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Toward a Canadian Grand Strategy of Restraint

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Introduction

It is widely believed within the Canadian foreign policy establishment that Canada is, and ought to remain, an influential “middle power.” According to this narrative, since the Second World War, Canada has been able to exercise outsized influence on international affairs by acting as a “helpful fixer” – that is, by mobilizing its soft power resources, not only to help stabilize the Cold War and post-Cold War international orders, but to advance a **broad-er moral or values-based agenda** as well.

Also according to this narrative, middle power diplomacy has served Canadian interests well: it has allowed Ottawa to “punch above its weight”, not only making the country safer and more prosperous, but also reinforcing Canada’s distinctive identity as an independent player with a truly consequential role to play on the world stage. All this being the case, or so the narrative would have it, for now and the foreseeable future there is simply no reason to abandon the country’s traditional grand strategy of middle power internationalism.

In recent years, another narrative has begun to take hold on the margins of that same foreign policy establishment, which should be understood as “**neo-middle power internationalism.**” According to this narrative, the onset of multipolar great power competition in recent years has profoundly changed how the middle power game is played.

This second narrative holds that, with the end of US predominance and the onset of a variety of other deep geopolitical transformations such as “deglobalization” and the regionalization of economic and security relations, the old way of doing middle power diplomacy just won’t work anymore. If Canada wants to retain its place as a middle power with global influence, then it will have to recognize that the middle power game will be increasingly played on regional tables. And if Ot-

tawa wants to play at those tables, it will not only have to ante up, but will also have to refrain from promoting certain Canadian values – like democracy and gender equality – that don’t necessarily resonate with the other players at the table.

This paper takes issue with both these narratives. It argues instead that the transformation of international order that has taken place over the last decade or so *has effectively eliminated the space within which Canada was long able to play the role of indispensable middle power with global reach and disproportionate impact.* This being the case, Ottawa will necessarily have to narrow its interests and moderate its ambitions – perhaps even abandoning its aspiration to be a truly consequential global player, embracing instead a more modest role in select regions. It will, in other words, have to adopt a new grand strategy, one that is rooted in a sober appraisal of Canada’s core national interests, a more realistic understanding of contemporary geopolitical realities, and a less romantic vision of what Canada can actually do on the world stage – a grand strategy, that is, of restraint.

Theorizing Restraint as a Grand Strategy

While **restraint** as a vision of grand strategy first evolved in the US context – and to some extent still bears the imprint of a decidedly American debate about the future of US grand strategy – it can nevertheless be theorized in a more generic (i.e., non-American) register. Viewed in this less particularistic way, restraint can be defined by a number of key assumptions, assertions and arguments.

To begin with, however, it is useful to define and delimit a key term in this discussion: grand strategy. There is considerable debate, of course, as to what precisely is meant by this term. Broadly



speaking, however, there is general agreement that the [term refers to](#) “the highest level of national statecraft that establishes how states, or other political units, prioritize and mobilize which military, diplomatic, political, economic, and other sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their interests.”

When speaking of grand strategies, therefore, we are not speaking merely of how best to use military force to achieve strategic objectives in a time of conflict. Rather, we are speaking of the “grand principles” that determine a state’s basic approach or orientation to the international environment: how it understands its core interests; how it understands the opportunities to advance those interests; how it understands threats to those interests; and how it believes it can best use the full range of available policy levers (including, but not limited to the military ones) to advance and defend its core national interests in an uncertain external environment, whether unilaterally or in concert with others.

There is also some [debate](#) about whether a country like Canada can even develop a grand strategy, with some arguing that only great powers can have such a strategy and others arguing that even lesser powers like Canada can have one. While acknowledging that there are contrary views, the premise of this paper is that, whether defined as a set of guiding principles that shape the way a state acts on the global stage or as a relatively fixed pattern of behaviour in the international realm, even lesser powers such as Canada can have such a grand strategy. Indeed, since the end of the Second World War, Canada has had a grand strategy of middle power internationalism in both senses of the term: a consciously held set of organizing beliefs about the “helpful fixer” role Canada ought to play on the international stage, and a consistent observable pattern of actual middle power behav-

our.

Turning now to restraint as a specific approach

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to grand strategy, it is possible to identify several [defining assumptions and orientations](#). First, restraint as a grand strategy is grounded in a focused understanding of interests. While debates over what does or does not constitute a national interest are inevitable – and healthy – in a free and open society like Canada, there is broad agreement that certain interests are fundamental. These core interests include maintaining the country’s territorial integrity and securing it from foreign attack (internal sovereignty); maximizing its freedom to operate on the international stage (external sovereignty); preserving its democratic domestic political order; and sustaining an economy that delivers an acceptable standard of living to the Canadian people. Simply put, Canada’s core national interests are physical security, political independence, freedom and prosperity.

Second, restraint as a grand strategy is based on a realistic understanding of geopolitical realities,



which permeate interstate relations irrespective of whether they coexist with a nominal “rules-based international order”. These include anarchy, or the absence of global sovereign power to adjudicate interstate disputes and enforce its judgments; polarity, or the distribution of power within the international order; the balance of threat, or the major or defining axes of conflict and competition within that distribution of power; and the role of geography in conditioning both the reality and perception of threat, competition and conflict.

Third, restraint as a grand strategy is grounded in a realistic appraisal of national capabilities – that is, what a country can *realistically* and *sustainably* attempt to achieve on the world stage to advance and defend its interests considering the geopolitical realities of the moment.

Finally, and building on all these elements, restraint as a grand strategy eschews ambitious, expansive or activist projects like “liberal order building” or normative projects like “democracy promotion” in favour of more modest projects related to advancing and defending the core national interests of physical security, political independence, freedom and prosperity.

Toward A More Sober Appraisal of Canada's National Interests

Given all this, any attempt to rethink Canadian grand strategy from a restraint perspective must necessarily begin with a sober appraisal of the country's core national interests. Viewed through a restraint lens – which limits these interests to security, independence, freedom and prosperity – in Canada's case, the first and most fundamental interest is to minimize threats to Canada's sovereignty and territorial integrity and, less directly but nevertheless unquestionably, to maximize the security of North America as a whole. There can

be no denying the fact that Canada's physical security is tightly bound up with that of the United States.

Second, viewed from a restraint perspective, Canada has an interest in seeing stable balances of power maintained in four regions of the world: Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and the Arctic. In Europe and the Indo-Pacific, a stable balance of power is in Canada's interests in that it creates a space within which a free, open and rules-based regional economic order can flourish. Given Canada's historic economic ties to Europe and expanding economic ties to the Indo-Pacific, Canada has an interest in seeing such regional orders perpetuated. Stable regional balances of power preclude the emergence of revisionist hegemony that might use their power to curtail Canada's commercial ties to those regions – or potentially even mobilize the resources of those regions to pose a military threat to North America.

In a related vein, Canada has an interest in the

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Middle East, not so much because of trade ties to the region, but because it is a major source of oil and gas for both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Should one emerge, therefore, a hostile hegemon in the Middle East would be in a position to en-



danger energy flows to those regions (and others), disrupting their economies in ways that would have detrimental knock-on effects on the Canadian economy.

Finally, Canada has an interest in maintaining a stable balance of power in the Arctic, a region of growing economic importance to the country and one where, should a hostile regional hegemon emerge, Canada's sovereignty and security could potentially be directly threatened.

Third, from a restraint perspective, Canada's core national interests include preventing the norms, rules and institutions of global governance from being transformed in ways that undermine Canadian security, independence, prosperity and freedom. This is not to suggest that upholding the existing rules-based international order (RBIO) is a core Canadian interest. That order is naturally evolving as the global balance of power shifts and the multipolar factory-settings of international politics kick in once again. Rather, it is to argue that, as that transformation takes place, Canada has an interest in preventing the norms, rules and institutions of global governance from evolving in ways that are incompatible with Canada's core national interests. That will necessarily involve Canada adopting a very different role than the "helpful fixer" one that it played during the eras of bi- and uni-polarity – one that is simultaneously more modest and more defensive.

From a restraint perspective, issues such as democracy promotion, human rights, peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction, and international development are not considered to be core Canadian national interests. To be sure, advocates of restraint are not opposed to these "goods." Rather, they argue that the policies designed to promote these goods are often counterproductive, can lead to overreach, tend toward utopianism, and some-

times mask quasi-imperial efforts to remake parts of the Global South in the Western image. And, perhaps most importantly, they do not directly impact core national interests, constituting at best second-order interests.

Nor from a restraint perspective is acting like, or being recognized as, a middle power a core national interest. Middle power diplomacy – and even the mantle of "middlepowermanship" – has arguably been an instrumental means to an end over the past seven decades, but at times Canadian policy makers have treated this means as if it were an end in itself. From a restraint perspective, this is flawed in two ways. First, it is a category error: it confuses ends for means. And second, the pursuit of middle power status encourages the kind of overreach and overextension that is the antithesis of the restraint approach.

Understanding Contemporary Geopolitical Realities — and Canada's Ability to Address Them

Having established Canada's core interests, the next step in developing a Canadian version of a restraint strategy is to develop a realistic understanding of the contemporary geopolitical context within which those interests can be advanced or might need to be defended.

The most defining feature of the contemporary

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international order is that it is multipolar in nature. At the very least, we live in a post-unipolar world, one in which great power competition has re-emerged as the defining structural reality within which Canada must operate. Simply put, as US hegemony has dissipated and China and other great powers have emerged as “rule-makers” rather than merely “rule-takers,” the essentially liberal international order (LIO) created by the United States has entered a period of terminal decline. Indeed, one rarely even hears the term LIO uttered anymore, the residual and crisis-ridden set of norms, rules and institutions first constructed by Washington in the aftermath of the Second World War and then globalized in the aftermath of the Cold War now being almost universally referred to as the RBIO.

But even that rump liberal-cum-rules-based order is now in its [death throes](#). This has profoundly altered the context within which Canadian national interests are both defined and pursued. As the rules-based order to which Canada has historically contributed has entered into a period of terminal decline, the space for “global middle powers” like Canada to play the role of helpful fixer, to contribute to a stable international order, or to conduct a normative foreign policy on the global stage is effectively evanescent.

Given the fracturing and realignment of the global financial and political-economic system, [region-based](#) economic and political dynamics are becoming ever more central to international politics. This is creating a space for “regional middle powers” – states that are [rooted in specific regional security complexes](#), that have greater material capabilities than their regional neighbours, and that are primarily focused on shaping their region in ways that advance their interests. This has also created more room for certain countries (like Australia and Japan) to operate as regional

middle powers. But it has also reduced the number of regional spaces within which Canada can play a middle power role. Canada is really only an organic, full-fledged member of two regions: North America and the Arctic. With respect to the first of these, given that it shares that space with the United States, it has little space to operate as a regional middle power. With respect to the second, it has more latitude to act as a regional middle power, but given the overlap between the North American, European and Arctic regional security complexes, probably less potential than, say, Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf or Australia in the Indo-Pacific.

Developing a Canadian grand strategy of restraint

Given the fracturing and realignment of the global financial and political-economic system, region-based economic and political dynamics are becoming ever more central to international politics.

in this context requires adopting a less romantic understanding of what Canada can hope to accomplish on the world stage. Practically, it involves eschewing the ethos that “Ottawa has to be a helpful fixer everywhere or the sky will fall.” And it involves a clear and realistic understanding of the limits of Canadian power and influence.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation on what Canada can do to address the potential threats to its core geopolitical interests is its relative paucity of military power. Canada spends only about 1.3% of its GDP on defence and has seen its military capability and preparedness decline precipitously



since the end of the Cold War. While sustained re-investment in the Canadian Armed Forces is possible, no reasonably foreseeable degree of investment is going to result in Canada having the kind of naval, air or ground forces necessary to affect the balance of power in any of the regions that are key to Canada's core national interests (with the exception of North America and the Arctic).

Beyond relative military weakness, in recent decades Canadian diplomatic power has also declined. As one recent [report](#) put it: "Canada consistently pretends to stand for values but the record shows that the world has had enough of listening to Canada's empty virtue signalling. This was obvious when Canada's bids to win elections to the United Nations Security Council were rejected by the world community in 2010 and 2020, but it is equally evident in its bilateral relations." The report goes on to cite lacklustre ministers as well as inattentive prime ministers as compounding factors, concluding that as a result of these dysfunctions "Ottawa's foreign policy machinery has grown deaf and unable to communicate with the world and as a result, Canada's strength has waned." Perhaps this dynamic could be reversed with sufficient time, focus and investment. But the sad reality is that no reforms realistically on the table will propel Canada into the ranks of the diplomatic great powers.

Canada's scope for effective action on the world stage is also limited by the fact that, in addition to falling short on the objective measures of middle power status, the currency of Canadian-style "global middle power" diplomacy is in terminal decline. Beyond the fact that the spaces within which Canada played its traditional middle power role are shrinking, the world truly has had enough of Canadian moral preening and is less and less receptive to efforts on the part of middle powers like Canada to promote liberal norms and values

and scold those states that don't adopt them with sufficient vigour.

Finally, Canada's ambitions are limited by the fact that it is recognized as a "natural" or "authentic" regional actor only in the intersecting regions of North America and the Arctic. This being the case, and given that it is dwarfed in North America by the United States, Canada is a true "regional power" only in the Arctic. In all the other regions where Canada has core national interests, Canada is at best a minor or marginal player – sometimes contributing military forces (as in Latvia today), but never profoundly shaping the regional security complex or decisively influencing the course of events within it.

Conclusion: Toward a Canadian Grand Strategy of Restraint

Given all this, what might a Canadian grand strategy of restraint look like?

To begin with, a Canadian restraint strategy would necessarily be built on the foundational assumption that Canada's primary strategic interest lies in securing the country against threats to its sovereignty and physical security. It would also rest on the assumption, dictated by geography and borne out by history, that securing Canada necessarily entails securing the broader North American regional security complex (or at least contributing to the security of the shared Canada-United States space within that complex).

In practical terms, securing Canada in the context of North America would necessarily involve an emphasis on the North American Aerospace Defence command (NORAD). And it would also involve a renewed emphasis on securing the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic maritime approaches to Canada and the United States, first within the NORAD and other bilateral US-Canadian frame-



works, but perhaps involving NATO and (in the Pacific theatre) supplemental minilateral arrangements.

Beyond protecting the country's sovereignty and

Beyond protecting the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, a Canadian restraint strategy would be largely premised on maintaining a favourable balance of power in those regions beyond North America that are vital to Canada's security, prosperity and freedom.

territorial integrity, a Canadian restraint strategy would be largely premised on maintaining a favourable balance of power in those regions beyond North America that are vital to Canada's security, prosperity and freedom. Put slightly differently, it would be grounded in an understanding that the emergence of a hostile hegemon in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Persian Gulf, the Arctic, or key global multilateral fora would be inimical to core Canadian interests. It would further be premised on the assumption that core Canadian interests would best be served by purposefully targeting the country's diplomatic and military resources on these key regions. Finally, it would be premised on the assumption that Canada should further narrow its focus on those regions or institutional spaces where it is able to meaningfully contribute to the maintenance of a favourable balance of power.

Intersecting with North America, but exceed-

ing it both geographically and institutionally, is the Arctic. In this region, Canada's interests are threefold. First, Canada has an interest in maintaining Canadian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, it has an interest in minimizing any threats to North American security that might originate in or traverse the Arctic. And, finally, it has an interest in maintaining a relatively free and open circumpolar economy.

Threats to those interests emanate largely from Russia which, as argued above, is seeking to shift the balance of power in the region decisively in its favour. A secondary threat is posed by China, which is actively seeking to become an Arctic great power and which, if successful and acting in concert with Russia, could shift the regional balance in ways that are contrary to Canadian interests.

As an authentic Arctic middle power – that is, as a power that is organically connected to the high north and that has potential to bring considerable assets to bear in that region – Canada can play an important role in both maintaining a favourable balance of power and promoting shared good governance in the region. With respect to the former, it should contribute meaningful military resources to the joint effort to blunt Russia's bid to shift the polar balance of power in its favour. With respect to the latter, it is well-positioned to help support – and even lead – regional fora through which the Arctic is collectively governed.

When it comes to Europe, once again Russia is the only potential threat to Canadian interests. In reality, however, that threat is easily exaggerated – Russia is not in any position to impose the kind of hegemony in Europe that would adversely affect Canada's core national interests in the region. In addition to Russia's internal challenges, both before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine the natural balance of power mechanisms in the re-



gion were operating reasonably well. The US has long acted, and will continue to act, as “cornerstone balancer” in the region. And NATO has long served, and continues to serve, as the institutional mechanism for blunting any possible Russian aggression against its members.

Moreover, since the Russian invasion, there has been renewed discussion of further defence and security cooperation within the European Union, perhaps taking the form of greater European strategic autonomy and the development of a more robust autonomous European defence capability – a dynamic that will only accelerate if the US continues its strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific.

Taken together, these realities mean that there is no need for Canada to play a significant direct role in upholding the European security order. Rather, from a restraint perspective, it suggests a strategy of “buck-passing” – that is, a strategy of shifting responsibility for maintaining the balance of power to another state or group of states. Defined thus, buck-passing does not necessarily imply isolationism or total disengagement. But it does involve eschewing both the pretence of leadership and the role of indispensable middle power.

None of this, of course, is to call into question Canada’s membership in NATO. The Atlantic Alliance will continue to serve Canada’s core security interests by facilitating military cooperation on, under and above the Atlantic approaches to North America and in the Arctic. But it is to argue that Canada has no pressing need to make any serious investment in upholding the existing *European* order or shaping the one that may be evolving in the aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The regional balance of power dynamics are operating as they should without Canadian involvement. And little therefore – other than perhaps a symbolic dispatch of ground and/or air assets to the

region in times of heightened crisis – needs to be done to defend Canada’s interests in the region.

Similarly, a Canadian restraint strategy would also involve buck-passing in the Persian Gulf, where a robust balancing dynamic has kicked in. The Abraham Accords, increased Saudi-Israeli cooperation on security matters, and a modest U.S. recommitment to the region have resulted in a new balance of power that favours the status quo. As a result, there is little likelihood that Iran will be in a position to dominate the region any time in the foreseeable future.

That brings us to the Indo-Pacific region. Here, the logic of restraint and the evolving geopolitical order give rise to two basic strategic options.

The first option is what might be called “regional engagement.” This strategy is premised on the view that regional multipolarity creates a space for a peripheral player like Canada to play a modest “regional power” role in the region, but only if Canada antes up and more concretely (and symbolically) grounds itself in the region. At a minimum, this would require that Canada take significant concrete steps to establish itself as an authentic regional player, including positioning itself as a regional military power (through the devotion of meaningful military resources to the region and participation in regional minilaterals) and an enhanced diplomatic and commercial presence throughout the Indo-Pacific.

The challenge in this connection is that, if this strategy were to have any chance of success, it would require an investment of military assets and diplomatic energy that Ottawa is neither willing nor able to make. And given the limited investment of such assets and energy that Ottawa is likely to make even in the best-case scenario, it is unlikely that it would be sufficient to secure for Canada recognition by other regional powers as



an organic element of the regional security complex. Canada is simply not part of the region like Australia, South Korea or the Philippines – and no realistic Canadian investment of military power in the region is likely to change that. This being the case, a strategy of regional engagement seems both superfluous to Canada’s needs and doomed to fail.

The second option is to once again simply allow the ongoing regional balancing dynamic to play out. A true restraint approach would take as its point of departure that there is no pressing need for Canada to play any significant role in the Indo-Pacific security order at all. Canada may be a Pacific nation, but it is not a *Western* Pacific nation – and, even with a substantial investment of military and diplomatic resources, it is unlikely ever to be counted amongst the region’s significant players. Moreover, the Western Pacific is already evolving as a “free and open” region and a stable balance of power appears in many ways already to be crystalizing. Unlike Australia and other authentic regional powers, there is nothing Canada can or must do to sustain that dynamic.

With respect to global multilateral fora, Ottawa should continue to play a modest “term-setting” role where useful. Otherwise, consistent with the spirit of restraint, it should adopt a strategy of buck-passing, letting others with the hard and soft power resources necessary to lead do so. This does not mean radical disengagement from these fora. Nor is it the same as free-riding. Canada should remain engaged in organizations like the UN and the WTO, and should invest substantial resources in defense of its core interests. But it does mean that, for the most part, Ottawa should eschew the pretence of middlepowermanship and abandon the increasingly quixotic quest for a leadership role in major multilateral fora that it is no longer capable of playing.

Put slightly differently, where Canada has the ability and is willing to invest the resources, it should

Where Canada has the ability and is willing to invest the resources, it should work with others to help shape favourable rules, norms and institutions in an evolving international order.

work with others to help shape favourable rules, norms and institutions in an evolving international order. And it should definitely do what it can to help blunt efforts on the part of Russia, China or any other power to alter those rules, norms and institutions in ways that are directly detrimental to core Canadian interests. But as a rule-of-thumb it should be realistically modest about what it can accomplish and act accordingly.

With respect to regional multilateral fora, Canada should target its investment of time, money and political capital, engaging vigorously only in those regions to which it authentically belongs (North America and the Arctic). Otherwise, Canada should accept the reality that it is not – and can never become – an organic part of regional security complexes such as those that have evolved in the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf and let others play the role of middle power and helpful fixer in those regions. Again, this does not mean total disengagement from other regional security complexes. Rather, it means adopting a restrained and targeted approach to regional governance that both recognizes the limits of Canadian power and accepts the need to prudently focus Canadian military, diplomatic and other resources on those regions that matter most and where Canada can actually play a consequential role.

About the Author

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