

# Great Canadian Question: Canada and the World

**Title: Seize the Day - Canada's Need for Revival**

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*“¡ Ah, tú es de Canadá! Quiero a canadienses.”*

During my travels in Paraguay I received this welcome: “You are from Canada! I love Canadians.” Overseas, people think of Canada as a huge country, blessed with land and resources. They picture a place where freedom, democracy and human rights are valued; where diversity is encouraged. Canadians are perceived as a peaceful people with a generous spirit. Yet, I wonder whether we still deserve such admiration and appreciation from our Southern friends.

This reputation stems from a past of great peacekeepers, visionaries and policies that reflected understanding and generosity towards the Global South. Perceptions are linked to eminent history makers, such as Lester B. Pearson, who represented Canada as it began asserting itself internationally in the post-World War II era. However, today's view of an influential nation is riding on the coat tails of past policymakers. We are drifting; our role in the world has diminished. In terms of aid, peacekeeping, and diplomacy Canada is falling behind its potential. Regarding its trade relations, Canada risks eroding its sovereignty beyond reasonable expectations.

Thanks to Lester B. Pearson's vision, Canada gained international recognition as a donor and peacekeeper. The 1950 Colombo Plan initiated a series of acts where Canada participated to bring assistance to the southern hemisphere. During the Cold War, foreign aid was a means to alleviate poverty and prevent the spread of communism. Both Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau recognized the need to alleviate global disparity and acted to establish relationships with Southern states. In the early 1970s, the Canadian Government made a further commitment: 0.7 percent of Canada's GDP would be designated for aid. Despite being repeated by politicians over the decades, this promise has never been met. Last year, Ottawa's foreign-aid level was 0.28 per cent of GDP.<sup>1</sup> Canada still falls short of its goal; it is an enduring embarrassment.

Allan Gotlieb lists the “alleviation of poverty” as a Canadian interest for the next century. If Canada wants to make a significant contribution to the developing world, it must reform its aid program. Despite overseeing large cuts, Chrétien ironically signed the Millennium Development Goals and hosted the G8 panel on African reform. Ottawa preaches moral obligation and compassion, but the numbers speak; Canada is not even close to reaching the 0.7 percent benchmark. In spite of its tightened budget, the Canadian International Development Agency has managed to be involved in diverse fields, from disaster relief to election observation. However, the organization has been stretched thin. Worse, Canada's assistance comes with stringent conditions. According to

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 43 percent of Canada's aid is tied, forcing the developing world to buy our goods and services.<sup>2</sup> This hurts local businesses and fosters dependency on the North, undermining the South's ability to develop. As a nation that promotes free enterprise, our aid should not limit recipients' choices in their own markets.

Like its international development efforts, Canada's military is also in need of renovation. After the Second World War, Canada emerged with the fourth largest military in the world.<sup>3</sup> We fought through Italy, liberated Holland, and protected the Atlantic. However this strength was soon forgotten. With the Cold War came the beginning of our demobilization. Criticized by NATO and the United States for being underfunded, today's military is among the weakest in the industrialized world. During the Second World War, over one million Canadians fought on the front lines, now the armed forces contains only 62,000 personnel; we are a shadow of our past.<sup>4</sup> For a G8 country with the second largest landmass and the longest coastline in the world, these numbers are disturbing.

For all its shortcomings as a warrior, isn't Canada the most engaged peacekeeper? First proposed by Lester Pearson to resolve the Suez Crisis, peacekeeping has been an important part of our history. For his vision, Pearson won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 and established our role in brokering international stability. In the post-war era, erosion of the military did not stop the deployment of 125,000 Canadian peacekeepers abroad.<sup>5</sup> However, our country's failure to reinvest in its military has slowly undermined our ability to contribute to current peacekeeping initiatives. Canada can no longer accept every mission established by the United Nations; we are overextended and lack the capacity. "Without the necessary investment in 'hard power,'" writes Allan Gotlieb, "our efforts to play a significant role in humanitarian interventions are likely to be regarded more as posturing than as serious national commitment."

Canada once distinguished itself in diplomacy. Emerging from the Second World War as a leading middle power, Canada established missions and sought solutions internationally. Pearson became the president of the UN General Assembly; we contributed to the growth of the Atlantic Community and to NATO. In conjunction with peace keeping, we used quiet diplomacy to resolve international disputes and gained recognition. However, today's Canadian diplomatic corps is in decline; Ottawa is becoming less influential and imaginative. Suffering from lack of resources, the Department of Foreign Affairs is having difficulty in retaining an elite work force; qualified diplomats can find better pay and promotion elsewhere. "Knowledge of foreign languages, cultures and history; analytical skills; excellent judgment refined through sustained experience—these are the essential ingredients... for producing influential diplomats and foreign-policy advisors. Alas the recipe is rarely followed these days," laments Gotlieb, former ambassador to Washington. He criticizes that our pattern of "turning diplomats into trade-promotion officers has had negative implications for Canada's influence in the world."

We may be underfunded as a donor, undermanned as a soldier, and less influential as an ambassador, but as a trader, our country is a Northern tiger. In 2005 we exported \$364.8

billion worth of goods and services, relying on other economies for our high standard of living.<sup>6</sup> This topic leads to our relationship with the United States. Throughout the post-war era, Canada gradually shifted its allegiance from Britain, pursuing exports with its southern neighbour. The trend became irreversible. Today, the United States and Canada comprise the world's most lucrative trade relationship. In 2004, bilateral trade was close to \$680 billion, with over \$1.8 billion worth of goods and services crossing the border every day.<sup>7</sup> Gotlieb states that "the achievement of more secure access to US markets" will be an ongoing priority in our foreign relations.

Although successful, our trade relations with the United States pose a challenge for a country as it tries to reassert itself in the world. The US accounts for 85.1 percent of Canadian exports, Japan, Ottawa's second largest trade partner, receives only 2.1 percent of Canadian exports.<sup>8</sup> The United States dominates our trade like never before. Pierre Trudeau's attempts to diversify our trade relations through increased exchanges with Europe were met with little success; it is easier to trade over borders than oceans. Janice Stein warns that our dependence on the American economy and its cultural influence are the biggest threats to our sovereignty. As trade grows so does pressure to harmonize social and economic policy. We are heavily dependent on a superpower whose interests sometimes conflict with our priorities and whose economy goes up and down, limiting our independence.

With trade playing a fundamental role in today's foreign policy, Canada needs to proceed with caution. In the *Globe and Mail*, former prime minister Joe Clark wrote that "there can be no doubt about the importance of the United States to Canada... but [US relations] should not be [our] dominant international priority."<sup>9</sup> Gotlieb suggests that Ottawa follow the example made by former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney whose "hands-on diplomacy delivered agreements on free-trade [and] acid rain." Alternatively, Mulroney disagreed with the United States on contentious issues like the intervention in Nicaragua and the South African apartheid. Through a balanced approach, Canada can maintain good relations with its powerful neighbour and still speak independently on the world stage. Gotlieb states further that our "privileged relationship" with the United States enables us "to affect the course of international events." A strong relation with the world's superpower puts us in a position of influence. Conversely, "Canada can lead where the United States wishes it could go," maintains Stein. Our peaceful reputation with the developing world, the Commonwealth and La Francophonie places us where Washington cannot always recommend itself.

*"Quiero a canadienses."*

I remember with fondness this amigo's words. However, I ask myself, "Why love Canadians?" We cut our foreign aid to his part of the world, scaled back our peacekeeping and weakened our diplomatic presence. Despite such declines, Canada has managed to maintain an amiable reputation abroad. However, in too much of the world Canada is running on what we used to do, not what we do now. For all its history and diversity, is this the best that Canada can do?

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is time to forge ahead with new ideas and rediscover our place in the world. Given the levels of global poverty and human suffering in parts of the world,

Canada needs to be more generous and increase its aid and diplomatic efforts towards creative solutions. In this era of uncertainty, Canada must prioritize military spending for defense and retake its leadership role in peacekeeping. In an increasingly complicated world, Canada needs to encourage dialogue between nations by investing in strong diplomacy. With the United States, Canada must remember that foreign affairs extend beyond the continent. Canada must steer a path that enhances trade, yet asserts a sovereign role in the world. There has never been a more critical moment to find our voice. Through reinvestment, Canada can recover its stature and find its place in the sun.

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