



IN-DEPTH

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Revisiting Canada-Russia Relations: A New Paradigm for a Multipolar World

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Introduction

Canada's reaction to the 2013-14 Ukraine crisis during Stephen Harper's premiership stood out as among the sternest in the Western community. Although diplomatic ties were not formally severed, the level of engagement between Ottawa and Moscow has been severely curtailed. Apart from a limited and brief overture following the 2015 federal election under Stéphane Dion's tenure as foreign affairs minister, the relationship has remained in a deep freeze ever since.

The last Canadian prime minister to hold a bilateral summit with the president of Russia (rather than a meeting on the sidelines of a multilateral summit) was Paul Martin. In other words, more than a decade and a half has passed without high-level engagement between Canada and a neighbouring great power that it abuts in three theatres: in the Euro-Atlantic region, where Russia remains the most militarily powerful actor besides the United States; in the Arctic, where Canada and Russia share the overwhelming majority of the coastline; and in the Pacific, which is becoming increasingly central to global geopolitics.

Despite increasing tensions, other G7 leaders have not severed dialogue with Moscow, which is necessary to manage security challenges and maintain strategic stability. Perhaps not coincidentally, other G7 countries have also continued to win a seat on the UN Security Council with regularity. Canada does play a leading role in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Eastern Europe and has convened the Ottawa Group to propose reforms to the World Trade Organization. But the future of a shifting and uncertain global order will not be exclusively decided in multilateral and allied contexts.

Ottawa's moribund relationship with Moscow forms only one part of Canada's increasingly

troubled foreign policy outlook. Canada's growing dependence on the United States since the 9/11 attacks has [fostered](#) a foreign policy overly focused on values rather than interests and often directed at a domestic rather than an international audience. This has made Canada appear unserious in many respects, damaging its ability to contribute to global multilateralism at the highest levels. Ottawa's strained relations with several leading capitals across the Eurasian landmass—including Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi—only threatens to enhance its relationship of dependence on Washington. Joe Biden's election as president of the United States has also rendered a closer Canada-US relationship more politically palatable.

To reverse this trend and chart a more strategically autonomous path fit for an increasingly multipolar world, Canada must develop a more comprehensive mental map for navigating its ties with other leading powers. This will prove extremely challenging under current circumstances, given the constraints associated with Washington's adversarial relations with Moscow and Beijing. Yet upon closer examination, Canada and Russia possess certain strategic imperatives that are in many ways aligned. A tripartite strategic concept that posits separate paradigms for the Canada-Russia relationship in Europe, Asia, and the Arctic could bear significant fruit. And while Canada's record of pursuing multilateral cooperation in the Circumpolar North is well established, there exists space for a collaborative approach to Canada-Russia relations in the Asian context as well.

Canada in the emerging multi-order world

The prevailing narrative in Western policy circles is that the United States and its allies birthed a "liberal international order" after World War II, which, while limited to the Western bloc during



the Cold War, [expanded](#) after the Soviet Union's collapse to reach global scope. Whether this monolithic and Western-centric conception of international order was ever an accurate description of world affairs remains an open question. Regardless, as Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan [argue](#), such an order can no longer anchor global stability in an increasingly multipolar and ideologically diverse world.

Yet the alternative to an international order rooted in Western hegemony is not necessarily a counter-hegemonic bloc centred on the Sino-Russian entente. China has benefited significantly from existing international conditions which have allowed it to mount an impressive economic rise. Russia, for its part, [challenges](#) perceived instances of Western overreach but does not oppose established global norms and institutions in their entirety. A likely outcome of today's great power rivalry is therefore not a new monolithic order but rather the advent of a "[multi-order world](#)".

One way to imagine a multi-order world is along [thematic lines](#), with separate orders governing issues such as trade, arms control, and human rights. Another is along geographic lines, in which different regions implicitly become subject to different norms and patterns of interaction between states. This would not necessarily amount to a "world of regions", given the integrated nature of the global economy, the presence of international law, and the persistence of global challenges such as pandemics and climate change. However, it would acknowledge that the institutions and mechanisms necessary for order-building in Asia may differ from those exhibited in the Euro-Atlantic theatre.

Canada's Euro-Atlantic posture remains firmly entrenched in NATO, which in recent years has reembraced its founding mission of deterring Russia. During a Cold War era centred on the Iron

Curtain, as well as in the initial post-Cold War decades dominated by a triumphant West, membership in NATO gave Canada a "seat at the table" alongside other leading powers such as the US, the UK, and France. Yet as global power shifts eastward, Canada must recognize that Asia-Pacific geopolitics will be structured differently than the Euro-Atlantic dynamics to which it has grown accustomed. This comes with implications for how Canada should approach relations with regional actors.

No monolithic bloc or "Asian NATO" has [emerged](#) to contain China despite Beijing's growing assertiveness in recent years, even if security cooperation has increased between the US and select partners such as the Quad. Trade with China remains a crucial component of economic growth for several US allies. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) [exists](#) partly to constrain the effect of great power competition—its members reject the notion of having to choose between Washington and Beijing. As such, although US-China competition threatens to produce a dangerous bipolar standoff over the short and medium terms, the long-term trend in Asia [remains](#) toward some form of multipolarity as India and Southeast Asia continue their economic ascent. Unlike the Euro-Atlantic theatre, which features a bipolar Russo-American dispute over the norms that should govern pan-European security, a multipolar Asian order is less conducive to a dynamic of "choosing sides". Canada will therefore need to cultivate relations with a variety of actors in Asia to pursue its regional interests effectively.

The rise of Asia to global prominence has coincided with the erosion of the three major pillars of Canada's postwar foreign policy: continentalism, multilateralism, and Atlanticism. Shifts in how the US interprets its economic and geopolitical in-



terests imply that a special relationship with the US can no longer be taken for granted. Canada has failed to win a seat on the UN Security Council for two decades, even as multilateralism itself has come under strain in a world framed by great power rivalry. And Atlanticism alone can no longer guarantee Canadian status in a world where power is increasingly shifting east.

Canada is poorly prepared for this new reality. If one imagines a map with Canada at the centre, Canadian foreign policy is framed by four **vectors**, one for each of the four cardinal directions. The southward and eastward vectors—continentalism and Atlanticism—are the most developed in principle and in practice, yet the former's future is no longer assured while the latter is decreasing in relative importance. And while Ottawa remains materially underinvested and plagued by inhospitable geography in its northward vector—the Arctic—Canadian national identity is intuitively conscious of the country's status as a “northern nation”. In this sense, Canada's westward vector—Asia—remains the most underdeveloped, both psychologically and empirically.

Given the absence of an Asian NATO, simply hitching a wagon to the United States does not present a reliable path for increasing Canada's regional clout. This is especially true given that the deepening standoff between China and the US threatens the rules-based character of regional order rooted in open multilateralism and trade, on which Canada relies to assert itself as a sovereign actor. Canada's Asian strategy must therefore include deeper dialogue and selective cooperation with a plethora of regional actors. Paradoxically, despite the adversarial setting of the Russo-Canadian relationship in the Euro-Atlantic theatre, Russia could embody one such country for Canada to engage in the Asian context.

Canada and Russia: Common strategic interests

On a superficial level, Canada and Russia possess certain obvious similarities. Both countries exhibit sprawling geographies and together account for the large majority of the Arctic coastline. Both are situated at the northern end of their respective hemispheres and have made some form of hemispheric integration a key pillar of their international strategy—NAFTA/USMCA for Canada and the fledgling “**Greater Eurasia**” vision in the case of Russia. Ottawa and Moscow have also in recent years sought to pursue multi-vectored foreign policies, with Canada touting the benefits of trade diversification and Russia stressing its “pivot to the east” as a counterweight to overdependence on Europe.

Both countries harbour a mixed inferiority-superiority complex toward their more powerful or developed neighbour. Canada contents itself with the knowledge that it is a more peaceful and progressive society—“kinder and gentler”—than the US, but at the same time remains wary of the excesses of U.S. power and pre-eminence. Similarly, for centuries Russia has touted the superiority of its own values when compared with the “degeneracy” of the liberal and cosmopolitan West, while at the same time hoping to “catch up” with Europe's economic and technological advancement. Both also view having a “seat at the table” as a means of compensating for their limited or declining power: Russia as part of a great power consortium at the global level; Canada through NATO where it can sit alongside leading Western states.

Canada and Russia also both face a dilemma situated at the intersection of geography and national identity. Canadians have a strong sense of North Americanness but also a firm belief that they are different from Americans. Russia has been an integral part of European politics and society for



centuries but finds itself situated on the continent's periphery—more of a multiethnic empire than an ordinary European nation-state. Russia's bicontinental geography buttresses its sense of great power status and [special responsibility](#) to uphold global order. Meanwhile, Canada's regular attempts to [transcend](#) the limits of its remote geography through lofty diplomatic and security discourses relate to its very status as an independent and substantive player on the world stage.

However, the most important similarities between Canada and Russia lie at the strategic level, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Ottawa and Moscow would [prefer](#) to avoid a zero-sum standoff between the US and China. Sino-American rivalry has damaged Ottawa's efforts to pursue trade diversification, with the Trump administration having persuaded Canada to agree to a [clause](#) during the NAFTA renegotiation signaling a common front in Washington's geo-economic dispute with Beijing. And although the material factors underpinning Russia's status as a great power—a large population, a hefty nuclear arsenal, a skilled diplomatic corps, abundant natural resources, and a sprawling geography abutting several strategically important regions—do not depend on the state of Sino-American relations, a protracted US-China confrontation that encompasses much of global geopolitics threatens to sideline Moscow in relative terms.

Perhaps even more importantly, the foreign policies of Canada and Russia have already begun to exhibit a tendency toward decoupling their Asian and European vectors. In other words, the seeds of the multi-order world have already begun to be planted. The question now concerns whether decision-makers in Ottawa and Moscow can recognize this commonality and build on it to foster mutually beneficial dialogue and—over the longer term—cooperation.

In the Euro-Atlantic region, Ottawa and Moscow have an adversarial relationship. Although the Russian leadership has placed significant emphasis on the Eurasian/Asian vector of its foreign policy in recent years, Russia's core security interests still lie in Europe, with most of its population residing west of the Ural Mountains. Given the importance of the forum that NATO provides for Canada to assert its status and (admittedly outdated) identity as a “middle power”, Canada-Russia relations in Europe are structurally constrained by the NATO-Russia rivalry.

However, the Pacific theatre exhibits a different set of dynamics. In contrast with its US-aligned posture in Europe, Canada has tried—with difficulty—to tread a fine line in its relationship with China despite the worsening relationship between Washington and Beijing. Canada has also not rushed to align itself with the US-backed Quad and has yet to affiliate itself with any “Indo-Pacific” scheme whose purpose is partly [aimed](#) at hedging against the implications of China's rise.

A similar phenomenon exists in Russian foreign policy. In recent years, Moscow's relationship with Western capitals has been plagued by rivalry, ranging from the conflict over Ukraine to allegations of election interference and disinformation. Russia remains Europe's most powerful actor even as it continues to be excluded from the continent's core political and security institutions—NATO and the EU. The dynamic of confrontation is therefore structural and likely to remain entrenched.

Given its ongoing rivalry with Washington, Russia is able to use its deepening partnership with China to cause strategic [headaches](#) for the US, such as through Chinese participation in the Vostok-2018 military exercise or Sino-Russian cooperation on missile launch detection. That said, the Asian vector of Russian foreign policy is not entirely directed



at balancing against the United States. Russia has managed to bring historic rivals India and Pakistan together as full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an intergovernmental body aimed at fostering cooperation on security and other key issues in Eurasia. Given the polarizing image of both China and the U.S. in South Asia, Russia finds itself with the unique opportunity to play the role of helpful fixer in that region. As such, Russia endeavoured to [defuse](#) tensions during border clashes between China and India in mid-2020 and also offered to [mediate](#) the U.S.-North Korea standoff early in the Trump administration.

Canada in Asia: Avoiding the logic of confrontation

As Canada's relationship with China has deteriorated sharply in recent years, calls have proliferated for Ottawa to adopt a tougher approach toward Beijing and align its regional efforts more closely with "like-minded" countries—an oft-cited but relatively vague term. But Canada faces a structural challenge in its foreign policy when it comes to the Pacific theatre. On the one hand, Canada needs to preserve good relations with its American neighbour. On the other hand, the U.S.-China rivalry is a driving factor of the erosion of the international conditions that have been vital to Canadian security, prosperity, and independence for decades. Canada can only transcend this dilemma by adopting a posture that incorporates an element of strategic promiscuity.

Issues pertaining to European security are easily perceived as zero-sum: If the cost of including Russia in Europe's security architecture as an "equal" great power supposedly amounts to limiting the sovereignty of smaller neighbouring states, then the path to a cooperative relationship inevitably becomes fraught. By contrast, while still under-

developed given the country's historic orientation toward Europe, Russia's Asian foreign policy vector reflects less combative and more positive-sum dynamics. Moreover, the distribution of power and resources in Asia is inherently less conducive to a protracted bipolar standoff, which creates potential for a plethora of overlapping partnerships in the region.

Canada has an interest in preserving the multipolar structure of the Pacific theatre to hedge against the possible excesses of Sino-American competition. Ottawa should therefore welcome the further development of Russia's engagement with Asia, which would further strengthen the multipolar character of the region. A more sustained and confident Russian pivot toward Asia could also prove beneficial for the Euro-Atlantic theatre, allowing for a new equilibrium to be reached over the long term as Moscow rebalances its foreign policy priorities.

While maintaining alignment with NATO on questions of Euro-Atlantic security, Ottawa could entrench a posture toward Asian affairs that, while not rooted in neutrality, nonetheless privileges problem-solving and diplomacy over actions that encourage deeper rivalry. Given Canada's relatively low military and strategic investment in Asia to date, such an approach would be better suited to Canada's existing capabilities and presents a more reliable path for enhancing Ottawa's image in the region. While the continentalist and Atlanticist dimensions of Canada's security strategy centre in large part on military engagements by way of NORAD and NATO, the Asian vector lends itself more to a diplomacy-first strategy.

Given the region's multipolar character, it is in Asia where an engaged Canada has the potential to become a more strategically conscious and less uniquely normative actor. Ottawa distinguished itself from Washington during the bipolar Cold



War through contributions to the realm of norms and multilateralism. While these will doubtless remain important—albeit less reliable—pillars of Canadian foreign policy, only by engaging with questions of strategy and polarity can Canada emerge from its neighbour’s shadow in a multipolar Asian century. The Canadian and American economies remain tightly integrated, Washington will continue to view the security of North America as synonymous with its own irrespective of Canada’s desire for sovereignty, and Canada will never be able to pose a serious military or strategic threat to the United States. Ottawa therefore has the leverage and the flexibility to pursue a more promiscuous foreign policy—carefully—if it so desires.

A basis therefore exists for a Canadian foreign policy that explicitly posits separate paradigms for engagement and order-building in different regions of the globe. In this context, Ottawa can compartmentalize elements of its Europe-related disputes with Moscow and pursue a mutually beneficial bilateral dialogue aimed at exploring both countries’ shared interests in the Asian theatre. This dialogue will instantiate a standing mechanism through which both countries can enhance their regional profile and contribute to order-building discussions in Asia.

Conclusion

Ottawa will only be able to play a substantive role in shaping Asia-Pacific norms if it maintains an open posture, given its meagre regional profile to date. Rushing to “pick sides” will immediately curtail Canada’s prospects for regional engagement and reduce it to third-tier status, behind the great powers and behind other states that are more seriously invested in Asian regional security. The strategic framework guiding Canada’s overall posture in Asia must be comprehensive and transcend existing disputes with individual countries.

Ottawa’s strategic dialogue with Moscow could begin with efforts to identify elements of commonality in both countries’ respective visions for development and stability in Asia. Given Canada’s interest in deepening its economic relations with Asia, this could include exploring how Russia envisions the role of its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in the region’s trading architecture and whether it could be incorporated into any future efforts to harmonize existing regional trade blocs, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPT-PP) and the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Exploring opportunities for Canadian companies and representatives to strengthen federalism and economic development in Russia’s Far East represents another potential shared strategic interest, as this would further solidify Asia’s multipolar distribution of power.

Bordering three of Canada’s four cardinal vectors, Russia will present strategic challenges—and opportunities—for Canada regardless of who sits in the Kremlin. But it is precisely its quasi-ubiquity that makes Russia the perfect candidate with which Canada can explore methods of disaggregating those vectors to prepare for the coming multi-order world. Canada already has some experience in this department, having made efforts in past decades to insulate Arctic affairs from geopolitical disputes in other theatres. In an increasingly decentred world, only by embracing the distinctiveness of each vector can Canada compensate for its geographic isolation, increase its global influence, and weave divergent regional approaches into a coherent strategic whole.

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