THE CONCEPT OF MULTILATERALISM IN CANADA' FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT
For decades, Canada's foreign policy has been defined by a steadfast commitment to multilateralism, rooted in its historical engagement with key international institutions, including the United Nations, NATO, and the Group of Seven (G7). This article critically examines Canada's multilateral approach to international security, with a specific focus on its involvement in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Canada actively supported the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, contributing military forces, diplomatic efforts, and humanitarian aid under the UN mandate as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This engagement reinforced Canada's dedication to collective security and humanitarian intervention within a multilateral framework. Simultaneously, Canada's refusal to participate in the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq further exemplified its commitment to multilateralism and adherence to international legitimacy as conferred by the UN.
Keywords: Canada, foreign policy, multilateralism, Afghanistan, Iraq, NATO, United Nations.

INTRODUCTION

Canada is perceived in various ways in the global context. From a North American perspective, it is often viewed as a reliable ally of the United States, exemplified by its participation in initiatives such as the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). At the same time, Canada is portrayed as a neighbor driven by economic interests, particularly in disputes over trade policies, natural resources, and market access. This dual perception reflects the complexity of Canada's foreign relations, as the country seeks to balance strategic cooperation with economic self-interest in an increasingly globalized environment. (JAMES et al., 2006, p. 16)

In the field of international diplomacy, Canada is widely recognized as a committed advocate of multilateralism. As a foreign policy approach, multilateralism involves cooperation among states through negotiations and agreements and stands in contrast to bilateral cooperation. Notably, some of the most significant academic work on multilateralism, peacebuilding, and related topics has originated in Canadian academic institutions. (Jentelson, 2015, p. 684). **This article puts forward the hypothesis that Canada's foreign policy reflects a consistent commitment to multilateralism, even though the form of its implementation has varied depending on different political leaders and global contexts.** The article aims to support this thesis by analyzing two key episodes — Canada's involvement in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns — which clearly illustrate the country's stance on multilateral engagement, international legitimacy, and global security.

Canada's active participation in shaping and supporting multilateral institutions in the post-World War II era solidified multilateralism as a cornerstone of its foreign policy thinking and practice. (Keating, 2013)

1. Methodological Basis
This article employs a qualitative, case-study-based historical analysis to explore Canada's commitment to multilateralism in foreign policy. The methodological approach integrates three core elements:

1.1. Historical-Comparative Method. The study traces the evolution of Canada's multilateral engagement from the post-World War II period to the early 21st century. By comparing different governments (e.g., those of Lester B. Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien, Stephen Harper, and Justin Trudeau), the article evaluates how multilateralism has been maintained, adapted, or challenged across changing political and geopolitical contexts.

1.2. Case Study Analysis. Two key case studies — Canada's participation in the Afghanistan campaign (2001–2021) and its non-participation in the Iraq War (2003) — serve as focal points. These cases are

selected for their significance in illustrating Canada's foreign policy choices under pressure from global events and alliance politics. The Afghanistan case exemplifies engagement through multilateral institutions like NATO and the UN, while the Iraq case highlights Canada's prioritization of international legitimacy over bilateral alliance obligations.

1.3. Document and Discourse Analysis. The article relies on primary sources such as speeches by Canadian leaders, policy statements, government records, and official UN and NATO communications. These are supplemented by secondary scholarly sources that provide analytical interpretations of Canada's foreign policy traditions, decisions, and debates. Particular attention is paid to public statements and parliamentary debates during key moments of decision-making (e.g., Chrétien's 2003 UN speech, Harper's positions on Libya and Crimea, Trudeau's post-2015 positioning).

This multi-method approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the continuity and shifts in Canadian foreign policy, especially regarding the principles, practices, and political rhetoric surrounding multilateralism.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in the theoretical tradition of **Liberal Institutionalism**, which posits that international cooperation through institutions can mitigate anarchy in the global system and foster collective security. This perspective provides an analytical lens through which to understand Canada's long-standing commitment to multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and the G7. According to Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, institutional arrangements can constrain state behavior, reduce transaction costs, and enhance transparency — all of which are evident in Canada's preference for multilateral frameworks in matters of security and diplomacy.

In addition, the article draws on insights from **Constructivist theory**, particularly in analyzing how Canada's national identity as a peacekeeping and rules-based state has shaped its foreign policy decisions. This is especially relevant in cases such as Canada's refusal to participate in the 2003 Iraq War, where normative considerations and domestic perceptions of legitimacy outweighed alliance pressures. Constructivist approaches allow for a nuanced understanding of how foreign policy is influenced not only by material interests but also by ideational factors such as values, identity, and historical narratives.

3.The main part of the article

It is important to acknowledge that, in Canada, multilateralism has been subject to critical scrutiny from various political and theoretical perspectives in recent decades. This is particularly evident in the context of international economic relations, as exemplified by Canada's decision to pursue a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States in 1984. (Maxwell & Tomlin, 2000).

Critics of multilateralism have increasingly directed their scrutiny toward international institutions, particularly the United Nations, highlighting their perceived failures in the post-World War II era, particularly in the realm of international security. This critique has been further fueled by discussions surrounding Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's decision to refrain from participating in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Opponents argue that Chrétien's government prioritized an unwavering commitment to multilateralism, often at the expense of Canada's national interests and values. (James et al., 2006, p. 355).

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper shared the skepticism of multilateralism voiced by many of Jean Chrétien's critics. Under Harper's leadership, the government's focus was primarily on Arctic sovereignty, and he frequently criticized Chrétien's administration for adopting a foreign policy that was considered more assertive than what had traditionally been aligned with Canadian values.

The debate surrounding Canadian multilateralism was prominently featured at a December 2009 conference at Dalhousie University, which brought together scholars and policymakers to mark the centennial of the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The discussions primarily centered on the evolution of Canadian multilateralism across various sectors. These deliberations culminated in a special issue of a scholarly journal, which published a series of academic articles. A significant number of contributors advocated for a more nuanced approach, one that seeks to recalibrate past commitments in order to align with and advance contemporary government priorities

while addressing continental, regional, and global dynamics. Several authors emphasized that effective multilateralism is essential for fostering a closer and more productive relationship with the United States, a stance also endorsed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The Second World War marked the foundation of Canada's tradition of multilateralism. In the aftermath of the war, Canada emerged as a global power with a robust economy, the third-largest navy, and the fourth-largest air force, moving away from the quasi-isolationism that characterized its pre-war stance. In 1947, Canadian Foreign Minister Louis St. Laurent asserted: "We now have an opportunity to demonstrate a high degree of competence, readiness, responsibility, and purpose in the conduct of our international affairs." This statement underscored Canada's commitment to a more active and engaged role in global diplomacy. (St. Laurent Louis, (1947). In the aftermath of the crisis, Canada, along with other nations, played a pivotal role in constructing a more prosperous and secure world, grounded in multilateral institutions and shared norms. This commitment to collective action and adherence to common rules became a cornerstone of Canada's foreign policy in the post-war era.

Canadian politicians became active "architects" of a new rules-based international order in the post-war era. For instance, Canada played a significant role in the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, which led to the establishment of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Similarly, Canada was deeply involved in the development of the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)[1], in which the original 23 signatories committed to reducing trade barriers among themselves. Canada was also a founding member of the United Nations, having successfully advocated for the inclusion of socio-economic objectives in the organization's charter during the 1945 San Francisco Conference.

However, as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union began to undermine the collective security role of the UN, Canadian diplomats strongly supported the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a counterbalance. While the British Commonwealth was not a new institution, it remained a key element in Canada's post-war foreign policy. Notably, Canadian Foreign Minister Lester B. Pearson, during Prime Minister St. Laurent's tenure, played a crucial role in transforming the Commonwealth into a multiracial organization and successfully brokering a compromise that allowed newly independent India to join as a republic.

Following 1945, multilateralism solidified Canada's position as a valued member of the global political community, particularly within the Western bloc. In response to the United Nations' call for assistance during the Korean War, Canada contributed significantly to the military effort. Ottawa also deployed an infantry brigade and an airborne division to Western Europe to support NATO in defending against the Soviet threat. A key moment in Canada's multilateral engagement came with Prime Minister Lester Pearson's instrumental role in de-escalating the Suez Crisis of 1956. For his efforts, the Nobel Committee lauded Pearson for "saving the world," and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957. While Pearson's primary goal was to resolve the divisions within NATO and the broader military community caused by the British and French invasion of Egypt, prompted by the nationalization of the Suez Canal, he faced criticism from some quarters for not supporting the former colonial power, Britain. Despite this, his peacekeeping initiatives at the United Nations garnered widespread support within Canada, both at the time and in the years that followed.

Canada's commitment to peacekeeping became one of its most prominent international roles in an era marked by regional conflicts. From the 1956 Suez Crisis until the end of the 20th century, Canada deployed peacekeeping forces to over thirty conflict zones. Notably, Canadian troops served as a buffer between opposing pro-Greek and pro-Turkish factions in Cyprus for an extended period. Additionally, in 1954, Canada was invited to join the International Supervision and Control Commission (ISCC), tasked with monitoring the ceasefire agreement and overseeing elections in divided and war-torn Vietnam. Given the growing U.S. military presence in South Vietnam, Canada, as the Western representative on the commission, found itself aligning more closely with U.S. interests in the region. (Scott W. See, 2011, p. 193)

The victory of the Progressive Conservative Party in the 1957 Canadian election did not fundamentally alter the core principles of post-war Canadian foreign policy. As one foreign diplomat

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[1] GATT - General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

noted, "Canadians are almost pathologically aware of Mr. Pearson's shadow and are largely content to continue the policies of the previous government" (Brendan Kelly, (2019)). When the United Nations Secretary-General called for the deployment of peacekeepers to the Congo, Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker faced significant pressure from the Canadian public, many of whom viewed peacekeeping as integral to the nation's identity. Diefenbaker played a key role in preserving the multiracial character of the peacekeeping institution, and notably, he was the only white leader to publicly oppose apartheid, thus distancing himself from the readmission of South Africa at the 1961 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference.

The following year, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker galvanized the Commonwealth in opposition to Britain's potential departure from the European Economic Community. Diefenbaker, Canada's 18th Prime Minister, was frequently characterized as a "Cold Warrior" who believed that Western alliances, particularly those led by the United States, often necessitated controversial commitments, such as Canada's involvement in nuclear weapons programs, driven by the defense of North America and NATO. Diefenbaker's outspoken remarks and his hesitation on certain key issues frustrated Canada's allies, contributing to the eventual decline of his political leadership and his departure from government.

When the Liberals returned to power in 1963, many Canadians expected Prime Minister Lester Pearson to elevate Canada's international profile. However, by this time, Canada's role on the global stage had undergone significant shifts. The economic recovery of Western Europe and Japan, coupled with the admission of numerous new countries to the United Nations, had diminished Canada's influence. Additionally, the post-World War II consensus that had defined Canadian foreign policy began to unravel in response to the U.S. war in Vietnam and NATO's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons in the 1960s—an issue Pearson had reluctantly accepted. "Quiet diplomacy," long seen as a hallmark of Canadian multilateralism, began to take on a pejorative connotation, with critics calling for a more "independent" foreign policy stance.

Despite these challenges, Canadian multilateralism remained productive during this period. For instance, during the UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus, where sectarian violence posed a threat to NATO allies and risked escalating tensions between Greece and Turkey, Canada played a crucial role in supporting both NATO and the United Nations, the latter of which was mired in prolonged debates over mission authorization and funding. Pearson also brokered a significant compromise within the Commonwealth regarding the unilateral declaration of independence by Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), then a British colony ruled by a white minority during Africa's decolonization. Canadian diplomats within NATO, who had long opposed the organization's sole focus on military objectives, worked to shift NATO's priorities. This effort culminated in the 1967 Harmel Report, which recommended that NATO broaden its focus to include peacekeeping operations, as well as prepare for potential intervention against the Soviet bloc and reinforce the organization's defense capabilities. (NATO's Harmel Report, (1966/67)

Canada and the United States established more favorable relations following the less productive years of the Diefenbaker-Kennedy era. In 1965, the two countries signed the Auto Pact, an agreement that reduced tariffs on automobiles, trucks, and their components. This accord had a profound impact on trade, as the automotive industry became the largest sector of bilateral commerce. Factories on both sides of the border began to rely on parts manufactured in the other country, thus facilitating the integration of the North American automotive production system. (Scott W. See, 2011, p. 194)

Another indication of the successful cooperation through multilateralism emerged in the landmark 1965 report, *Principles of Partnership*. Authored by Canadian diplomat Arnold Heaney and his American counterpart Livingston Merchant, the report emphasized the shared values between the two countries, asserting that their goal was to strengthen peaceful and mutually beneficial economic and diplomatic relations. While, in hindsight, the *Principles of Partnership* may appear overly optimistic, they captured the strong desire of both nations in the mid-1960s to avoid conflict and foster a cooperative relationship. (Scott W. See, 2011, p. 194)

In 1968, Canada's 15th Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, vowed to reassess the country's foreign policy, critiquing Canada's unquestioning adherence to NATO and arguing that the nation harbored an unrealistic vision of its international role. Regarding peacekeeping, Trudeau asserted that Canada should

not act as the "world's policeman." He contended that "foreign policy" should be better understood as a reflection of national interests, leading him to reduce the number of Canadian NATO forces stationed in Europe by half. In contrast, former Prime Minister Lester Pearson maintained that true national interest encompassed "cooperation with others to create a world order that would promote freedom, prosperity, and security for all," underscoring a more multilateral approach to international relations. (Bothwell, 1998, p. 88).

At this point in history, Canada appeared to retreat from a more active role in multilateralism. In fact, the Trudeau government was neither particularly inclined toward nor capable of pursuing a robust multilateral agenda. His 16 years in power were characterized more by continuity than by a shift in foreign policy direction. However, during this period, Canada remained engaged in key multilateral efforts, participating in all United Nations peacekeeping missions and contributing to significant international negotiations. Notably, Canadian diplomats played an active role in the 1970s in discussions such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. In 1976, Canada's admission to the newly formed Group of Six major industrialized countries marked a notable step in its international engagement. Following this, the group expanded to the Group of Seven (G7), where Trudeau became an active participant at the summits. (James et al., 2006, p. 297).

In 1984, when Brian Mulroney became Canada's 18th Prime Minister, his Progressive Conservative government pledged to establish a "special relationship" with the United States. Mulroney's most significant international achievement was the 1989 Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement, which solidified the economic ties between the two countries. His government continued Canada's postwar foreign policy tradition of fostering a close relationship with the United States. Additionally, Mulroney took a firm stance on global issues, advocating for economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa at both the United Nations and the G7. Canada also became a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and eventually joined the Organization of American States (OAS). A notable diplomatic achievement during this period was the successful compromise between Ottawa and Quebec on the contentious issue of provincial participation in the Francophonie, which paved the way for the first annual summit of the international organization.

Following the end of the Cold War, Canada capitalized on its "peace dividend" by withdrawing its troops from Europe, a move that is often considered to have diminished its influence within NATO. However, Canada reluctantly joined the UN military coalition led by the United States in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Some Canadians expressed concerns that participating in "muscular multilateralism," such as the military actions authorized by the UN Security Council during the Gulf War, might undermine Canada's long-standing reputation in peacekeeping. Nonetheless, the Mulroney government remained active in supporting UN peacekeeping missions in conflict zones like Somalia and the former Yugoslavia. Mulroney also took a keen interest in the UN's initiatives on environmental protection and child welfare.

In the early 1990`s, during an era of expanding trade liberalization, the incoming Liberal government under Jean Chrétien ratified the previously negotiated North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and joined the newly established World Trade Organization (WTO), which succeeded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Chrétien's government also honored Canada's peacekeeping commitments in Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. However, it became apparent that maintaining peace in such regions was far more complex than anticipated. Traditional peacekeeping strategies, which typically involve establishing buffers between conflicting parties, proved difficult to implement in politically unstable countries.

Canada has cultivated close alliances with like-minded states and civil society groups, leading to significant achievements such as the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty and the establishment of the International Criminal Court (Nossal, 1999, p. 103). However, the country also played a notable role in the bombing of Serbian forces in Kosovo, mobilizing a small military force under the banner of human security.

The US response to the September 11, 2001, attacks posed new challenges to Canadian multilateralism. In alignment with other NATO allies, Canada participated in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan to topple the Taliban government. However, in the broader "war on terror," the

administration of George W. Bush shifted its focus toward the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the invasion of Iraq, citing the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)[2] in Iraq—a claim that was later unsubstantiated.

The Chrétien government contended that Canadian involvement in the Iraq War would require multilateral support through the United Nations. Canadian diplomats argued that more time was needed for weapons inspectors to verify the presence of suspected WMD. Despite these concerns, the issue of invading Iraq was decided when the United States, the United Kingdom, and the "coalition of the willing" chose to bypass the UN and proceed unilaterally.

The Chrétien government's decision to refrain from participating in the Iraq War became one of its most popular and significant foreign policy moves, particularly among Canadians. This stance reinforced Canada's commitment to multilateralism at a time when there was growing apprehension regarding the influence of the United States on global affairs.

Canada's 22nd Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, deployed Canadian troops to Kandahar province in Afghanistan as part of NATO's mission. Under Harper's leadership, Canada's approach to multilateralism became notably selective. The government extended Canada's military mission in Afghanistan under NATO until 2014, participated in NATO's air campaign against Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and joined its allies in the fight against the Islamic State. Harper's administration also took a firm stance against Russia's annexation of Crimea, condemning the act on the global stage.

Harper's strong focus on global economic governance and international trade—issues that gained increasing significance following the Great Recession of 2008—led to Canada's active participation in multilateral forums such as the G8, especially after Russia's expulsion from the G7. This period marked a shift toward prioritizing economic and security interests in Canada's foreign policy while engaging selectively in multilateral initiatives.

In contrast, the Harper government exhibited a deep skepticism toward the United Nations. Canada's failure to secure a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2010 was a clear manifestation of this skepticism (Brendan, 2022, p. 4). Similarly, in other major multilateral institutions such as the Commonwealth and the Francophonie, the Harper government was not hesitant to boycott meetings or publicly criticize member states that, in his view, did not align with Canada's commitment to freedom, democracy, and human rights. While the Harper government received praise for its boldness, critics contended that its "megaphone diplomacy" undermined constructive engagement with other nations, potentially alienating allies and hindering diplomatic progress.

In the 2015 Canadian election, the Liberal Party's victory marked a shift in Canada's foreign policy under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who proclaimed that Canada was "back" on the world stage. Whether Canada had ever truly left the global political stage remains a matter of debate and historical perspective. Nevertheless, Trudeau's rhetoric strongly reaffirmed Canada's commitment to a multilateral system that, although under strain, remained central to its foreign policy approach. His administration suggested that while the multilateral system faced challenges and required reform, it remained the most effective framework for addressing global issues. In this context, Canada's leaders and policymakers can take pride in the country's ongoing commitment to multilateralism, a tradition that has evolved over the past 75 years and continues to shape Canada's role in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

Canadian foreign policy has consistently adhered to the tradition of multilateralism for over seven decades. Although there have been periods in history when the Canadian government sought to distance itself from this approach, as evidenced by the policies of the 15th Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, in 1968, the overarching commitment to multilateralism has remained a cornerstone of Canada's international relations. Trudeau, in his promise to reassess Canada's foreign policy, criticized the country's alignment with NATO and expressed concerns about Canada's unrealistic foreign policy vision. On the issue of peacekeeping, he famously stated that Canada was not the "world's policeman."

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[2]WMD - Weapon of mass destruction

It appeared, at this point in history, that Canada sought to avoid further entanglement in multilateral initiatives. Nevertheless, despite this rhetoric, the Trudeau government continued Canada's involvement in global peacekeeping efforts, including participation in international negotiations such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea during the 1970s. These actions underscored the enduring influence of multilateralism in Canadian foreign policy, even during periods of retrenchment.

A clear demonstration of Canada's commitment to multilateralism came in 2003, when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien decisively rejected the United States' call for military intervention in Iraq. This stance was emblematic of Canada's dedication to multilateralism, prioritizing international consensus over aligning with a neighboring superpower. The Canadian participation in the 2001 Afghan campaign, in contrast, was part of a multinational coalition, with Canada playing a significant role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, reinforcing Canada's position as a contributor to collective security and peacebuilding.

In August 2021, under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada withdrew its troops from Afghanistan following the Taliban's resurgence. While Trudeau had initially sought to withdraw earlier, he deferred this decision until the global coalition had completed its departure. This move, while aligned with the broader international withdrawal, also highlighted Canada's independent decision-making, reinforcing its sovereignty in foreign policy decisions. Despite fluctuations in approach, Canada's longstanding commitment to multilateralism continues to shape its foreign policy trajectory in the twenty-first century.

These two case studies—Afghanistan and Iraq—demonstrate the practical and principled dimensions of Canadian multilateralism: an active participant in UN- or NATO-backed missions and a cautious skeptic of unilateral interventions that lack multilateral legitimacy. Canada's multilateralism has undergone significant transformation—from the idealism of postwar peacekeeping to a more pragmatic and interest-based approach in the 21st century. Nonetheless, the foundational commitment to working through international institutions has remained a defining feature. This enduring commitment to multilateralism also reflects Canada's self-perception as a "middle power" committed to a rules-based international order. This identity, constructed over decades of diplomacy, continues to guide its behavior in global affairs. Domestic political pressures and public opinion have also played a role in shaping Canada's multilateral approach. The widespread opposition to the Iraq War at home contributed to Chrétien's refusal to engage, aligning democratic accountability with multilateral norms. As global power dynamics shift and multilateral institutions face increasing strain, Canada's challenge will be to adapt its multilateral engagement to new realities—reconciling national interests with global responsibilities in a more fragmented world order. Ultimately, Canadian foreign policy reflects a balancing act between normative commitments to multilateralism and the strategic imperatives of an evolving global landscape—highlighting the country's unique role as a cautious yet committed actor in international affairs.

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