



CANADA AND THE UNITED NATIONS

RETHINKING AND REBUILDING CANADA'S GLOBAL ROLE

*REPORT BY THE CHAIRS OF THE ADVISORY PANEL ON
CANADA AND THE UN*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The global order built after the Second World War is fraying.** World Politics are becoming increasingly competitive and contested, with more actors demanding an equal voice at international tables, more states turning away from international institutions, and disruptive powers, such as China and Russia, making multilateral solutions more difficult to achieve.
- **As a result, the United Nations is facing unprecedented challenges.** The United Nations (UN) Security Council has been paralyzed by the veto, unable to pronounce on grave violations of international peace and security, and the UN system as a whole has been badly hampered in its response to challenges of the global commons, such as COVID-19 or climate change.
- **And yet, Canada needs the United Nations more than ever.** The UN has brought real functional benefits to Canadians over the years and is the “only game in town” to manage global challenges that affect Canada’s security and prosperity. It is in Canada’s interest to help reinforce a UN that can shape the future Canada wants.
- **Canada needs to reinforce influence at the UN.** Multilateral cooperation is too often an afterthought in Canada’s foreign policy decision-making. Canada’s engagement at the UN is under-resourced in terms of its diplomatic presence, policy leadership, and contributions to the parts of the UN system that matter to Canada. Internal Canadian government processes to bring coherence and visibility to Canada’s UN agenda are strikingly weak.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Our recommendations focus on achieving three things:

- A more functional, interest-based approach by Canada to its UN engagements across government and the UN system;
- Greater Canadian capacity to exercise influence at the UN through its policies and partnerships, and;
- Heightened Canadian presence at its UN missions and in priority UN bodies.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATION 1: Develop a formal United Nations Strategy

RECOMMENDATION 2: Identify a Short-List of UN Priorities

Such a review could identify some of the following priorities:

1. *Sustainable Development (including food security),*
2. *Climate Change,*
3. *Refugees/Migration,*
4. *Global Health and*
5. *Peace and Security (including Cyber/Artificial Intelligence, Space, Non-Proliferation/Disarmament, and Democracy/Human Rights).*

RECOMMENDATION 3: Improve Internal Governance to Bring More Coherence and Visibility to Canada's UN engagements

RECOMMENDATION 4: Put Forward Canada's Candidacy for the Next Uncontested UN Security Council Seat

RECOMMENDATION 5: Build the Multilateral Capacity of Canada's Foreign Service

RECOMMENDATION 6: Expand and Focus Canada's Diplomatic Presence in Priority UN Bodies

RECOMMENDATION 7: Enhance Engagement with the Canadian Public on UN Issues

RECOMMENDATION 8: Appoint More Canadian Nationals to UN Secretariats.

INTRODUCTION

More than 75 years ago, Lester B. Pearson wrote: “Canada cannot occupy her rightful place in international society so long as its security is dependent on American benevolence. If we are to escape from permanent inferiority, our security must be found in an organisation to which we ourselves contribute.” Canadian leaders from John G. Diefenbaker to Brian Mulroney to Justin Trudeau have spoken of the United Nations as the backbone or cornerstone of Canada’s foreign policy. Canada’s current government has emphasized how Canada “can and must play an active role in the preservation and strengthening of the global order from which we have benefited so greatly.”

The United Nations has been at the centre of Canadian foreign policy from the beginning. Canada thrives in a rules-based international system, where intergovernmental decisions are made through agreed norms and procedures. A system where all states have rights and opportunities to influence collective action. As Canada’s Foreign Minister said to the UN General Assembly High Level debate in 2022, “For Canada, the choice is clear: we’re convinced that we need more multilateralism, not less; we need more of the UN, not less.”

While Canada has a distinguished track record of UN engagement, it must rebuild its influence to better serve its national interests and project its values in a changed international context. In today’s world, it is more difficult for Canada to work through the United Nations to shape the world it wants and needs. This is due to several factors, many but not all of them outside of Canada’s control. But the net result is that Canada today punches below its historic weight at the UN. While the recommendations of the June 2023 Future of Diplomacy initiative, if fully implemented, will prove valuable, the government needs to go further—particularly when it comes to the allocation of resources. This report provides recommendations for how to do this, refocusing Canada’s approach to the United Nations and multilateralism.

THE GLOBAL ORDER IS FRAYING, BECOMING MORE COMPETITIVE AND MORE CONTESTED

Over the past few decades, new power configurations have begun to reshape the norms, rules, and institutions governing world politics. It has been a period of deep global transformation, with profound implications for the UN system and for Canada.

The international level has shifted in three important ways: first, power has become more dispersed, with many more states, primarily from the developing world, demanding an influential seat in global affairs. One country—or group of countries—can no longer dominate international rulemaking. The exponential growth in the number of UN member states brought about by de-colonization and the end of the Cold War has had a significant impact on how multilateralism works.[1] The result is a world organization that can be seen as more legitimate, since it now comprises states and peoples not at the table at the UN's creation, but it is also more fragmented and increasingly multipolar.

Inconsistent interest in the priorities of these countries by the West, including Canada, since the end of the Cold War has widened the North/South divide. Vaccine-hoarding during the pandemic, a lack of progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as debt and food crises, aggravated by the war in Ukraine, have led many states in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, to question the benefits of the existing order. Many resent the "imposition" of value-laden agendas and few wish to "take sides" in any confrontation between Western democracies and China/Russia. A desire among some to dissociate themselves from General Assembly resolutions condemning and sanctioning Russian aggression in Ukraine has served to highlight the global divide as well as a waning commitment to international law. Productive North/South links, so essential to cooperation on global challenges, such as climate change, the loss of biological diversity, and pandemic preparedness, are increasingly threatened. The centrifugal forces at play in the UN result in "messy multilateralism," complicating diplomacy.

[1] The G77—the chief negotiating bloc of developing countries—has grown to 134 members, representing over two-thirds of the General Assembly membership. China's participation in the group since the 1990s has extended its influence, leading it to now be called the G77+China.

In this more fluid environment, multilateral solutions to complex problems take more time and defter diplomacy. Second, China, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, states like Brazil, India, and Turkey, have started to act more like regional hegemony. Even before Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, its behaviour was becoming more disruptive, muscular, and less conducive to multilateral solutions, particularly—but not solely—in matters related to collective security. China and others are using their influence across the UN system to limit or reverse international human rights norms and gender equality agendas. The ideational divide between autocracies and democracies has grown. This shift in power has gradually created a world of flux and strategic surprise that challenges fundamentally the United Nations.

Third, a number of governments have turned inward and away from multilateral solutions. Over the last decade, there has been a steady rise in the number of states rejecting multilateral treaties and processes in areas such as climate change, international criminal law, arms control, and disarmament. Most prominently, the role of the United States in world affairs has been changing. Long serving as the chief architect and guarantor of the system of norms, rules, and institutions that have underpinned world order since 1945, the U.S. has borne the burden of global leadership with greater reluctance in recent decades. While the presidency of Donald Trump brought this into sharpest focus, many key Trump-era policies have continued under the administration of President Joe Biden.[2] Domestic polarization and the notion held by some that international commitments are binding only on a given administration, have shaken the credibility of American international leadership. At the UN, U.S. credibility suffered a serious blow with its 2003 invasion of Iraq, a decision that still dogs U.S. diplomacy today. At times, the U.S. has treated unilateralism as a badge of honour. For Canada, as one of its key allies, this has not been a positive development. The further the U.S. strays from multilateral solutions, the more isolated Canada becomes.

The combination of rising disruptive powers like China, with the U.S. stepping back from its post-war leadership role has created instability in the international system. Periods of change in the distribution of global capabilities are inherently risky and uncertain.

[2] With the exception of pro-choice issues and a reversal of the decisions to leave the World Health Organization and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Even if the U.S. and China successfully—and jointly—avoid the “Thucydides trap,” which obtains when a rising power seek to displace a ruling power, important perils remain. Indeed, multipolar systems can be less predictable than other global power configurations. While stability is possible, multiple, competing centres of global power complicate cooperation and can work against international conflict management. Such contexts can lead to economic volatility, as well. In the short-to-medium run, the world is very likely entering a phase of heightened turbulence.

“MESSY MULTILATERALISM”: THE UNITED NATIONS IS FACING UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES

Global divisions have paralyzed many of the intergovernmental organizations that might otherwise ease global tensions. Owing to the veto, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has been unable to condemn atrocities, such as chemical weapons use in Syria or Russian aggression and war crimes in Ukraine. The Council was similarly hamstrung in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, as was the World Health Organization in its efforts to investigate the origins of the pandemic. Geopolitical tensions have led to a withering of arms control and the breakdown of other multilateral security guardrails. Global efforts to keep the planet within 1.5°C of pre-industrial warming are falling short.

In places where the U.S.—and other Western democracies, including Canada—have limited their engagement within the UN system, leaving a resource and leadership vacuum, China and other countries have increasingly filled the void. China has embarked on a long-term plan to reshape the organization, placing Chinese nationals strategically within UN technical agencies and the UN secretariat, cultivating influence and shaping agendas. As the second largest contributor to the UN budget, the Chinese government is using its position to attempt to rewire the organization to better suit its priorities, including setting global norms and standards and rolling back existing ones in areas such as human rights. While democracies have also sought to shape the UN agenda to suit their own interests since 1945, it is important to face up to the longer-term consequences of declining engagement among democratic countries.

Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine has put the United Nations’ ineffectiveness into even starker relief. Vladimir Putin’s war is not just about Ukraine’s sovereignty but about how power is organized inside and between states.

President Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been ideologically driven by a desire to build a world where autocratic leaders have a right to run states without respect for democracy or human rights and where stronger states can dominate their weaker neighbours. This is the antithesis of the principles on which the United Nations was founded and runs directly counter to the interests of open democracies, such as Canada, whose prosperity and security rely on open market economies, the rule of law, and collective security. Russia's war on Ukraine has paralyzed the UN Security Council, heightened polarization, and skewed relative international power by bringing Russia ever more deeply into China's orbit.[3] The recent expansion of the BRICS grouping as a rival to the G7 is a further indication of a more polarized, competitive world order.

CANADA NEEDS THE UNITED NATIONS MORE THAN EVER

The central question of our study—given the radical changes the world has undergone—is: Does the United Nations remain vital to Canada's foreign policy? We conclude that it is and should be. Effective multilateralism has become even more important to protecting Canada's interests. A well-functioning United Nations can offer the legitimacy, universality, and predictability needed for Canada to thrive. No other organization can bring the world together in a comparable fashion: North and South, East and West. Notwithstanding its many limitations, the UN has historically been the indispensable organization for Canadian international policy and it should remain so. For Canada, international cooperation and the national interest are deeply connected.

As a trading nation, the prosperity of Canadians relies heavily upon an open, fair, and rules-based economic system. A world divided into rival economic blocs, a vision gaining support under the auspices of "friend-shoring," risks being a less prosperous one. As has been observed by the International Monetary Fund, the long-term efficiency costs of a world increasingly organized into economic blocs would be significant. The effects of extensive economic decoupling would be most severe in emerging markets and developing economies. In a competition over aggressive subsidies, it is difficult for smaller states to compete with the largest economies.

[3] Russia's increased economic and political isolation, for instance, have increased its reliance on Chinese markets and political backing.

The international security implications of intensified geopolitical competition are, if anything, even more concerning. A new Cold War is not in the Canadian national interest. A world of multiple, competing global power blocs is a more dangerous one. To take just one example: arms control among three or more major nuclear weapon states could be inherently less stable than among two because no state can balance the strategic nuclear forces of the others without triggering a reciprocal response. The resultant arms race and modernization erodes the nuclear taboo and could spark further proliferation.[4]

The principal Canadian avenue for influencing these developments is via multilateral institutions. Recent experiences with hostage diplomacy and steel and aluminium tariffs are illustrative of the implications for Canada of a world where the constraints on big states are loosened. Notwithstanding its frustrations, which are many, multilateralism serves as a constraint on the naked exercise of power by the largest states. In return for others' compliance and participation, the larger states agree to bind themselves—or at least temper more extreme behaviour—in favour of agreed rules and procedures as a means of serving their longer-run self-interest in sustained cooperation. Canadian security and prosperity are well-served by such a system, where the rule of law trumps a world where “might makes right.”

From this perspective, multilateralism is both a means of furthering Canadian self-interest and an end in itself. There is a misconception among some that multilateralism is idealistic. While international organization can advance a values-based agenda, it is the self-interest of states that has always driven cooperation. Canada needs a seat at the multilateral tables where key global norms and rules are being formulated, particularly in such a dynamic international environment. These norms and rules affect the daily lives of Canadians, whether it be the global health regulations adopted at the World Health Organization that once led to the eradication of smallpox and now could forestall another pandemic, or telecommunication standards and laws governing outer space that allow global communications and GPS to function.

[4] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., “The New Nuclear Age: How China’s Growing Nuclear Arsenal Threatens Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-putin-is-threatening-to-cross-the-nuclear-line-what-can-we-do/>

See also: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-putin-is-threatening-to-cross-the-nuclear-line-what-can-we-do/>

Agencies such as the International Telecommunication Union, the World Meteorological Organization, or the World Trade Organization bring real functional benefits to Canadians. Canada thus has a vital interest in effective, well-functioning multilateralism and working to counter those that would undermine it.

The United Nations remains the centrepiece of global multilateralism. Without it, the broader system loses its coherence and functional core. It is indeed the world's "operating system." Other international and regional institutions, inside and outside of the UN system, rely on the United Nations legally and normatively. Efforts to weaken the UN, therefore, eat away at the global structure that underpins Canadian interests. The UN serves as the principal and most legitimate generator of global norms as well as a key vehicle for their dissemination.

As power becomes more dispersed within the international system, the universality of the UN is the world's counterweight to polarization. It is the one institution that can bring the world together with an eye toward a common cooperative enterprise. It offers avenues to foster collaboration among democracies and autocracies, a function essential to dampening the geopolitical rivalry so threatening Canadian security and prosperity. In a period of wicked interdependence problems of truly global proportions, no other institution offers a plausible alternative. The UN is the only global game in town.

Even for those, including in Canada, who look upon the UN with suspicion, it is in Canada's interest not to leave the field to those countries with radically different values and priorities. Even in a purely political theatre, Canada has a national interest in effectively countering those views and articulating its own.

CANADA AND THE UNITED NATIONS TODAY

Canada has a distinguished history of engagement within the United Nations. It was an active player at the San Francisco Conference in 1945, has been elected to the Security Council six times, and has done much to further the mission of the organization over the past 78 years.

Canada has played a major part in advancing international cooperation on many issues, including peace and security, human rights, disarmament and non-proliferation, and sustainable development. Individual Canadians, including Louise Fréchette, John Humphrey, Lester B. Pearson, and Maurice Strong, have done much to shape UN cooperation.

Notwithstanding the fact that it has consistently fielded highly skilled diplomats to the UN, Canada is a less influential UN player than it once was. For although Canada remains the eighth largest contributor to the UN's regular budget and channels more than two-thirds of its international assistance through multilateral partners, its influence on global agendas has dropped off significantly. Canada's two consecutive losses in elections to the Security Council—in 2010 and 2020—are illustrative of a decline in Canadian relevance. While Canada has fielded strong delegations to UN bodies, they are small by G7 or G20 standards and often not provided the resources necessary to “walk the talk.” Canadian international assistance lags significantly behind the global benchmarks, including the 0.7% of Gross National Income target set by the Lester B. Pearson Commission of the World Bank. Canada is the world's ninth largest voluntary contributor to the UN Peacekeeping Operations budget but ranks sixty-ninth in actual troop contributions. In this context, complacent assumptions about Canadian popularity in UN circles simply do not mesh with reality.

As one example, once a leader in pushing for global disarmament, the government now takes less of a visible role on these questions. For example, a lack of ministerial participation in successive meetings of the Stockholm Initiative on Nuclear Disarmament, which reinforces the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as other important decisions, can be seen as limiting Canada's capacity to play a bridgebuilding role on these vital questions of international security.

SOURCES OF DECLINING INFLUENCE

Declining influence is derived from internal and external challenges.

Internal: First, internally, Canada's UN diplomacy and policies lack coherence. The UN system is expansive, with dozens of specialized agencies, funds, and programmes governing cooperation and setting standards in a wide range of spheres.

Canadian participation in these highly autonomous bodies is divided across dozens of domestic agencies and departments, which have minimal direct connection to each other on UN questions. Notwithstanding recent consultative efforts between Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and Other Government Departments, the bureaucratic mechanisms within the Canadian government available to ensure policy coherence across UN fora are strikingly weak. This says nothing of the hundreds of other bilateral, regional, and multilateral interactions ongoing across the government with significant implications for Canada's UN policies.

Within GAC, the lead department for Canada's international activities, responsibilities for UN issues are highly fragmented. The branch responsible for UN governance issues—the international organizations branch—is separate from the international security branch, which handles many of the substantive security, stability, humanitarian, democracy, and human rights issues covered at the UN. Responsibility for the SDGs, a real focus at the UN, is led by a different branch, the Strategic Policy branch. All three branches report to different Assistant Deputy Ministers, and primarily to different Deputy Ministers. Many of the UN specialized agencies receive little attention in terms of GAC human resourcing and organizational structure and some international priority issues, such as climate change, environment, and global health, were previously dropped completely by GAC because of budget cuts, though some have just recently begun to be reintroduced. As a result, GAC is poorly positioned to serve as a coordinator of Canada's overall UN engagement on critical issues of global concern.

The implications of this ineffective bureaucratic structure in Ottawa are many. Fragmented national policy-making diminishes capacity to set priorities in Canadian UN diplomacy. Fragmentation makes it difficult to establish linkages across issues or institutions, and this has an impact on coherence and effectiveness. It also reinforces problematic silo-ization in Ottawa. Domestic departments prioritize their substantive policy agenda in UN negotiations, inadvertently causing collateral damage to other parts of the UN system or to Canada's relations with other partners at the UN. This leads to missed opportunities for strategic collaboration.

Because there is no system-wide view, Canada has limited ability to gain concessions on its priorities in exchange for flexibility on issues it cares less about. Poorly integrated structures in capital can prevent valuable information from flowing across bureaucratic divides, hurting Canadian negotiators and negotiations. Information on the domestic constraints or priorities of other governments, gleaned from one institutional setting can often have relevance in other multilateral negotiations. A lack of internal coherence undermines Canada's ability to take advantage of such opportunities.

Poor integration also makes it difficult for the government to ensure that Canadian positions are aligned fully in different UN contexts. For issues that cross multiple institutional domains, such as climate change, where relevant bargaining occurs in dozens of separate UN bodies, fragmentary policy guidance from Ottawa—where priority is often given to annual Conferences of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—can undermine Canadian diplomacy in other UN fora. Some UN member states seek to insert problematic “agreed language” within one UN setting and then transplant that language to other, higher-stakes negotiating settings. A lack of internal coherence makes it difficult for Canada to combat such tactics.

External: The second major challenge facing Canadian UN diplomacy, largely external to the government, is the increasingly peripheral position the country occupies within intergovernmental networks. Some of this owes to factors that are outside of Canada's control. For example, the coherence of the European Union as a bloc within the UN has diminished Canadian centrality within its Western European and Others (WEOG) regional grouping. Other factors are, however, a consequence of Canadian diplomatic choices. Successive Canadian governments have failed to consistently cultivate countries in Africa, Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean, with important implications for Canada's UN diplomacy. High-level visits to these regions have been uncommon and UN issues are seldom prominent within Canada's bilateral diplomacy.

Relations with the developing world, once buttressed by links within the Commonwealth of Nations and La Francophonie, are less salient in Ottawa than they once were.

The convening power of both organizations is taken insufficient advantage of as a result of relatively limited multilateral capacity at the respective missions (London and Paris). Canadian efforts to advance UN priorities are hampered by this. While useful for their own sake, bilateral, regional, and other links should be better and more consistently operationalized at the UN as means of multilateral influence.

There are many reasons behind Canada's repeated failure to gain a seat at the UN Security Council, chief among them is the reluctance to announce Canada's candidacy sufficiently in advance to get out ahead of the competition and an inability to communicate Canadian priorities outside of New York. To do so would have required making long-term strategic policy choices and having a better tactical understanding of how UNSC elections work in terms of timing¹ and regional groupings. The failures also reflect a lack of consensus between the major political parties in Canada about the role and utility of a UNSC seat. In a polarized domestic political context, governments are reluctant to campaign 10 years out only to win the seat for a future government formed by the opposition.^[5] Successive governments have also been reluctant to run for election on other UN bodies. Canada's decision to finally contest a seat on the Human Rights Council for 2028-2030 is an encouraging sign and the government should approach such opportunities with an overall strategy that reflects its priorities and positioning on UN issues.

Relatedly, the government has positioned itself as a preference outlier on some key UN debates, at times favouring domestic political positioning at the expense of its broader UN objectives. Canada's stances on UNSC reform and Middle East issues, for instance, have alienated key UN members. Unless backed by careful diplomacy and the requisite resources, Canada's advocacy on social issues, including elements of the Feminist International Assistance Policy, can come across as patronizing and sanctimonious in other countries. Similarly, recent Canadian domestic political debate has too often framed diplomacy with autocratic states as anathema. Earlier periods of Canadian diplomacy understood the world to be more nuanced and "talking to enemies" was seen as a pragmatic instrument to influence behaviour.

[5] By contrast, Ireland and Norway, which defeated Canada in the 2020 UNSC election, announced their candidacy in 2005 and 2007, respectively.

While a principled foreign policy is essential, the UN provides multiple channels for dialogue and at times quieter approaches can do more to achieve progress than public shaming. Finally, there is also a tendency as a matter of foreign policy to make alignment with like-minded countries, particularly the U.S., the default foreign policy stance, without first articulating what Canadian policy should be.

In New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, and elsewhere, Canadian delegations' ability to position Canada at the centre of international networks is hampered by understaffing. Smaller missions can find it difficult to keep up with the host of committees, subcommittees, and friends of meetings occurring among missions and with UN staff. The recent commitment, as a part of Canada's Future of Diplomacy initiative, to better staff its UN missions is a start, but this will need to be implemented and sustained. There are no incremental resources associated with GAC's current transformation initiative, at a time when Global Affairs is undergoing cuts as part of a government-wide cost-cutting exercise. Timely implementation of a commitment to increase staffing at multilateral missions may be affected. There is also a risk that cuts to other parts of the Global Affairs network will not be based on any strategic priority-setting.

Canadian credibility at the UN and capacity to influence the multilateral agenda is also enhanced greatly through high-level visits to priority UN organizations. Yet, Canadian high-level visits, particularly at the Ministerial level, are uncommon relative to other governments. Visits even to UN bodies based in Canada, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization or the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, have been extremely uncommon until this year. While in the past Canada's multilateral objectives featured prominently in bilateral discussions, high-level officials now regularly seek to capitalize on UN meetings as an opportunity for "bilats" or "pull-asides" on bilateral issues, rather than as opportunities for engagement on multilateral questions with other governments and the staff of UN bodies.

Compared with the unipolar moment, where ties with the leading political power mattered most, a world of increasing multipolarity demands new strategies of connection.

No one country—or group of countries—can shape the international system in its own image. In this context, the ability to forge coalitions of states across regions and negotiating blocs is a prerequisite for advancing Canada's interests. To do this, Canadian diplomats must deepen ties with non-traditional partners. Interactions within comfortable groups of likeminded states are unlikely to yield non-redundant information or uncover openings in global talks, perpetuating the perception of Canada as a marginal player.

While Canada's UN delegations do seek to expand Canada's multilateral links, they are restricted in their capacity by the limited network of connections the government has sustained over the medium-to-long term. In recent decades, Canada has neither effectively identified priority bilateral relationships, nor maintained bridges across regional divides that could further Canadian interests in the multilateral sphere. There have been recent efforts to re-establish long-standing bilateral ties with countries that can help Canada build bridges to other regions, South Korea, for example. Such contacts can bring invaluable informational resources and allies to Canadian negotiators that help to construct multilateral coalitions.

POLICY CAPACITY

Relatedly, Canada has traditionally been a supplier of ideas and initiatives at the multilateral level, such as those associated with human security, disarmament, violence against women, maternal and child health, and the development of international environmental law. Good ideas create opportunities for the countries that offer them, affording convening and agenda-setting power, moving them to the centre of diplomatic networks. Unfortunately, the supply of ideas has been less consistent in recent years; in large part because of a deep reluctance to commit the necessary resources to bolster new initiatives and a growing aversion to risk at both the bureaucratic and political levels. As a result, Canada has largely become an “agenda taker,” rather than an “agenda maker” at the UN. On emerging issues where there are serious gaps in international norms, including cyber, artificial intelligence, and space, areas where Canada would have something to offer to the world, Canada is not filling the diplomatic void.

The policy capacity of GAC, especially on key multilateral questions, such as environment and health, has been diminished through successive budget cuts or has moved to other government departments. Bright ideas are rarely the product of eureka moments. Instead, they are often innovative mid-range solutions to concrete policy dilemmas that emerge through information obtained, and interactions within, well-cultivated networks that include not just other countries' diplomats, but UN staff, civil society, academia, and the private sector. Key Canadian missions abroad and headquarters divisions are so severely understaffed that strategic engagement—and thinking—has been hampered. In this way, a limited supply of new ideas is both a cause and a consequence of Canada's less central position within global networks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We group our analysis and the resulting recommendations into internal and external actions that the government can take to rebuild its influence at the UN in a new global era. Our recommendations are not about preserving the UN status quo and Canada's traditional place in it. We recognize that the world has changed fundamentally and that the UN is a different body than when it was created. Decades of crisis and the rise of strategic competition have put pressure on the UN and, consequently, on Canada's traditional approach to multilateralism. Our recommendations thus focus on achieving three things:

- A more functional, interest-based approach by Canada to its UN engagements across government and the UN system;
- Greater Canadian capacity to exercise influence at the UN through its policies and partnerships, and;
- Heightened Canadian presence at its UN missions and in priority UN bodies.

Internal

1. Develop a formal United Nations Strategy

Many of Canada's closest allies regularly develop national security strategies or foreign policy statements. Canada has not done so for 18 years, since 2005.

While a full foreign policy review might be preferable, the government should, at a minimum, develop a focused UN Strategy. This strategy should be public and benefit from civil society engagement. The intergovernmental process of composing such a strategy is as valuable as the eventual document, forcing the government to examine key assumptions and clarify its policy preferences. Public consultations also ensure that Canadians have a better understanding of why and how the UN serves Canada's interests. Public strategies also let other governments know what Canada's priorities and commitments are. While GAC would compose the strategy and lead on the resulting Memorandum to Cabinet, the process should include all government departments with substantial involvement in the UN and engage with provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, as well as Canadian civil society, academia, and the private sector.

The strategy should then guide the international engagements of all Canadian government departments across the breadth of the UN system. Such a UN strategy would be more confident in its promotion of Canadian interests, more targeted to those areas of the UN system and those partners that can help Canada to advance its interests. It would focus on filling normative and policy gaps where Canada has something to bring to the table. In a word, it would be strategic, with a more functional and interest-based approach that is backed by resources beyond those Global Affairs could bring to bear. Below we set out these elements of a renewed Canadian approach to the UN that we believe should be instituted.

2. Identify a Short-List of UN Priorities

One element of a new UN Strategy should be a decision on a national, whole-of-government basis to establish a clear set of Canadian priorities at the UN. The aim is to be able to make strategic choices that reflect Canadian interests. For this, the government needs to better articulate Canada's interests and why they matter to Canadians and to the rest of the world. Priority-setting provides a focus across government and adds coherence to Canada's many UN engagements, including its interactions in other regional, bilateral, and multilateral settings. The number of priorities—perhaps limited to five or six—should be numerous enough to demand a level of ambition appropriate of a G7 country, yet sufficiently limited to allow Canada to emerge as a top five contributor of ideas, financial and program support in these areas.

Once established, these priorities should provide a focus for voluntary financial contributions to UN bodies and for the expenditure of political capital at the UN. Possible election onto relevant intergovernmental bodies and leadership roles therein should be viewed through this prism. Program review should assess the efficacy of various UN agencies, as well as the value-added of heightened Canadian contributions. This assessment should not facilitate a reduction in resources but should have an eye toward augmenting overall resources. The aim is to target investments in areas where Canada can enjoy the biggest “bang for its UN buck.” Canadian diplomacy at both headquarters and its UN missions would also focus on identified priority areas: a practice we call issues-based multilateralism.

As part of its priority-setting exercise, Canada should also undertake a detailed analysis of the partner countries and regions that can best help it build issue-based coalitions inside the UN. While Canada has a real asset in its cross-regional network of partner states, it does less well in identifying priority relationships based on its interests and systematically maintaining them. Relationships with regions, countries and diplomats need be built over time so they are solid and can be used when needed.

Canada should undertake a detailed analysis to identify the bilateral and regional relationships that will help it move forward on its specific UN priorities and ensure sustained investment.

Because Canada thrives in a rules-based international system with intergovernmental decisions that are made through agreed norms, rules, and procedures, UN reform is critical. Canada has no interest in a multilateral system that is “grid-locked in colossal global dysfunction.”^[6] But making the UN work better is about more than changing rules and procedures.

[6] Secretary General’s Address to the General Assembly, United Nations, September 20, 2022, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2022-09-20/secretary-generals-address-the-general-assembly>

At the core of Canadian UN policy is therefore, crucially, the question of Canada's relations with rising global leaders and with developing countries generally. The support of these countries will be the only way to protect and nurture the rules-based international order that has always been so important for Canada. Too often, Canada's domestic social priorities have preoccupied its foreign policy agenda and successive governments have spent too little time listening to what the rest of the world has to say. Success in this new world context will depend on Canada's capacity to understand the perspectives and grievances of developing countries and identify solutions that take their concerns into account without sacrificing Canada's own objectives.

Canada's interests also lie in strengthening the international rules that were the *raison d'être* for building the UN in the first place. In recent years too many states have started to turn away from the global web of rules put in place as security guardrails since the Second World War. Many new technologies give rise to ungoverned spaces that pose global challenges and opportunities. Canada's UN priorities should include normative gaps at the UN on issues that are not yet regulated and that touch Canadian interests, such as space (where Canada is an industry leader), cyber, pandemic cooperation, or Artificial Intelligence. It could also include areas where Canada has a direct interest and where less-benign global competitors could seek to crowd it out. One example is the new Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation, launched at the 2023 UN General Assembly, that seeks to foster cooperation among North America, Latin America, Africa, and Europe, on issues related to the Atlantic basin, such as fishing, piracy, or unhindered trade.

Finally, Canada should focus on areas where rules have been fraying and where it has credibility, such as human rights/democratic resilience and non-proliferation/disarmament (where it has a contribution to make in terms of peaceful nuclear technologies). Canada's shortlist of UN priorities must also include those "global commons" issues that directly affect its sovereignty and economic well-being, such as climate change, the loss of biological diversity, refugees/migration, and global health.

Canada should conduct a functional, issues-based review to identify its “short-list” of UN priorities based on an assessment of Canadian interests. Such a review could identify the following priorities:

- 1. Sustainable Development (including food security),*
- 2. Climate Change,*
- 3. Refugees/Migration,*
- 4. Global Health and*
- 5. Peace and Security (including Cyber/Artificial Intelligence, Space, Non-Proliferation/Disarmament, and Democracy/Human Rights).*

3. Improve Internal Governance to Bring More Coherence and Visibility to Canada’s UN engagements

Canada’s UN policies are hampered by a striking lack of bureaucratic coherence. The current structure that has grown over time was not purpose-built and needs to be assessed and reworked through the prism of Canada’s multilateral priorities. Dozens of government departments are engaged in UN questions, whether it is Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada for the Food and Agriculture Organization, Environment and Climate Change Canada for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), or Health Canada within the World Health Organization. A proliferation of informal institutions and trans-governmental networks outside the UN system has only deepened fragmentation. Effective multilateralism today must be coherent multilateralism.

GAC has traditionally been a policy department with multiple centres of expertise—geographic, development, trade, and foreign policy—spread across multiple Assistant Deputy Minister portfolios. This can be, and has been, a strength provided there is adequate expertise and sufficient coordination to ensure coherence and a sustainable culture of ideas-generation.

However, many of these traditional elements of the GAC culture have withered, whether due to budget cuts, a focus on creating foreign policy generalists, rather than subject-matter specialists, an aversion to risk, or to successive years of failing to hire and develop new indeterminate staff. There is no one machinery fix that can solve all of these challenges. However, some machinery changes could improve coherence both within GAC and between GAC and other departments engaged on international issues.

While there is no “one-stop shop” that could foster greater coherence and expertise on priority UN questions, the department could consider organizing its UN responsibilities around the two main lines of effort: (I) political-security issues, including peace support, peacebuilding, humanitarian issues, human rights, democracy, non-proliferation/disarmament, and governance, under the International Security and Political Affairs (IFM) branch, on the one hand, and political-economic issues, including environment, development, and health, under a strengthened Global Issues and Multilateral Development (MFM) branch, on the other. This change would recognize the multi-dimensional character of these questions, including areas where issues such as health and environment have a distinctly political character, and allow for the necessary policy crosswalks. A jointly-managed unit could support both branches on UN budgets, reform, external communications, and coordinating Canadian candidacies for UN secretariat positions (including secondments of government officials and the junior professionals program) and elections to senior positions and organs.

In the current model, reporting relationships to Deputy Ministers are split, with IFM largely reporting to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and MFM reporting to the Deputy Minister responsible for International Development.[7] A more integrative approach could be taken by having both report to the senior DM, or having the two DMs function as a Management Board for UN issues, accountable together for setting overall strategic agendas and tracking performance on UN issues, including coherence.

[7] This has resulted in the questionable state of affairs that accountability for all of Canada's assessed UN contributions currently resides with the Deputy Minister for Development.

To enhance government-wide—and UN system-wide—awareness, there could be dedicated reporting streams from multilateral missions on UN priorities established in Canada’s UN strategy, focusing on strategic objectives and key multilateral trends within the UN organizations that they are accredited to. Strengthened coordination mechanisms and fora, on a whole-of-government basis, will need to be established. An annual in-person retreat of senior leadership of multilateral missions should be scheduled, as well, to enhance strategic policy exchange and to track successes and challenges in implementing Canada’s defined UN priorities.

External

4. Put Forward Canada’s Candidacy for the Next Uncontested WEOG UN Security Council Seat

Canada’s losses in 2010 and 2020 for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council have been highly conspicuous. While Canada’s UN engagement is much broader than whether it occupies a seat on the Security Council, participation is in Canada’s national interest. The Security Council remains the world’s most significant security venue, taking decisions on global trouble spots. Security Council decisions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter are binding on all UN member states. No other international organization has this power. Canada, not least as a top-ten contributor to the UN’s funding, has an interest in how these issues are resolved—or not. While the Security Council is often deadlocked by the veto, there is a reason that major states continue to seek permanent membership and why election to non-permanent seats is hotly contested.

Rather than a policy focus in and of itself, though, election to a non-permanent seat should be a byproduct of an effective and strategic foreign policy. It is a result of the networks that the government has built and contributions to international cooperation. While Security Council membership demands a substantial diplomatic resource increase from non-permanent members, this peak in resource commitments comes best at the end of a crescendo of longer-term involvement. Election should be pursued, vigorously, alongside a sustained recommitment by Canada to the United Nations.

Membership would boost Canada's centrality within UN networks, providing enhanced relevance and links with other actors. A decision to contest a seat on the Council should be accompanied by a broader strategy concerning Canada's UN priorities, including which bodies should be a focus for expending scarce diplomatic capital.

Election to the Security Council should be considered in relationship with possible membership on other intergovernmental bodies. Canada should evaluate the potential benefits of contesting the Presidency of the UN General Assembly and other UN offices. Strategic placements of Canadians in junior and mid-level positions should be funded, including via secondments of Canadian officials, to create a "feeder system" for election to higher positions. Moreover, given the vote swaps required to obtain elected positions, all candidacies should be evaluated holistically within a 10-15 year planning cycle. Vying for leadership positions within the UN must be multi-partisan national projects, not domestic political trophies. As with all other UN priorities, Canada should also focus on reform of the UN system. While UN Security Council reform work has been underway for decades, with little movement, new proposals for UN Security Council reform launched by President Biden at the UN General Assembly carry some promise.

5. Build the Multilateral Capacity of Canada's Foreign Service

For Canada to be better able to anticipate and respond to a world of flux and strategic surprise, it must do a better job at multilateral diplomacy. Messy multilateralism demands growing and retaining a professional diplomatic corps; people with multilateral knowledge and networks; and then deploying them strategically in intergovernmental organizations. The generalist model of diplomacy does not adequately build this skillset.

While multilateral diplomacy demands some of the same knowhow as bilateral diplomacy, there are certain competencies that are especially important for exercising influence within intergovernmental organizations. Negotiations in contexts with hundreds of states can generate significant complexity, as well as distinctive coalitional dynamics. Network building assumes an altogether different character in horizontal, multilateral contexts.

The rules and procedures of international organizations shape interactions, as do relations with secretariats. Professional diplomats understand issues, countries, and regions in-depth. This allows them to identify early opportunities for Canada to influence and lead. They use the relationships they have built over time to turn these opportunities into action, whether it be bolstering peace, creating new markets, or development. By rebuilding multilateral policy and diplomatic capacity, there is real scope for Canada to re-emerge as a chief supplier of innovative ideas and increase centrality within intergovernmental networks.

A multilateral career stream within the Canadian foreign service—alongside specializations in trade, consular, and international assistance—should be established as a subspeciality of the Foreign Policy and Diplomacy stream. New foreign service officers would spend a majority of their early career postings at multilateral organizations, refining the skills needed to further Canada's interests multilaterally. Work in Ottawa should focus on Canadian policy toward priority UN institutions and issues. Such a structure would be commensurate with the centrality of multilateral relations to Canada's global interests.

As part of the career paths of multilateral stream officers, thought could be given to structuring regular secondments between GAC and domestic departments that engage with major UN issues, such as the Department of National Defence, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Health Canada, or Agriculture and Agri-food Canada. This system would help to create a broader network of multilateral specialists who understand not just specific issues, but the broader context. This might follow the major/minor career development concept, perhaps complementing multilateral work with some “minor” postings to relevant bilateral or thematic bureaus. Importantly, this system would contribute to greater unity of outlook and deeper ties to those working on UN issues across the Canadian government, strengthening coherence.

Facilitating collaboration with other countries could further boost multilateral expertise. The government could, for example, seek to embed Canadians within the UK or U.S. missions for UNSC work, improving expertise.

Knowledge networks can be bolstered further through collaborations with other missions. Members of the European Union, such as France and Germany, have benefited from pooled diplomatic resources within the Observer European Union Delegation. EU experts handle the bulk of negotiations, freeing permanent delegations to focus on other issues. This is an advantage that is notably absent for Canada. While Canada does attempt to burden-share with Australia and New Zealand, it has not fully leveraged these partnerships at the UN.

Global Affairs should develop a multilateral affairs career stream and promote exchanges with UN agencies, partner countries and domestic departments engaged in multilateral work, creating networks of multilateral specialists.

6. Expand and Focus Canada’s Diplomatic Presence in Priority UN bodies

The government should expand its diplomatic presence within UN agencies, funds, and programmes, including building the multilateral capacity of “hybrid” Canadian embassies/high commissions that house Canadian representatives to UN bodies outside of New York and Geneva.

Canada’s permanent UN missions in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, Rome, and elsewhere, are woefully understaffed relative to other G7 and G20 countries. More robust staffing would enable Canada’s UN mission to be more proactive within the many UN meetings of interest to Canada. New staffing should be permanent (i.e., not subject to the availability of temporary “sunsetting” funding) and extend to all of Canada’s other UN missions, particularly hybrid bilateral/multilateral missions within Canadian embassies and consulates abroad. On this, we welcome the Future of Diplomacy report’s call for a review of Canada’s capacity at UN missions and maintain that, in our own assessment, there are very good reasons to augment staffing of Canada’s UN missions. What is sorely missing, however, is a commitment that the findings of such a review would be accorded the resources necessary for effective implementation.

Staffing increases should target better representation from departments outside of GAC, which can provide on-the-spot technical expertise. Canadian missions in Geneva, London, Montréal, New York, Rome, and Vienna already feature such arrangements given the increasingly specialized character of many negotiations, but more are needed. Representation from partner departments to GAC should be increased, with particular attention to easing the logistical and financial burden of these positions for the home departments of those posted. The advantages of such placements for these departments in building their own capacities would be significant.

Staffing levels should reflect the multilateral priorities identified in the proposed UN Strategy. For instance, if environment and climate change are deemed priorities, staffing increases should include positions focused on environment in New York and at the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi, which handles Canada's representation within UNEP. In the latter case, a dedicated Deputy Permanent Representative would do much to increase Canada's profile within the UN Environmental Assembly and in relation to the UNEP secretariat. Representatives from Environment and Climate Change Canada, for example, would further strengthen Canada's green diplomacy in Nairobi. This decision must be taken in tandem with a significant reinvestment in expertise within GAC at headquarters on global environmental questions. GAC needs to get back in the UN environment game.

7. Enhance Engagement with the Canadian Public on UN Issues

The work of civil society organizations, including academia, advocacy groups, and thinktanks, enriches policy discourses in the country, spurring innovation within Canada's UN diplomacy. The contributions of such groups to the human security agenda in the 1990s were considerable, for instance. A culture of government openness and exchange with these groups, entailing regular consultations, would bolster Canadian policy capacity. Civil society organizations in Canada also serve as useful amplifiers of Canadian soft power and public diplomacy. The concept of an Open Policy Hub, proposed within the Future of Diplomacy project, could provide a platform for such engagement.

The department could consider re-establishing something akin to the Centre for Foreign Policy Development as an internal GAC thinktank that facilitates outreach.

Public outreach on UN issues should extend beyond specialists. The government could increase support for the United Nations Association of Canada, financially and through other means.

The government should encourage UN officials to visit the country with greater frequency, increasing public awareness of UN affairs. Canadian Ministers, in turn, should engage directly with the UN—including the agencies headquartered in Canada—rather than view UN meetings primarily as opportunities for bilateral engagements. Ministerial and high-level announcements can be used by the government to highlight activities underway at the UN.

To the extent possible, outreach should be expanded to all Canadian political parties to establish a baseline consensus for Canada’s UN involvement. This would help avoid having major Canadian initiatives and candidacies at the UN undermined by changes of government.

8. Appoint More Canadian Nationals to UN Secretariats

The government should develop a more robust system to support the appointment of Canadian nationals to senior UN posts and expand its support for Canadians entering the UN secretariat’s Junior Professional Officer (JPO) programme.

Canada current funds a small number of JPO positions, chiefly targeting UN bodies with a development focus. While Canadians are well-represented within the UN secretariat overall, the government should expand its support for the JPO program and include junior officers in GAC’s multilateral stream in that program. Over and above a more modest desire to “renew” Canadian participation in the program, outlined in the Future of Diplomacy report, we recommend substantial and strategic reinvestment. If recruits rise through the UN ranks, their presence will be a resource for the government. If they return to government service in Canada, their experience, knowledge, and networks are an asset. In expanding participation in the JPO program, the government should take a strategic perspective by focusing on positions within UN bodies of greatest importance to Canada’s international interests.

The government should also develop a better approach to enable Canadians to obtain high-level appointments within the UN. The current system provides career disincentives for such moves and handles applications only a case-by-case basis. The government should strengthen its appointment processes, helping to ensure that excellent candidates bolster key UN bodies.

PANEL BIOGRAPHIES

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Kerry Buck was Canada's Ambassador to NATO from 2015 to 2018. Previously she held Assistant Deputy Minister and other senior positions for International Security, Africa, Latin America, Afghanistan, Middle East and human rights. She was posted to Canada's permanent mission to New York and spent most of her thirty-year diplomatic career working on peace, security, human rights and humanitarian issues at the UN, G7 and NATO.

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Louise Blais was Ambassador of Canada and Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations (2017-2021). A career diplomat, she served in Washington, Tokyo, Paris and as Consul General in Atlanta. She is now Diplomat-in-Residence at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs and Université Laval.

Paul Heinbecker served as Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations in New York, Ambassador of Canada to Germany, and Minister (Political Affairs) at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, as well as in more junior positions in Ankara, Stockholm, and the OECD. In Ottawa, he has been Chief Foreign Policy Advisor to then Prime Minister Mulroney, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet for Foreign Policy and Defence, and Assistant Deputy Minister for International Security and Global Affairs in the Department of External/Foreign Affairs. Paul was an architect of Canada's human security agenda, helped negotiate an end to the Kosovo war, headed the Canadian delegation to the Climate Change negotiations in Kyoto, and represented Canada on the UN Security Council. At the UN he was a leading opponent of the Iraq war, and an advocate of the International Criminal Court and the Responsibility to Protect.

Masud Husain retired from Canada's foreign service in the summer of 2021. Upon his retirement, he was Director General and Deputy Legal Adviser at Global Affairs Canada. Prior to this appointment, he was Canada's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi and Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. His other foreign postings include Canada's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York and embassies in the Netherlands, Jordan and Syria. At Global Affairs Canada's headquarters in Ottawa, his other notable appointments include Director General for the Middle East and Executive Director of the Criminal and Diplomatic Law Division.

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Sabine Nölke, LL.B., LL.M., LL.D. (hc), is an international lawyer who throughout her career specialized in the law relating to the United Nations Charter, international peace and security, international institutions, human rights, economic sanctions, disarmament, terrorism, and armed conflict. She was Canada's Ambassador to both the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the international institutions and tribunals in The Hague.

Guillermo Rishchynski was the executive director for Canada at the Inter-American Development Bank from 2016 to 2019. He served as Canada's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations from August 2011 to December 2015. He has served abroad in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Amman, Melbourne, Jakarta, Chicago and, from 1999 to 2002, as Ambassador to Colombia, in Bogotá. In Ottawa, he has served the department as Deputy Director, Latin America and Caribbean Trade Division, and Director, Team Canada Task Force, and Inspector General. He joined the Canadian International Development Agency in 2003, serving as Vice-President of the Americas Branch until his appointment as Ambassador to Brazil in 2005.





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