Canada and the argument for soft powers to fight the modern battle and establish the new international order

By Claire Wählen

The world seems poised to slip into another cold war and has for some time now; Russian aggression is on the rise as surely as American influence is struggling; the European Union is facing its greatest existential threat with Brexit still to be established and the Middle East so disjointed that it's hard to paint any swath of it with the same brush given that some countries are on the economic upturn, some countries are nearly emptied of citizens after years of devastating civil war which means other countries are filled beyond capacity with refugees and then of course there are a few at war with each other; and then there's Canada. Canada's reliance on diplomatic solutions has been the hallmark of its foreign policy since the end of WWII, when Canada served a disproportionately large role in defining the postwar world order. The world needs a strong middle power like Canada to step up again as international systems are facing stagnation and the threat of extinction amid a rising tide of fascist populism across the globe. With traditionally strong institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations being treated as threats by pseudo-conservative factions unwilling to do the heavy lifting to adapt these institutions to meet our modern day's needs, a revitalization of the global structures is required but without falling for concessions to those who challenge the current systems on the basis of trumped up politics of fear and nationalist sentiment. Canada can and should endeavor to rise to that challenge because even on its worst day, an international order that prioritizes human rights and collective success is better than any alternative.

In the past century, Canada has had bursts of truly inspired success as a middle power, in particular under Lester B. Pearson and Lloyd Axworthy. The former, who would receive the Nobel Peace Prize and eventually take on the role of Prime Minister in Canada, was considered Canada's foremost diplomat in the postwar rebuilding effort and is widely credited for the creation of peacekeeping. To his credit as a diplomat, foreign minister and eventually prime minister, Pearson

led the implementation of a national pension plan, a universal Medicare system, unified the Canadian armed forces, represented Canada in the creation of NATO, and fought to install the flag Canada flies today. His predecessor by some forty years later, Lloyd Axworthy is celebrated for championing the Responsibility to Protect doctrine at the United Nations and for his leadership on banning anti-personnel landmines – for which he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize but did not win, although the anti-landmine movement at-large did receive the prestigious award. He has also had no issue in speaking truth to power, rebuking the United States in 2000 for their heavy handed actions against the people of Iraq, citing a humanitarian explanation 'to avoid making ordinary citizens pay for the actions of their leaders' and for the lack of alternative options to deter the regime from additional aggression. Canada's foreign policy representation has been tepid in the decades since – the decision not to participate in the Iraq war split supporters who often frame the success of Canada's foreign policy on its relationship with the United States but ultimately eked out a small measure of success considering the initial war was based on false intel and heightened emotions following 9/11 and the region continues to require international involvement – a role which Canada has taken on personally earlier this year when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Canadian leadership would begin training instructors in the region to establish a sustained security force. While Canada has maintained a seat at the international table, there have been few particularly strong impressions on the international stage and the need has ramped up accordingly. With counter powers challenging the need for international institutions, it is up to those who would champion them to help redesign and redefine them as we had done in the past, responding to the challenges of the day with a focus always to helping secure the future.

Nearly every international institution is in need of an intervention, either because they actually do or are being targeted by association: the challenge then, for Canada and other soft powers who would protect the principles of global governance while retooling it for the modern day, is both making those necessary changes and ensuring these institutions are prepared for changes when their turn comes. This must be done without sacrificing soft power to appease the more hawkish factions but also without discrediting the importance of readiness and strength for when the situation calls for it. Robert Kagan, a prominent commentator on American foreign policy who has served directly under Republican and Democratic presidents and is currently with the Brookings

Institute, dedicated one of his earlier books to the difference in approach to global politics between the United States and Europe. *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the new world order* was published in 2003 but speaks to the inherent ideological differences in approach by the two superpowers and why this is relevant to our topic at hand is the vastly different opinion he describes both of having on soft power:

> "If Europe's strategic culture today places less value on hard power and military strength and more value on such soft-power tools as economics and trade, isn't it partly because Europe is militarily weak and economically strong? Americans are quicker to acknowledge the existence of threats, even to perceive them where others may not see any, because they can conceive of doing something to meet those threats. The differing threat perceptions in the United States and Europe are not just matters of psychology, however. They are also grounded in a practical reality that is another product of the disparity of power and the structure of the present international order."

So what of Canada then? As the United States closest ally by virtue of proximity and its historical preference for soft power, as a founding member of NATO and as the de facto creator of peacekeepers, Canada is somewhere in the middle. Canada is uniquely poised to mediate and facilitate the sometimes terse relations between these two differing schools of thought and by serving as the middle power between these two super powers, the critical axis of global security that spans the transatlantic is maintained. Canada, in the development of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, had to reconcile the importance of human life without devaluing the role of sovereignty. Axworthy addresses the difficulty of getting the 2001 United Nations report *Responsibility to Protect* produced and thanks allies including the recently deceased Kofi Annan, "a consummate diplomat well schooled in the 'get-along philosophy' of the UN but also a man of conviction and courage, not afraid to speak out" in his book *Navigating a New World: Canada's Global Future*. It was this support behind Canadian sponsorship that ultimately led to a "unique exercise in global brainstorming" and ultimately a rethinking of the role of sovereignty, "not a prerogative but a responsibility" and handled the issue in such a way that conservative and liberals alike were found to support it. This sort of responsible leadership is needed to push us laterally beyond our current comfort zone around unpopular issues and is what will revitalized these important institutions as they age into a new era.

As referenced above, we will explore two institutions in the context of needing fresh initiative from a traditional soft power like Canada: NATO and the UN. Canada is one of twelve nations that founded NATO almost 70 years and Canada has never left the leadership table; how it has applied that leadership though has changed as Canada and other nations have been more creative with their contributions to the alliance. It has been a major sticking point for American president Donald Trump that more than half of the alliance comes in just under the two per cent target of each nation's gross domestic product (GDP) being applied to defence spending – a figure reaffirmed in 2006 at the Riga Summit – that as a result it has become one of the few policy points common citizens recognize from NATO; this despite only two nations having met the criteria in 2014 and in only four years the number has jumped to eight with more than half expected to meet the target by 2024. Germany, who took the heavy brunt of Trump's ire at the recent NATO Summit in Brussels has dedicated just over one per cent of their GDP to defence but it is worth noting that they also dedicate approximately three per cent broadly to research and development. While the two per cent goal is an ambitious one that each nation has agreed to despite so few being within range of it, it must be achieved in tandem with goals that use each individual nations skillset to the utmost. Canada, in the midst of Trump's alliance wide criticisms, has taken on leadership in a new NATO mission in Iraq and expanded its current mission in Latvia, all the while boosting general defence funding by some 32$ billion per year until 2024, according to the current government's priorities. Simply throwing money at the problem is not enough and that has become increasingly apparent as hybrid warfare evolves to include a new frontier in the information age; digital warfare, an area in which Russia has had too much experience, demands flexible and innovative response and how we meet that demand will demonstrate both the ability and need for change across NATO's various structures.

The United Nations is a much more convoluted issue but Canada has demonstrated that progress can be made at a core level – the concept of Responsibility to Protect, much as some may disagree with the notion, challenged our fundamental understanding of the world's responsibility to humanity because a sovereigns power is contingent on protecting its people and is forfeit if their citizenry faces undue danger. After Rwanda, we promised *never again* and this had been the effort of the day to meet that promise. The realities in Syria, Palestine and Libya to name only a few

contemporary international relations nightmares prove we have an undeniably long way to go. The challenge is compounded in today's political climate where increasingly nationalist governments across the globe are winning elections and claiming legitimacy, and it certainly doesn't help when the United Nations is by contrast increasingly symbolic versus actionable. To consider the United States influence on the current world order is to look at both the actions and inactions of at least the past two presidents, Presidents George W. Bush in Iraq and Afghanistan and Barack Obama in Libya and Syria. Canada played a major contributor to post-WWII international policy but it cannot be denied that the United States was the heaviest influence on post-9//11 policy and their successes and failures in the pursuit of a War on Terrorism. Canada was absolutely involved in the days and years after but the visible influence is much murkier than Pearson's. It was for a lack of positively used soft power that Syria and Libya have found themselves in the conditions they are in now, conditions which can only devolve further as the current American administration endeavors to distance itself from the United Nations financially and symbolically, in particular through disassociation with the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC). An overly simplistic response to the current reality is that if we want these agencies to achieve something, we need to give them a stronger mandate and some power to achieve these goals. The United States leaving the UNHRC was a symbolic blow but it hardly shook the foundations, so the argument stands that the agency – and quite a few like it within the United Nations – needs to address the gap between what they are currently achieving, what they reasonably could and what they idealistically would achieve and within these discussions middle power nations like Canada can help to chart a way forward as we have in the past as the peace brokers and fixers.

Canada has demonstrated something of a proclivity and a capacity to effect change on a global scale for the betterment of all people, and it's time for the nation known for mediation to again bring about the leaders of the world and solve the problem facing the international order: how to effectively update institutions in need of change and demonstrate that change can and will come to institutions when the needs arise. Nothing short of both goals will assuage the concerns of those bought in by the nationalist wave cropping up across the globe, which would rather shutter these venerable intuitions that attempt to retool them to contemporary needs. Despite efforts to dismantle or discredit global institiutions from the EU to NATO to the many branches of the UN and the

uncertainty that comes in the wake of Donald Trump – none of these institutions are so long gone that they cannot be redeemed. A world without measures for collective success, protections for people and for progress, and ensured mutual defence is not one worth considering. The goal of a truly multicultural, protected world is hard to reach and was perhaps impractically sold following the Second World War but to admit defeat and walk away would be the greatest shame of humanity when the possibility of greater efforts always lies ahead if only we push on smarter rather than harder. It will thus be the soft powers of the world, from nations to individuals, who will chart the course forward – with some errors but hopefully with enough self-awareness not to be beholden to those mistakes – and a new international order will come about.

BIO: Claire Wählen is the program director for NATO's 70th anniversary celebrations in Canada through the NATO Association of Canada, as well as a junior research fellow. She holds a Bachelor in Journalism (Honours) with a double honour in Political Science from the University of King's College and Dalhousie University respectively. She has previously worked with iPolitics.ca as a parliamentary reporter, focused on national and digital security policy, and has also written about Canada's policies on torture, surveillance, refugee security, and cyber defence. She intends to apply to do her master's degree in international relations in the winter, and is interested in exploring the future of global governance through international organizations.