Canada’s Role in Uniting Democracies

By Ben Rowswell

Synopsis

In his opening keynote address for the Kingston Conference on International Security, CIC President Ben Rowswell examines his predecessor John Holmes’ description of Canada’s role as a “middle power” in the context of the early days of the Cold War. He then proposes a new role for Canada consistent with that tradition but adapted to the context of the geopolitical conflict emerging as we enter the 2020s.
About the Author

Ben Rowswell was appointed President and Research Director of the Canadian International Council in November 2018.

Ben has 25 years of experience as a practitioner of international relations. He earned his expertise in international security serving with the United Nations in Mogadishu, Somalia, as Canada’s first diplomatic envoy to Baghdad, Iraq, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and as the head of the NATO Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar at the height of Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan. He was Ambassador to Venezuela from 2014 to 2017.

Ben has advised top levels of government on international strategy in the Privy Council Office during the tenures of Jean Chrétien and Stephen Harper, and at the Washington DC Center for Strategic and International Studies.
Introduction

It’s an honour to be invited to provide the opening remarks for this conference. I was already pre-disposed to accept any invitation given the high regard in which I hold Kim Nossal, the dean of Canadian foreign policy analysts. But Kim sealed the deal when he invoked the legacy of my predecessor as President of the Canadian International Council.

It piqued my curiosity. How would John Holmes assess the world order today?

You might not know John Holmes, but you surely know the term he coined for Canada’s role in the world. Writing in the 1960s, he described Canada as a “middle power.” It was our organization, then called the Canadian Institute for International Affairs, that seeded that concept in the public imagination.

Holmes was a senior diplomat who had contributed to many of the negotiations that led to the creation of the international order after the victory of the Allies in World War Two. He led Canada’s embassy in Moscow after the war, then served as one of the first heads of mission at the fledgling United Nations. Like many of his colleagues that were heavily involved “at the creation” of the postwar international order, he brought a uniquely Canadian perspective that many other allies found valuable.

Unlike his colleagues, however, he soon found himself forced out of government. Holmes was expelled from the Foreign Service in 1960 for his sexual orientation. This act of discrimination against a servant of Canada was a travesty. If there was a silver lining to this violation of his rights, however, it lay in the fact that he could then take that unique perspective from the coalface of international politics and share it with the public.

Drawing on this expertise he could explain to his fellow citizens how power works in the international system. When he explained to Canadians how our nation had a distinctive contribution to make in global affairs, it was tempered not by the exaggerated self-regard of a country that sees itself as uniquely virtuous, but by the hard realities of power.

Holmes had no time for Canadians who argued that we should be a neutral or even a pacifist nation, keeping both superpowers at a distance so that we might advance causes based on a sense of morality divorced from considerations of power. Rather, he argued that Canada had influence because it was aligned with the U.S. and other liberal democracies. We had a seat at the table because we made our loyalties clear, and contributed men, materiel and money to advance our shared objectives.

What made Canada a middle power was that, inside that alliance, we retained the ability to set our own course. We could draw on our relationships outside NATO – in the Commonwealth, with francophone nations, or as a major donor to developing countries – to do things that other allies could not do. Like lead a peacekeeping force that enabled the UK to back down in the Suez Crisis without appearing to have bowed to American pressure.

Canada was both allied and autonomous, and derived power from both of those characteristics. By aligning ourselves with the United States and other democracies we benefited from their power. And by retaining a certain independence of initiative, we could wield power within the alliance as well. As Holmes put it, being a middle power meant that we were “a loyal ally without being a satellite, preserving as much of our sovereignty and identity as is compatible with the economic and military realities of the nuclear age.”

The concept caught the imagination of a generation of foreign policy thinkers, diplomats and military leaders. Successive governments of either political stripe described Canada’s role in the world in this way, and it helped articulate a broad foreign policy consensus across the partisan divide. It was such a compelling concept that it outlasted the Cold War and continues to be invoked today, three decades since the standoff between USSR and United States came to an end.

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How Canada helped unite democracies in the 1940s

We can debate how relevant the middle power concept is today. But it was very relevant in the formation of our alliance in the first place.

I invite you to think back to the late 1940s. The world’s democracies emerge from World War Two in very different situations. The U.S., principally responsible for the victory and flush with the largest economy the world had ever seen, was expected to return to its tradition as an isolationist power. Since the days of George Washington, the most consistent tendency in U.S. foreign policy was to avoid “foreign entanglements.”

The UK was also victorious, but flat on its back economically and so desperately over-stretched in its far-flung empire that it started shedding colonies in a hurry, from India to Israel. The government of Clement Attlee knew that it could no longer hold the line in Europe should a new menace arise.

Canada was extraordinarily close to both – deeply loyal to an empire whose flag we still flew back then – and now fully integrated into the U.S. military orbit since the 1940 Ogdensburg Treaty. If any country had an interest in deepening the special relationship between these two anglophone giants, it was Canada.

The first signs of a new menace arose not in Europe, but in Ottawa of all places. In September 1945, just weeks after the war ended, a cipher clerk at the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa defected with evidence of an extensive espionage network through Canada. It was so novel to hear that our wartime ally was spying us on such a scale that at first Igor Gouzenko couldn’t find anyone in the Canadian government to accept his defection. After two days of knocking on doors he finally convinced the RCMP to review his documents, only to find Prime Minister MacKenzie King willing to send him back to the Soviets to avoid upsetting our wartime ally. It took a disobedient deputy minister of external affairs to grant him asylum and start sounding the alarm bell to our allies.

Over the next two years relations with the USSR would deteriorate as tensions flared in Iran, Turkey and Germany, then administered jointly by the US, UK and France as well as the USSR. But public attitudes change slowly, and the newly-minted United Nations was very popular. Surely the growing disagreements could be worked out in the Security Council.

Canadian diplomats played a disproportionate role in the establishment of the UN system, drafting key documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Lester Pearson served as the first President of the General Assembly.

This talent for building institutions is one reason why the UK insisted in having Canada at the table when Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin first put the idea of a transatlantic security pact to the U.S. Canadian diplomats were the biggest champions of a broad and deep mandate for what would become NATO, constantly pressing other allies to go further in aligning political and economic objectives as well as military ones.

This was the other reason Bevin wanted Canada at the table. He knew our diplomats would propose a more ambitious degree of integration, and press more firmly than any others.

In those early weeks of negotiation, the U.S. was divided between those who wanted to move quickly and those that still sought to avoid “foreign entanglements.” Canada tipped the hand of the former by being the first country to publicly endorse a formal treaty. We then singled out the recalcitrant U.S. diplomats one by one, including the influential George Kennan, and wore them out arguing for a full treaty. When the French government dug in their heels on demands the U.S. could not meet, it was Canada’s ambassador to Paris who talked them down.

Canada never achieved the full extent of political and economic integration that it sought for NATO. Article 2, which outlines the political character of the alliance, was a significant dilution. Because Canadians pushed so
hard for the closest possible union, however, the resulting treaty produced an alliance more tightly aligned that anyone would have predicted just a year before.

A changing world order
Why am I going into such detail about Canada’s role in the formation of NATO? Because I think there are intriguing parallels between the late 1940s and the world order today.

I’ll name four: (A) a shifting global balance of power; (b) brazen behavior by states rising to challenge the rules-based international order; (c) simultaneous threats to liberal democracy at both the domestic as well as international levels; and (d) a fierce debate within democracies on whether sovereignty is best pursued by collaborating with or by keeping our distance from other democracies.

First, let’s look at the shifting balance of power. For much of the early 20th century, the UK and Germany had dominated international affairs. By 1945 the latter was defeated, and while the United Kingdom had prevailed it had exhausted its ability to project itself as a top military power. Our mutual allies in the war, the United States and the USSR, had filled the void created by the decline of the great powers of Western Europe.

In 2019, the U.S. is losing its predominance and Russia, while reduced compared to its former Soviet self, increasingly defies the U.S. where it pleases, from Syria to Venezuela. China is a more significant challenger to U.S. power. Its military power may lag behind, but it is on a path to overtake it in economic weight within twenty years. In soft power terms it may already be on a par with the U.S. The Beijing model seems more attractive to many Asian and African countries, and many would prefer to collaborate with Xi Jinping’s China than with Donald Trump’s America. Now, as then, the balance of power is shifting under our feet.

When power relations change suddenly, rising powers start pushing the limits, challenging norms established by previous powers. We’ve already seen how the Soviets engaged in espionage inside our countries to a scale not previously seen. In countries it dominated it did not hesitate to eliminate the free press, crush independent civil society or murder inconvenient politicians such as the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia.

In our day Russia has launched chemical weapons attacks on British soil, supported extremist parties within democratic states, and subjected countries that criticize it to disinformation campaigns designed to confuse and discourage our citizens. China, for its part, kidnaps ex-diplomats from countries which displease it, and subject them to interrogation methods many consider to be a violation of the Vienna Convention on treatment of diplomats. Now, as then, norms that used to govern international behaviour are being discarded as the newly powerful stretch their wings.

Third, liberal democracy is facing a determined challenge both at home and abroad. Back then, political parties directed from Moscow grew in influence inside our nations, supported by newspapers that took their editorial line from similar quarters. In 1946 it looked quite likely that Greece would fall into the Soviet orbit, and in France and Italy parties deeply hostile to democracy were on the march, winning 26 and 19 percent of the vote in each respective country.

For there were real divisions within our countries that the Soviets could work with. Liberal democracy had its critics in the 1940s, and they had a point. Misguided economic policies had exacerbated a terrible economic crisis, generating profound inequality and social injustice. Canadians joined many other established democracies in flirting with ideologies of the far left just as they had with the far right before the war. There were two MPs representing the communist party in Parliament, one of which was eventually found to be collaborating with the Soviet government.

Today, democratic parties are challenged by unprecedented interest in parties of the far right and the far left. The patience of many voters in our democratic processes is wearing thin. For citizens exasperated by those on the other side of the political divide, victory over other parties begins to take precedence over preserving the institutions those parties are competing for. Hostile foreign powers happily exploit these growing divisions in our society. Russia supported the “Leave” side in the Brexit referendum, the candidacy of
Trump in the U.S. and various parties on the extreme ends of the European political spectrum.

The ostensible goal is to polarize the population and exacerbate the frustration that voters have with their fellow citizens. Now, as then, liberal democracy faces challenges on the domestic as well as the international level.

Fourth, think about the debates North American and Western European countries had about sovereignty in the 1940s. I’ve mentioned the isolationist tradition in the U.S. before the war. Many Americans were proud of their nation’s independence of action and disdainful of alliances that would draw it into the fights of the bellicose Europeans. Furthermore, the U.S. Constitution assigned the power to wage war to Congress, not the President. Asking the U.S. to automatically come to the defence of another democracy must be unconstitutional since it would override the prerogatives of Congress. For many in the U.S., being sovereign meant not entering into binding treaties.

For its part, France objected to an overly confrontational approach to the USSR, in part because the Moscow-friendly Communist Party enjoyed high levels of support through France and in part because France saw itself as a potential intermediary between the U.S. and the USSR. For many in France, sovereignty meant preserving total freedom of action in strategic matters.

In 2019, as citizens feel less assured that their countries retain any real power in the face of growing global threats, the instinct to invoke sovereignty more and more loudly leads some countries to take rash and self-defeating measures. Like jettisoning the partnerships that allow them genuine control in an increasingly global economy. The UK is the most extreme example of this, a small majority of its citizens willing to reduce the influence over the country’s principal trading partners under the guise of “taking back control.” But we see this confusion over sovereignty in the words of a President who claims that the alliances and institutions that the U.S. created to amplify its own power now constrain it.

Aligning liberal democracies back then

I also invoke the memory of the 1940s to show that dramatic change is possible in a short period of time.

When the Gouzenko affair broke in early 1946, no one imagined that the world’s democracies would respond to the growing Soviet threat by building a new alliance.

Three years of remarkable diplomacy overcame each of the objections to greater cooperation. Truman cajoled Congress into accepting treaty obligations that would constrain that body’s constitutional prerogatives. Through his Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and then NATO, America did a 180 degree turn in its foreign policy traditions, shedding isolationism for the most robust commitment to global engagement imaginable. In return Western European countries and Canada relinquished final authority over their war-making capabilities to the alliance. Even France went along, until Charles de Gaulle suspended France’s participation in the command structure and kicked NATO out of Paris.

In signing the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4, 1949, 12 liberal democracies committed themselves to the defence of one another. They subordinated their sovereignty to the goal of maximizing the power they would yield together.

By pooling our sovereignty with other democracies, we arguably created the greatest power that has ever been assembled. NATO stood tall at the frontlines of the Cold War and wore down the opposing Warsaw Pact. With NATO armies massed on the western side of the Iron Curtain for decades, the Soviet Union decided that stalemate was preferable to a new world war.

The solidarity that drove this pooling of sovereignty required a new narrative about what united these countries who had spent so many centuries at war with one another. The countries that made up NATO had far deeper history of conflict than on collaboration. Thus was born the concept of the “the West” as a single entity – the idea that there was some kind of unity to a
A disparate set of countries that extended from the Elbe all the way to the Pacific Ocean, from Berlin all the way to British Columbia. There had not been any single military formation of any kind across Europe since the Roman Empire, but nostalgia for a “West” that included the defeated Germans as well as the victorious Brits, the Free French and others soon made our alliance seem predestined. The reality is that this alliance had been highly unlikely before the myth of a united “West” became reality in 1949.

**Aligning liberal democracies today**

To be sure, 2019 is not 1948. To name but a few differences, the U.S. is falling in the global balance of power, not rising. Liberal democracies are not confined to Western Europe and North America, but spread out across six continents. There is no single ideological rival challenging democracy at home and abroad, but two: authoritarian China and populist, nationalist Russia.

But the similarities seem more relevant than the differences. Then as now, liberal democracies faced a sudden and dangerous new challenge, both at home and abroad. Will we be up to the challenge of combining our power to preserve our interests in today's more dangerous world order?

I believe we can, and I sense a willingness on the part of Canada to play its traditional role.

Our foreign minister, Chrystia Freeland, told the House of Commons in June 2017 that “we can and must play an active role in the preservation and strengthening of the global order from which we have benefited so greatly. Doing so is in our interest, because our own open society is most secure in a world of open societies. And it is under threat in a world where open societies are under threat.”

The Leader of the Opposition, Andrew Scheer, told a Montreal audience in May 2019 that “a new era of great power rivalry is upon us…. On one side are the free democracies…. And on the other, the imperialist, despotic, and corrupt regimes that seek to destabilize the rules-based international order. Canada must always side with those who value freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.”

The alliance that became NATO began with an ambitious dream, one that never materialized. Ernest Bevin and Lester Pearson had imagined a federation of democracies from the Elbe to the Pacific Ocean.

I do not have a single new alliance or institution to recommend. But I believe that if we apply the same urgency that our forebears did in the 1940s, we can find a way to combine the power of the world’s democracies into a new and effective force for good.

In the best tradition of a Canada that seeks to unite democracies around a single purpose, let me propose an approach that might respond to the dangers present in the world order emerging today.

The shift in the global balance of power today is not so much from the U.S. to China as it is a gradual dispersion of power more generally. As Moises Naim points out in the End of Power, institutions from the state to companies to religious organizations no longer hold the sway they once did. It is this loss of power that drives some political actors to turn back the clock on international cooperation in a misguided effort to “win back” a sense of sovereignty they enjoyed in the past.

I would argue that sovereignty is the right concept to start with. But we increase our power over own lives not by embracing competition with allies and trading partners. We increase our sovereignty by acquiring influence over our economy and our society at the level at both increasingly operate: globally. That requires banding together with the largest number of countries to pool our common efforts to exercise that influence.

Our overarching goal should be to expand our sovereignty by banding together. But because we are

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3https://myvisionforcanada.ca/foreignpolicy/
democracies, we should be expanding popular sovereignty – pooling as much power together and then placing it at the disposal of our citizens.

Cajoling democracies to align more closely won’t be easy, particularly with a unilateralist president in power in Washington DC. But the issues requiring greater unity among democracies proliferate daily. Now that technology dominates our lives, could liberal democracies adopt a common approach to the implementation of the 5G network so that the rights of individual citizens are protected no matter in which democracy they live? Could we present a common front when managing relations with an increasingly aggressive China across other policy areas? Could we monitor foreign interference in electoral processes in another’s countries to minimize the confusion and division that Russia seeks to sow?

These are the practical problems a pragmatic power like Canada could help solve through its convening power, demonstrating utility beyond our modest size.

Building any new alliance begins with framing interests in common. The shared goal of expanding popular sovereignty provides a basis for such a frame. If power requires joining forces, then we should maximize the amount of power we can amass together, then place it at the service of voters.

To do so we should integrate our security and military forces as much as possible. We should strive to maximize social and economic outcomes through the kind of integration that drove dramatic improvements in the quality of life in post-war Europe and North America. We could consider regulatory alignment to maximize the trade and investment flows that drive high growth.

Once common interests are defined, we can build institutions to uphold them. Coordination at the political level could occur through regular summits between leaders. An apparatus at the officials’ level blocked and policed. The current question policymakers are struggling with is whether disinformation and fake news qualify as harmful content that needs to be regulated.

Given our shared commitment to popular sovereignty we could also explore cooperation between the domestic institutions that preserve citizen rights.

Members of this alliance should help one another uphold democratic values and traditions. We have an interest not only in the power we build together but in ensuring that the public benefits from that power.

We could monitor one another’s elections to preserve their integrity. Interchanges and joint agendas could be explored by Parliaments, political parties, civil society organizations could adopt similar standards of data privacy and security to protect rights online.

**Conclusion**

This new solidarity between democracies might look the North Atlantic Community that Canadian diplomats once proposed during the negotiations that created NATO. This time the community would not be limited to North America and Western Europe, but to all continents where liberal democracy thrives.

John Holmes called Canada a middle power. I don’t think the term applies anymore, since we no longer live in a Cold War where we derive strength through loyalty to one superpower, and generate useful solutions to countering the influence of the other.

But I do think that the broader role Canada played as a uniter of democracies remains relevant and available to us today. We see this role playing out yet again in the face of the Venezuelan crisis. Canada’s principal response has been to unite the democracies of Latin America in a new multilateral body, the Lima Group. That’s because our natural home is with the world’s democracies. Even when these democracies disagree with one or another, we find ways to bring them together.

And I believe that role could enjoy support from both liberals and conservatives. Canadians of all stripes embrace democracy. Some like certain democracies better than others. But that drive to bring partners together, to smooth out the differences and find pragmatic solutions that unite us, that’s quintessentially Canadian.

Building a new alliance that extends beyond the West will prove challenging. But that’s the kind of challenge Canada has excelled at in the past. It’s time to unite the world’s democracies once again.
Bibliography

Holmes, John “Canada as a Middle Power” in the Centennial Review, Vol 10 (4), 1066, p. 436.2


About the CIC

The Canadian International Council (CIC) is Canada's foreign relations council. It is an independent, non-partisan membership organization and think tank dedicated to advancing constructive dialogue on Canada's place in the world and providing an incubator for innovative ideas on how to address the world’s most pressing problems.

The non-profit CIC integrates the voices of a diverse and multidisciplinary group of societal actors from academia, business, civil society, government and the media, and endeavours to inform and develop the capacity of the country’s next generation of foreign policy leaders.

One of Canada’s oldest and most respected think tanks, the CIC is not only dedicated to nurturing dialogue on Canadian foreign policy domestically, but also in projecting a Canadian perspective on the international stage. In our rapidly changing world, this effort to promote greater understanding and foster meaningful debate on critical challenges is more important than ever.