The 1970 Arctic Waters Pollution Protection Act that the U.S. robustly contested and the 1979 East Coast Fisheries and Maritime Boundary Treaties that defined jurisdictions over national economic zones 200 miles from the coast followed (though the U.S. Senate rejected the fisheries agreement). Legal defence of our sovereignty dovetailed with our leading role in drafting the rules for a new international regime to govern rights on the sea bed and adjacent continental shelves.

**W**ars also propelled Canada’s international engagement. In London’s Green Park, a monument honours the “more than a million” Canadians in uniform

who passed through Great Britain on their way to Europe's murderous 20th Century wars.

After Canadian units fought together impressively in the First World War (though under British command), Prime Minister Robert Borden demanded a seat for Canada at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, followed by membership in the League of Nations.

The 1931 Statute of Westminster formally conferred on the dominions of the British Empire national responsibilities for diplomatic self-representation formerly exercised by Britain. Canada created a foreign service, having already deployed trade commissioners abroad.

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In the Second World War, Canadian-commanded forces played an even more significant role, emerging temporarily as the world's fourth military power. An initial nuclear partner, our wish to act as a broker on disarmament drove the choice not to weaponize our capability.

The war effort earned a founding role in the creation of the post-war international institutional order meant to prevent future wars,

launching “the golden age” of Canadian diplomacy. Our best and brightest (men only, actually) leaned into building a better world, whose multilateral binding might also ease life with a much more powerful neighbour. We became enthusiastic joiners of a myriad of multilateral group-



Prime Minister Robert Borden and First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill leave the Admiralty after a meeting in London in 1912. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

ings for security, economics, culture, the environment, the Americas, the Commonwealth, and Francophonie.

Star diplomat Lester B. Pearson won the Nobel Prize for the 1956 Canadian initiative to create a UN peacekeeping force between Egypt and Israel after Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal awoke vestigial British and French imperialist impulses that provoked a stunning breach with the United States over the threat of a disastrous Middle East war.

Peacekeeping and mediation became



Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson and President John F. Kennedy at the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport, May 1963. *Library and Archives Canada photo*

Canadian vocations that made Canadian diplomats default chairpersons of committees and commissions across the United Nations.

Canadian officials were also original builders of the international trade and payments system, and its informal inside *directoires*, such as the G7, formed in 1975, and after 1981, “the Quad,” the sanctum of the four principal world traders (the US, the EU, Japan and Canada).

During the Cold War, though less ideologically hostile to the USSR than the US, Canada was an earnest member of the NATO alliance, having sponsored the article intended to bind members in a political-economic community as well as to mutual military commitments, again in the hope that wider multilateral ties might reduce our exposure to bilateral pressure in our neighbourhood.

Since postwar international peace and security and trade and payments systems largely reflected U.S. design, Washington welcomed our multilateral activism. Bilaterally, intensive wartime cooperation had built an easy working relationship between Canadian and American officials, enabling Canadian diplomacy to channel creative attention to wider international cooperation, including development assistance.

President de Gaulle's quixotic late-life decision to throw France behind Quebec's separatist movement, betraying

Canada's critical support for him in the Second World War, posed an almost existential threat and traumatized External Affairs. The crisis over de Gaulle's "Vive le Quebec Libre!" speech in Montreal in 1967 elevated the staunchest defender of our sovereignty in Cabinet—Pierre Trudeau.

Succeeding Pearson as Prime Minister in 1968, Trudeau asserted a harder-nosed focus on Canadian interests. He would repatriate the Canadian Constitution and draw up a Charter of Rights.

In foreign affairs, he clipped the easy access of External officials to their PM (they had long co-habited the East Block of Parliament). He cut back Canada's military presence in Europe.

**T**rudeau's foreign-policy review introduced a strategy for relations with the US, by then stuck in the quagmire of the Vietnam War, which Pearson had publicly deplored (disquieting External officials). Trudeau didn't challenge the U.S. on the war but admitted 30,000–40,000 dissenters and draft-dodgers.

Ahead of his time in foreseeing the rise of newly-industrializing powers, Trudeau broke from the pack to negotiate diplomatic relations with communist China. An advocate of North-South power-sharing, He became a prominent world figure who consorted as easily with Third World leaders as with colleagues in the G7, which became a central forum for Canadian multilateral interests.

President Nixon wasn't impressed, regarding Trudeau as a "leftie." When Nixon veered in 1971 to belligerent economic nationalism, imposing unilaterally a no-exceptions import surcharge with devastating implications for Canadian trade, Trudeau agreed with the recommendation from deceived External officials for a "Third Option" on relations with the U.S. To reduce the "current vulnerability," Canada would pursue enhanced national economic capacity and control and diversify economic ties, notably institutionalizing a closer economic relationship with the European Eco-



Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and President Ronald Reagan at the G7 summit in Venice in June 1987, only a few months before the successful negotiation of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum photo*

nom ic Community (finally achieved with the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, in 2016).

With Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, U.S.-Canada relations again became fractious. His administration took issue with Canada's perceived "economic nationalism" as well as with Trudeau's apparent doubts over U.S. Cold War fixations.

Successor Brian Mulroney promised to make the bilateral relationship "special" again and free trade negotiations dominated the policy and political agenda. He calmed fears of losing national identity, safeguarding Canadian culture and avoiding identification with unpopular (in Canada) U.S. initiatives like "Star Wars" missile defence.

Mulroney also became a world figure who led an activist foreign policy that continued to deploy our energy to both bilateral business and multilateral passion.

The Cold War's end rewarded Canada's work on East-West detente and recharged our multilateral DNA. The UN at last functioned, if briefly, as its charter had foreseen, endorsing in 1991 a "just" war to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait with an unprecedented international military coalition. Canada contributed significant

air, sea, and land forces and Foreign Minister Joe Clark undertook highest-level diplomacy in the region to try to break logjams preventing lasting regional peace that would be tackled by the Oslo accords.

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Taking office in 1993, Jean Chr -

ten operated with a lower profile but pushed the same foreign policy buttons, adding to our toolbox for promoting bilateral business ties the innovation of major Team Canada missions. The scare of a near-defeat in the 1995 Quebec referendum didn't lessen Canadian activity abroad. China became a top priority.

**R**etaining old worries from the 1988 Canada-U.S. FTA debate we risked being continentally overbalanced, Chrétien re-ignited talks to get the EU finally into a comprehensive economic agreement. This bilateral initiative and symmetry on the multilateral agenda of human security and action on climate change prompted Canada's designation as the EU's sixth strategic partner.

Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy steered the new policy paradigm for human security, launching international initiatives to protect increasingly vulnerable civilians by sponsoring a treaty to ban land mines, an International Criminal Court to try war crimes, and a doctrine of international responsibility to intervene in cases of mass atrocity. International civil society became a central partner in policy formulation and advocacy.

The 9/11 attacks dramatically shifted the focus to security. John Manley led an all-of-government effort to save the common Canada-U.S. supply chain's access across a hardening border.

NATO allies joined the U.S. in a campaign in Afghanistan to oust the Taliban. Alas, the US, with UK support, pushed toward a disconnected regime-change war and occupation in Iraq. Chrétien refused participation because of absence of authorization by the UN Security Council, earning Canada recognition as the "other North America."

Paul Martin's brief sojourn as prime minister promoted the G-20 as a more equitable central forum for international economic discussion, reflecting floundering confidence in existing international economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization as well as doubts over the Washington "consensus" on the supremacy of

market forces that the financial crisis of 2008 would confirm.

Stephen Harper radically tried to re-gear foreign policy to neo-conservative precepts that according to Foreign Minister John Baird, would end "worship at the altar of compromise and consensus." Abandoning the role of honest broker, Canada shunned countries whose regimes it disliked, including initially China, and on controversies such as Israel-Palestinian issues, lining up behind one side. Relations with the White House cooled under President Obama, whose world view resembled the Canadian one Harper had shed.

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“What’s happened to Canada?” was a question asked of many Canadians abroad, including ex-Foreign Minister David Emerson. Canada lost an election to the UN Security Council.

In Ottawa, human security was out and hard power was in. The long expeditionary war in Afghanistan became the all-consuming foreign policy activity, with high opportunity costs and meagre results on the ground and in nation-building. Multilateralist Foreign Affairs (for some years merged with International Trade, and soon to absorb international development and the Canadian International Development Agency, CIDA), was sidelined, centralizing power in the PMO to an unprecedented degree.

In 2015, newly-elected Justin Trudeau promised “Canada’s back!” Geographic and economic realities made rein-

forcing the North American continental venture with the U.S. and Mexico the lead priority, backed by aims to renew multilateral activism and a meeting of minds with president Obama.

Donald Trump’s election in 2016 re-introduced a threat to vital Canadian interests. Internationally, an effort to diversify markets and partnerships proceeds but on multilateral issues, Canada seems wary about antagonizing a newly nationalistic White House—an approach that has been unproductive in the past.

Foreign Affairs—renamed Global Affairs—appears an unwieldy bureaucracy struggling with challenges of the new digital, inter-active and public diplomacy environment. An even more narrowly-centred PMO monopolizes key U.S. policy issues, though Global’s high-profile and effective Minister Chrystia Freeland is gaining international traction.

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History doesn’t move forward in a straight line. In a more competitive and dangerous world where populist nationalism stalks even the US, the hundred-year duality of bilateral and multilateral imperatives is more relevant than ever for Canadian diplomacy—and identity.

There can be no let-up in efforts to champion and advance Canadian interests—our “business”—while diplomacy leans in to improve conditions for global security, well-being, and governance—our enduring “passion.” **P**

*Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman is a former Canadian ambassador to Russia, the UK and the EU. He is now affiliated with University of California, Berkeley, and Ryerson University in Toronto. kinsmanj@shaw.ca*