

Address By Minister Freeland On Canada's Foreign Policy Priorities

Global Affairs Canada

Mr. Speaker,

Here is a question: Is Canada an essential country, at this time in the life of our planet?

Most of us here would agree that it is. But if we assert this, we are called to explain why. And we are called to consider the specifics of what we must do as a consequence.

International relationships that had seemed immutable for 70 years are being called into question. From Europe, to Asia, to our own North American home, long-standing pacts that have formed the bedrock of our security and prosperity for generations are being tested.

And new shared human imperatives—the fight against climate change first among them—call for renewed, uncommon resolve.

Turning aside from our responsibilities is not an option. Instead we must think carefully and deeply about what is happening, and find a way forward.

By definition, the path we choose must be one that serves the interests of all Canadians and upholds our broadly held national values; that preserves and nurtures Canadian prosperity and security; and that contributes to our collective goal of a better, safer, more just, more prosperous, and sustainable world. One we can pass onto our children and grandchildren, with a sense of having done the right thing.

This is no small order, Mr. Speaker. It is what I would like to spend few minutes talking about today.

Since before the end of the Second World War, beginning with the international conference at Bretton Woods in 1944, Canada has been deeply engaged in, and greatly enjoyed the benefits of, a global order based on rules.

These were principles and standards that were applied, perhaps not perfectly at all times by all states, but certainly by the vast majority of democratic states, most of the time.

The system had at its heart the core notions of territorial integrity, human rights, democracy, respect for the rule of law, and an aspiration to free and friendly trade.

The common volition toward this order arose from a fervent determination not to repeat the immediate past.

Humankind had learned through the direct experience of horror and hardship, Mr. Speaker, that the narrow pursuit of national self-interest, the law of the jungle, led to nothing but carnage and poverty.

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Two global conflicts and the Great Depression, all in the span of less than half a century, taught our parents and grandparents that national borders must be inviolate; that international trading relationships created not only prosperity but also peace; and that a true world community, one based on shared aspirations and standards, was not only desirable but essential to our very survival.

That deep yearning toward lasting peace led to the creation of international institutions that endure to this day—with the nations of Western Europe, together with their transatlantic allies, the United States and Canada, at their foundation

In each of these evolutions in how we humans organize ourselves, Canadians played pivotal roles.

There was Bretton Woods itself, where the Canadian delegation was instrumental in drafting provisions of the fledgling International Monetary Fund and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

A few years later in 1947, a Canadian, Dana Wilgress, played a leading role at the meetings in Geneva that led to the development of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, precursor to the WTO.

It is a Canadian, John Humphrey, who is generally credited as the principal author of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. That was the first of what became a series of declarations to set international standards in this vital area.

And let us not neglect the great Canadian perhaps best known for advancing the cause of humanitarian internationalism—Lester B. Pearson. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership during the Suez crisis in 1956, for the creation of modern peacekeeping.

These institutions may seem commonplace now, Mr. Speaker. We may take them for granted. We should not. Seventy years ago they were revolutionary. And they set the stage for the longest period of peace and prosperity in our history.

It was the same appreciation of the common interests of the human family, in caring for our common home, that led us to the acid rain treaty of the Mulroney era. It is what led us to the Montreal Protocol of 1987 to phase out CFCs and preserve the ozone layer. It is what led us to Paris, Mr. Speaker, with 194 signatories at our side. That is global co-operation.

And it is important to note that when sacrifice was required to support and strengthen the global order—military power, in defence of our principles and our alliances—Canada was there. In the Suez, in Korea, in the Congo, in Cyprus, in the First Gulf War, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, up to and including today in Iraq, among many other places, Canada has been there.

As the Prime Minister has often said, that is what Canadians do. We step up.

Today it is worth reminding ourselves why we step up—why we devote time and resources to foreign policy, defence and development, why we have sent Canadian soldiers, sailors, aviators, diplomats, aid workers, intelligence officers, doctors, nurses, medics and engineers into situations of danger, disaster, and chaos overseas, even at times when Canadian territory was not directly at risk.

Why do we spend billions on defence, if we are not immediately threatened?

For some countries—Israel, Latvia come to mind—the answer is self-evident. Countries that face a clear and immediate existential challenge know they need to spend on military and foreign policy. And they know why.

For a few lucky countries—like Canada and the United States—that feel protected by geography and are good neighbours, the answer is less obvious. Indeed, you could easily imagine a Canadian view that says, we are safe on our continent, and we have things to do at home, so let's turn inward. Let's say Canada first.

Here's why that would be wrong.

First, though no foreign adversary is poised to invade us, we do face clear challenges. Climate change is by definition a shared menace, affecting every single person on this planet. Civil war, poverty, drought and natural disasters anywhere in the world threaten us as well—not least because these catastrophes spawn globally destabilizing mass migrations. The dictatorship in North Korea, crimes against humanity in Syria, the monstrous extremists of Daesh, and Russian military adventurism and expansionism also all pose clear strategic threats to the liberal democratic world, including Canada.

Our ability to act against such threats alone is limited. It requires cooperation with like-minded countries.

On the military front, Canada's geography has meant that we have always been able to count on American self-interest to provide a protective umbrella beneath which we have found indirect shelter.

Some think, some even say, we should therefore free ride on U.S. military power. Why invest billions to maintain a capable, professional, well-funded and well-equipped Canadian military?

The answer is obvious: To rely solely on the U.S. security umbrella would make us a client state. And although we have an incredibly good relationship with our American friends and neighbours, such a dependence would not be in Canada's interest.

That is why doing our fair share is clearly necessary. It is why our commitment to NORAD, and to our strategic relationship with the United States, is so critical. It is by pulling our weight in this partnership, and in all our international partnerships, that we, in fact, have weight.

To put it plainly: Canadian diplomacy and development sometimes require the backing of hard power. Force is of course always a last resort. But the principled use of force, together with our allies and governed by international law, is part of our history and must be part of our future.

To have that capacity requires a substantial investment, which this government is committed to making. The Minister of Defence will elaborate fully on that tomorrow. I know he will make Canadians justly proud.

Whatever their politics, Canadians understand that, as a middle power living next to the world's only super power, Canada has a huge interest in an international order based on rules. One in

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which might is not always right. One in which more powerful countries are constrained in their treatment of smaller ones by standards that are internationally respected, enforced and upheld.

The single most important pillar of this, which emerged following the carnage of the First and Second World Wars, is the sanctity of borders. And that principle, today, is under siege.

This is why the democratic world has united behind Ukraine. The illegal seizure of Ukrainian territory by Russia is the first time since the end of the Second World War that a European power has annexed by force the territory of another European country. This is not something we can accept or ignore.

The atrocities of Daesh directly challenge both the sanctity of borders and the liberal international order itself. They create chaos, not only because of the carnage they perpetrate on their innocent victims, but because of the humanitarian crises and migratory explosions that follow. This is why the world has united against this scourge; violent extremism challenges our way of life. We will always oppose it.

Another key benefit for Canada from an international system based on rules, is of course free trade. In this sphere as well, beggar-thy-neighbour policies hit middle powers soonest and hardest. That is the implacable lesson of the 1930s, and the Great Depression. Rising trade barriers hurt the people they are intended to help. They curb growth, stifle innovation and kill employment. This is a lesson we should learn from history. We should not need to teach it to ourselves again through painful experience.

The international order an earlier generation built faces two big challenges, both unprecedented.

The first is the rapid emergence of the global South and Asia—most prominently, China—and the need to integrate these countries into the world's economic and political system in a way that is additive, that preserves the best of the old order that preceded their rise, and that addresses the existential threat of climate change. This is a problem that simply cannot be solved by nations working alone. We must work together.

I have focused these remarks on the development of the postwar international order—a process that was led primarily by the Atlantic powers of North America and Western Europe.

But we recognize that the global balance of power has changed greatly since then—and will continue to evolve as more nations prosper.

The G20, in whose creation Canada was instrumental, was an early acknowledgement of this emerging reality. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia are on the ascendant, delivering ever-increasing living standards to fast-growing populations bursting with innovation, creativity and enterprise.

This is not a trend anyone should fear: it is one we should embrace. Let us recognize that the peace and prosperity we in the West have enjoyed these past 70 years are desired by all, and increasingly within reach of all. And, as Canadians, let us be agents of that change.

Let us seize the great opportunity we now have to help the people of the world's fastest-growing countries join the global middle class and the multilateral system that supports it. Peace and prosperity are every person's birthright. The second great challenge is an exhaustion in the West of the belief among working people, the middle class, that the globalized system can help

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them better their lives. This is an enormous crisis of confidence. It has the potential, if we let it, to undermine global prosperity itself.

At the root of this anxiety around the world is a pervasive sense that too many people have been left behind, betrayed by a system they were promised would make them better off, but hasn't.

Here's the key: it's true that the system is flawed. But international trade is the wrong target, Mr. Speaker. The real culprit is domestic policy that fails to appreciate that continued growth, and political stability, depend on domestic measures that share the wealth.

Admittedly, this is a complicated problem. If there were easy solutions everybody would be applying them.

But let's be clear on this point: it is wrong to view the woes of our middle class as the result of fiendish behaviour by foreigners.

The truth is that the nature of work has changed because of profound, and generally benign, global economic innovation. This transformation, driven primarily by automation and the digital revolution, is broadly positive.

Managed fairly, it has the potential to increase prosperity for all—not just the global one percent. That means supporting families, supporting pensioners, and supporting education and retraining—as the Minister of Finance did in his recent budget.

By better supporting the middle class, and those working hard to join it, Canada is defining an approach to globalization that can be a model. At the same time, we strongly support the global 2030 Goals for Sustainable Development, Mr. Speaker. The world abroad and the world at home are not two solitudes. They are connected.

Likewise, by embracing multiculturalism and diversity, Canadians are embodying a way of life that works. We can say this in all humility, but also without any false self-effacement: Canadians know about living side-by-side with people of diverse origins and beliefs, whose ancestors hail from the far corners of the globe, in harmony and peace. We're good at it. Watch how we do it.

We say this in the full knowledge that we also have problems of our own to overcome—most egregiously the injustices suffered by Indigenous people in Canada. We must never flinch from acknowledging this great failure, even as we do the hard work of seeking restoration and reconciliation.

Now, it is clearly not our role to impose our values around the world, Mr. Speaker. No one appointed us the world's policeman. But it is our role to clearly stand for these rights both in Canada and abroad.

It is our role to provide refuge to the persecuted and downtrodden, to the extent we are able, as we are so proud to have done for more than 40,000 Syrian refugees.

It is our role to set a standard for how states should treat women, gays and lesbians, transgendered people, racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious minorities, and Indigenous people.

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We can and must play an active role in the preservation and strengthening of the global order from which we have benefited so greatly. Doing so is in our interest, because our own open society is most secure in a world of open societies. And it is under threat in a world where open societies are under threat.

In short, Canadian liberalism is a precious idea. It would not long survive in a world dominated by the clash of great powers and their vassals, struggling for supremacy or, at best, an uneasy détente.

Canada can work for better, Mr. Speaker. We must work for better.

Let me pause here and address the United States, directly. As the Prime Minister said last week: Canada is deeply disappointed by the decision by the U.S. federal government to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate.

That said, we will continue to seek opportunities for constructive progress on the environment, wherever we can find them, with our counterparts in Washington and across the great United States, at all levels of government and with partners in business, labour and civil society.

As I have said, we Canadians can rightly be proud of the role we played in building the postwar order, and the unprecedented peace and prosperity that followed.

Yet even as we celebrate our own part in that project, it's only fair for us to acknowledge the larger contribution of the United States. For in blood, in treasure, in strategic vision, in leadership, America has paid the lion's share.

The United States has truly been the indispensable nation, Mr. Speaker. For their unique, seven-decades-long contribution to our shared peace and prosperity, and on behalf of all Canadians, I would like to profoundly thank our American friends.

As I have argued, Canada believes strongly that this stable, predictable international order has been deeply in our national interest. And we believe it has helped foster peace and prosperity for our southern neighbours, too.

Yet it would be naive or hypocritical to claim before this House that all Americans today agree. Indeed, many of the voters in last year's presidential election cast their ballots, animated in part by a desire to shrug off the burden of world leadership. To say this is not controversial: it is simply a fact.

Canada is grateful, and will always be grateful, to our neighbour for the outsized role it has played in the world. And we seek and will continue to seek to persuade our friends that their continued international leadership is very much in their national interest—as well as that of the rest of the free world.

Yet we also recognize that this is ultimately not our decision to make. It is a choice Americans must make for themselves.

The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership, puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course. For Canada that course must be the renewal, indeed the strengthening, of the postwar multilateral order.

We will follow this path, with open hands and open hearts extended to our American friends, seeking to make common cause as we have so often in the past. And indeed, as we continue to do now on multiple fronts—from border security, to the defence of North America through NORAD, to the fight against Daesh, to our efforts within NATO, to nurturing and improving our trading relationship, which is the strongest in the world.

And, at the same time, we will work with other like-minded people and countries who share our aims.

Mr. Speaker, to put this in sharper focus, those aims are as follows:

First, we will robustly support the rules-based international order, and all its institutions, and seek ways to strengthen and improve them.

We will strongly support the multilateral forums where such discussions are held—including the G7, the G20, the OAS, APEC, the WTO, the WHO, the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, the Arctic Council, and of course NATO and the UN.

A cornerstone of our multilateral agenda is our steadfast commitment to the Transatlantic Alliance. Our bond is manifest in CETA, our historic trade agreement with the European Union—which we believe in and warmly support—and in our military deployment this summer to Latvia.

There can be no clearer sign that NATO and Article 5 are at the heart of Canada's national security policy.

We will strive for leadership in all these multilateral forums. We are honoured to be hosting the G7 next year, and we are energetically pursuing a two-year term on the UN Security Council. We seek this UN seat because we wish to be heard. For we are safer and more prosperous, Mr. Speaker, when more of the world shares Canadian values.

Those values include feminism, and the promotion of the rights of women and girls.

It is important, and historic, that we have a prime minister and a government proud to proclaim ourselves feminists. Women's rights are human rights. That includes sexual reproductive rights and the right to safe and accessible abortions. These rights are at the core of our foreign policy.

To that end, in the coming days, my colleague the Minister of International Development and La Francophonie will unveil Canada's first feminist international assistance policy, which will target women's rights and gender equality. We will put Canada at the forefront of this global effort.

This is a matter of basic justice and also basic economics. We know that empowering women, overseas and here at home, makes families and countries more prosperous. Canada's values are informed by our historical duality of French and English; by our cooperative brand of federalism; by our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic citizenry; and by our geography—bridging Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic. Our values are informed by the traditions and aspirations of the Indigenous people in Canada. And our values include an unshakeable commitment to pluralism, human rights and the rule of law.

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Second: We will make the necessary investments in our military, to not only redress years of neglect and underfunding, but also to place the Canadian Armed Forces on a new footing—with the equipment, training, resources and consistent, predictable financing they need to do their difficult, dangerous and important work.

We owe this to our women and men in uniform. We will not let them down, Mr. Speaker.

Canada's broader interest in investing in a capable, professional and robust military is very clear: If middle powers do not implicate themselves in the furtherance of peace and stability around the world, that will be left to the Great Powers to settle among themselves. This would not be in Canada's interest.

Third, we are a trading nation. Far from seeing trade as a zero-sum game, we believe in trading relationships that benefit all parties. We look forward to working with our continental partners to modernize the North American Free Trade Agreement, and to making a great trading partnership even better. We will also intensify our efforts to diversify Canadian trade worldwide. We will actively seek new trade agreements that further Canadian economic interests and that reflect our values—with the Canada-EU Trade Agreement as our template.

We are proud of the role Canada has played in creating a rules-based international trading order. We believe in the WTO and will continue our work to make it stronger, and more responsive to the needs of ordinary people in Canada and around the world.

We believe in progressive trade that works for working people. That is why we are very proud that this month, Canada will ratify the last of the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization.

In summary, we will be tireless in pursuing our national interest, tireless in upholding progressive Canadian values, tireless in working to create a rules-based international order for the 21st century. Seventy years ago Canada played a pivotal role in forming the postwar international order. We are now called—by virtue of our unique experience, expertise, geography, diversity and values—to do this again, for a new century.

Mr. Speaker, these are ambitious objectives. There is no guarantee of success.

We set them, not in the assumption that success will come easily, but in the certain knowledge that it will not. We will venture, in noble and good causes. We will risk. We will enjoy victories—and we will suffer defeats. But we will keep working toward a better world, Mr. Speaker, because that is what Canadians do.

Let me conclude on a personal note.

A popular criticism today of the argument I am making here, is that all such ideas are abstract, perhaps of interest to the so-called Laurentian elite, or the media, or the Ottawa bubble, but not at all relevant to “real” Canadians.

That line of reasoning is the ultimate, elite condescension; it is nonsense. And in reply, I offer the example of my grandfather, John Wilbur Freeland.

He was born in Peace River, Alberta—the son of a pioneer family. Wilbur was 24 in 1940, and making a bit of a living as a cowboy and boxer. His nickname was “Pretty Boy” Freeland.

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My grandpa was the opposite of an Upper Canada elite. But in the darkest days of the Second World War, Wilbur enlisted to serve. Two of his brothers, Carleton and Warren, joined up too. Wilbur and Carleton came home. Warren did not.

My grandfather told me they signed up partly for the excitement—Europe, even at war, was an exotic destination for the youths of the Peace Country.

But there was more to it than a young man's thirst for adventure. My grandfather was one of a generation of Canadians who intuitively understood the connection between their lives, and those of people they'd never met, whose speech they couldn't comprehend, who lived on a continent so far away as to constitute, back then, another world.

That generation of Canadians—the Greatest Generation, we call them, with good reason—had survived the Great Depression. They were born in the aftermath of the First World War. They appreciated viscerally that a world without fixed borders or rules for the global economy, was a world of strife and poverty. They sought to prevent that from ever happening again.

That is why they risked and gave their lives to fight in a European war. That is why, when they came home, they cheerfully contributed to the great project of rebuilding Europe and creating a postwar world order. That is why they counted themselves lucky to be able to do so.

They were our parents, and grandparents, and great-grandparents. The challenge we face today is significant, to be sure. But it pales next to the task they faced, and met.

Our job today is to preserve their achievement, and to build on it; to use the multilateral structures they created as the foundation for global accords and institutions fit for the new realities of this century.

They rose to their generation's great challenge. And so can we.