



Prime Minister Trudeau and President Trump, accompanied by Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau and Melania Trump in the Oval Office at the White House, October 11, 2017. Adam Scotti photo

“Canada is Back”: Justin Trudeau’s Foreign Policy

Colin Robertson

Declaring that Canada “is back”, Justin Trudeau promised a “constructive and compassionate” foreign policy in 2015. Then came Donald Trump in 2016—protectionist, populist and unilateralist—who presents the Trudeau government with its biggest foreign policy challenge. Managing the bilateral relationship has tested Canadian governments since Confederation. For the most part, Trudeau has delivered on his foreign policy promises. Under his leadership, Canada’s international brand has improved.

Expectations were high when, after winning election in October 2015, Justin Trudeau promised Canadians that he would restore “sunny ways” and grow the middle class, among other promises. As prime minister, he has achieved broad public support and favourable international recognition for a multilateralism that recognized climate change, embraced refugees, espoused a feminist development policy, and, surprisingly for a Liberal government, argued for more defence spending. But the elephant in the

room for Canada is Donald Trump. At two years in government, Trump's behaviour on trade, migration, climate and defence present tests for Trudeau that he has to get right.

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Trudeau quickly established his bonafides with President Barack Obama over climate change and their shared commitment to progressive liberal internationalism. Their bromance was visible to all during the Trudeau visit to the Obama White House in March 2016 and Obama's visit to Ottawa three months later for the Three Amigos Summit.

The election of Trump, with his platform of protectionism, populism and "America First", forced Trudeau to reset his government and prioritize the U.S. relationship. International Trade Minister Chrystia Freeland has since become Foreign Minister, keeping responsibility for North American trade.

During Trudeau's first working visit with Trump last February, they agreed on an agenda: Growing the shared economies, energy security and the environment, border security, allies in the world, and empowering women entrepreneurs.

Renegotiation of the NAFTA began in August, with seven rounds scheduled before Christmas. Freeland has identified Canadian objectives as follows:

- Modernize the NAFTA to recognize the technological and digital revolution;
- Make it a progressive "fair trade" agreement, using CETA as a model, through inclusion of chapters on the environment, labour, gender equality, indigenous peoples;
- Reforming dispute settlement to ensure governments have the

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right to legislate in the public interest with fair dispute settlement (Chapter 19);

- Easing business travel (Chapter 16), cutting red tape and focusing more on harmonized regulatory cooperation;
- Preserving supply management and the cultural exemption.

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To deliver the Canadian message to Americans, there has been a veritable flood south of cabinet ministers, provincial premiers and legislators of all levels of government, not just to Washington, but to the rest of the U.S., especially into Trump country. The Canadian message: Canada is a reliable ally and a trusted trading partner and Canadian trade and investment creates jobs in the U.S., Canadian energy fuels the U.S. economy and will sustain the North American energy renaissance promised by Trump. The *New York Times* reports that "unlike anything tried by another ally", the "quietly audacious campaign to cajole,

contain and if necessary coerce the Americans ... has largely succeeded."

The relationship with the U.S. was at the heart of Freeland's June 2017 foreign policy statement. As a "middle power", said Freeland, Canada has a "huge interest in an international order based on rules. One in which might is not always right. One in which more powerful countries are constrained in their treatment of smaller ones by standards that are internationally respected, enforced and upheld."

In many respects it is a back to the future evocation of Pearsonian diplomacy. Canada is seeking a UN Security Council seat, she declared "because we wish to be heard."

Acknowledging frankly the "indispensable" role that the U.S. plays in preserving global order, she identified the multiple fronts of the Canada-US relationship: "From border security, to the defence of North America through NORAD, to the fight against Daesh, to our efforts within NATO, to nurturing and improving our trading relationship, which is the strongest in the world."

There was no pussy-footing about defence. Taking a shot at Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, Freeland declared NATO and Article 5 to be at the heart of Canada's national security policy. "The principled use of force", declared Freeland, "together with our allies and governed by international law, is part of our history and must be part of our future."

The next day, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan announced the new defence policy, "Strong, Secure, Engaged":



Prime Minister Trudeau attends a reception at the Department of National Defence. January 26, 2016. Adam Scotti photo

strong at home, secure in North America and engaged in the world. The emphasis—on homeland, North America and then the world, is consistent with that of previous governments. Specific commitments included:

- Boosting defence spending from 1 per cent of GDP to 1.4 per cent by 2024.
- Purchasing 88 advanced fighter jets to replace the aging CF-18s and building 15 Canadian Surface Combatant ships to replace the existing frigates and retired destroyers.
- Growing the regular forces by 3,500 to 71,500 troops, and the reserves by 1,500 to 30,000 and reducing the recruitment time from months to weeks.
- Increasing women in the Forces by one percentage point a year to 25 per cent by 2026.

There was no reference to whether Canada would join ballistic missile defence, as recommended unanimously by the Senate National Defence Committee in 2014. Nor was there an elaboration on where the government would deploy its promised commitment last August that Canada would commit 600 troops to peace operations.

Critics of the Trudeau foreign policy argue that spending is still inadequate with the promised increases in defence spending falling short of the NATO norm of 2 per cent of GDP. A *Globe and*

Mail editorial mocked that “Canada is currently capable of playing a small but valuable supporting role in a major military engagement, and a big role in a minor military mission.” In terms of development assistance, Canada currently spends just 0.26 per cent of the country’s gross national income on foreign aid—a long way from the UN target of 0.7 per cent established by former Canadian prime minister Lester Pearson. While “excited about what it promises”, Canadian Council for International Cooperation CEO Julia Sanchez got it right when she said that “... we don’t understand how this is going to be realized without new funding,”

Since Confederation, Canadian foreign policy has been constructed around the reality of life with Uncle Sam. Once a threat but for more than a century a friend and ally, its market sustains our prosperity and its security umbrella protects us.

To help mitigate the powerful cultural and economic influence of the United States, successive Canadian governments have embraced collective security in defence and multilateralism in foreign policy and trade diversification. Recognizing that it is access to the U.S. market that sustains Canadian prosperity, Trudeau’s top priority is the re-negotiation of preferred access to the U.S. market.

Two years into his mandate, Justin Trudeau’s popularity remains high. His foreign policy—an activist and progressive multilateralism—enjoys broad support. But the big test—re-negotiating preferred access to the U.S. or finding and making good on counterweights—must still be achieved. **P**

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