

Trudeau's Foreign Policy: Progressive Rhetoric, Conventional Policies

Article by Dominik Tolksdorf, Xandie Kuenning
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On October 21, Canada will head to the polls. Four years ago, Canadian Liberal Justin Trudeau was elected prime minister on the back of a cultivated progressive persona and commitments to match. Seen from Europe, Canada under Trudeau became a key partner in a global context characterised by a turn away from the rules-based international order. With Canada's political future in the balance, Dominik Tolksdorf and Xandie Kuenning ask whether Trudeau's record in government stands up to scrutiny and look to where Canada might be heading in the years to come.

For European policymakers, Canada under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has proven to be a more reliable partner in North America than the US under President Donald Trump. Trudeau has spoken out in favour of democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and a rules-based international order. Trudeau's rival for the post of prime minister, the conservative Andrew Scheer, who supports Brexit and shares Trump's hawkish views on Iran and China, would likely turn out to be a more difficult partner for Europe.

Under Trudeau's predecessor, the conservative Stephen Harper (2006-2015), Canada's foreign policy departed at times from its traditional focus on multilateral cooperation, human rights, and support for the United Nations. The election of Trudeau in 2015 therefore raised high expectations in Europe of progressive domestic policies and a greater global engagement. Trudeau's foreign policy vision of 2015 included a strong focus on human rights, climate policies, a re-engagement with the UN, gender equality and women's empowerment, and development aid primarily directed towards the poorest countries. However, after almost four years in office, there are contradictions between rhetoric and actions in Canada's foreign policy.

A reliable partner for Europe

Europe's relationship with Canada has intensified under Trudeau, including in the framework of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) — which has been provisionally applied since 2017 — and the EU-Canada Strategic Partnership Agreement. While CETA, which is set to remove tariffs on 98 per cent of goods, has already been ratified by the Canadian parliament, it has been received more controversially in Europe. Due to concerns that CETA will allow for lower standards of food safety and meat labelling (such as regarding the country of origin) or undermine the protection of speciality foods, some member states' parliaments have opposed the CETA ratification (so far, only eight member states have ratified the agreement).

The strategic partnership has proved less controversial. The agreement reflects the common interests and values of Canada and the EU and has established strategic dialogues that should lead to closer cooperation in fields such as cybersecurity and counter-terrorism. Those shared values were recently emphasised at the EU-Canada summit of July 2019 and, more generally, Canada often supports EU positions on foreign policy issues. Canada has imposed

sanctions on Russia since 2014 and participates in EU security missions in Ukraine and the Palestinian Territories.

Securing a rules-based international order

Canada and the EU have both tried to secure a rules-based international order in recent years. As a result, particularly in comparison to Trump, Trudeau enjoys a high level of trust among European policymakers. When holding the G7 presidency in 2018, the Canadian government proposed a “progressive agenda” that included the advancement of gender equality and women’s empowerment, closer cooperation on climate change, oceans and clean energy, and building a more peaceful and secure world. However, the summit in Charlevoix was marred by tensions between Trump and the other G7 members over tariffs and attitudes towards Russia, as well as a clash between Trump and Trudeau.

In the relationship with the United States under Trump, Trudeau has faced similar challenges to some of his European counterparts, particularly on trade and defence. After tough trade negotiations, the US, Canada, and Mexico signed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement in 2018, which to some degree improved Canada’s relations with the US. However, together with its European allies, Canada is still trying to overcome the US’s refusal to appoint new judges to the World Trade Organization’s appeals panel.

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Similar to some European allies, Canada has struggled to fulfill its commitment to increase its defense budget to 2 per cent of its GDP: in 2018, Canada only spent 1.3 per cent of its GDP on defense. Like Germany, the Trudeau government has tried to counterbalance this weak spot by playing an active role within NATO’s operations. While Canada withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 2011 and its fighter aircraft from the campaign against the Islamic State in 2016, it has led a battlegroup in Latvia as part of NATO’s presence in the region. In 2018, Canada took command of the new NATO training mission in Iraq, deploying 250 soldiers.

Vocal on global warming, but still lagging behind

Shortly after his election, Trudeau announced that Canada would “take on a new leadership role internationally” to fight climate change and he has since repeated this commitment on several occasions. The G7 Presidency under Trudeau placed climate policies high on the agenda, stating that “Canada and its G7 partners recognize the urgent need to accelerate the transition towards a sustainable, resilient, low carbon future”. The policies of Trudeau’s government, however, have been more business friendly than his rhetoric would suggest, matching the pattern seen in other Western countries.

Under Trudeau, Canada signed the Paris Agreement, introduced a federal carbon tax, and promised 2.65 billion Canadian dollars over five years to help developing countries fight climate change. This money funds programmes such as improving access to affordable energy in Africa, the expansion of clean energy infrastructure, and improving energy access for women and girls in developing states. Canada also launched an international alliance to phase out coal from power generation by 2030.

Canada, similar to other G7 countries, is lagging behind in implementing policies to fight global warming

But while the Trudeau government has promoted climate policies on the international level, it has frequently been criticised for not implementing effective policies to meet said international targets domestically. A recent report by the Climate Action Network argues that Canada, similar to other G7 countries, is lagging behind in implementing policies to fight global warming. Canada is the fourth largest producer and exporter of oil in the world and, according to Climate Transparency, produces the greenhouse gas emissions per person among G20 countries. Observers have also condemned the Trudeau government's support of extractive industries, as seen by the recent approval of the expansion of the Trans Mountain tar sands pipeline, which came at the same time as a declaration that the country faced a climate emergency.

Little progress on strengthening UN peacekeeping

Trudeau had promised that Canada would be an active and constructive member of the UN and other multilateral organisations. While Canada increased its engagement with NATO, Ottawa's record at the UN and its peacekeeping missions has been rather less committed.

In 1992, Canada was among the largest troop contributors to UN missions — since then, its deployments have been in steady decline. Trudeau's predecessor Harper was critical of their effectiveness and hesitant to support UN missions. In contrast, Trudeau promised a return to peacekeeping and in 2016 announced that Canada would pledge 600 soldiers and 150 police officers for UN peacekeeping operations by 2019.

However, in his first years in office, Trudeau declined several requests to deploy troops to UN missions, and as of February 2018, only 22 Canadian soldiers had participated in four missions authorised by the UN Security Council. In summer 2018, Canada eventually deployed 250 personnel and several helicopters to the UN Mission in Mali — its first major peacekeeping contribution in 18 years. However, the engagement ended in September 2019, and the Trudeau government repeatedly rejected extending the mission to minimise the gap between the Canadians' departure and the arrival of Romanian replacements. Overall, and again similar to many Western countries, Canada seems to be interested in NATO engagements rather than in UN missions.

Feminist foreign policy: laudable but limited

One of Trudeau's most promising initiatives was his "feminist" approach to foreign policy. In June 2017, Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland outlined the historic relevance of having a feminist prime minister and government and put women's rights, as human rights, at the center of Canadian foreign policy. In 2016, Canada's development aid programme was renamed the Feminist International Assistance Policy, with the specific mandate to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as the most effective way to "reduce extreme poverty and build a more peaceful, inclusive and prosperous world."

On the surface, the programme has laudable goals, the most significant of which is to spend at least 95 per cent of Canada's international assistance on equality and women's empowerment by 2022. The programme focuses on the world's least-developed countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa supposed to receive at least 50 per cent of the funding by 2022. However, in terms of actual foreign policy, it is unclear whether there is much substance behind the rhetoric — the country spends only 0.26 per cent of its gross national income on development assistance, a figure that falls far below the UN target of 0.7 percent.

That being said, the new policy did bear some fruit regarding the empowerment of women in Canada's foreign policy apparatus, where the composition of top diplomats has gone from 29 per cent women and 71 per cent men in 2013, under former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, to 44 per cent women and 56 per cent men as of October 2017, according to data given to OpenCanada by Global Affairs Canada.

Upholding arms exports to the Middle East

Despite Chrystia Freeland's promise that "Canada will always stand up for human rights around the world," Ottawa has had a rather mixed record in this field under Trudeau. Foreign Minister Freeland has frequently been in the international news for her support for human rights and free speech. Canada's relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorated in 2018 when Freeland supported the release of human rights activists from Saudi prisons. Tensions with Riyadh rose further in early 2019 when Canada granted asylum to a Saudi woman who had fled the country.

However, critics have argued that while Canada puts much emphasis on human rights in the Arab world, its arms exports to the Middle East did not change dramatically. Indeed, Canada remains among the largest arms exporters to the region, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — who are considered responsible for human rights violations in Yemen — as Canada's main clients for arms sales. Following the diplomatic row with Saudi Arabia in 2018, Trudeau announced the government would possibly reconsider the deal worth 15 billion Canadian dollars to sell 737 armoured vehicles to Riyadh, which had been signed under Harper. But it seems that Ottawa is unwilling to completely reverse its relationship with Riyadh and has decided to honour the agreement, at the risk that Canada — similar to other Western governments — remains indirectly complicit in human rights violations in Yemen.

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Another humanitarian issue where Trudeau was more visible was that of refugee policies: he campaigned on the promise of allowing 25 000 Syrian refugees into Canada by the end of 2015. While his plans were a little delayed, the country has ultimately accepted almost 60 000 Syrian refugees since 2015. In 2018, Canada admitted the largest number of resettled refugees (28 100 of 92 400 refugees) and had the second highest rate of refugees who gained citizenship. In doing this, Trudeau followed in his father's footsteps: under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Canada accepted more Vietnamese refugees per capita than any other country, taking in 60 000 refugees in just two years, and a total of 110 000 over five years.

While immigration remains a key election issue, growing scepticism towards refugees has caused the Trudeau government to begin tightening its immigration and asylum processes. One tougher policy Canada intends to implement is to reject asylum seekers who have already made a claim in another country that has an immigration information-sharing agreement with Canada, such as the US.

Prospects for Canadian foreign policy under the Conservatives

The leader of the Conservative Party, Andrew Scheer, has clearly distinguished his take on foreign policy from that of Trudeau's and looks towards the Trump administration for inspiration.

Scheer calls for a tougher policy on China, which he considers the "strongest propagator of authoritarian values." Scheer also highlights China's posturing in the Arctic as a threat to Canada's national security, and has criticised China's unfair trade practices. Not too long ago, Canada, under Trudeau, was attempting to woo China into a free trade deal, but the Huawei affair soon put a damper on this budding relationship. Scheer shares the Trump's administration's perspective on Iran and took aim at the Trudeau government's repeal of the sanctions against Tehran following the Iran nuclear deal. Upon being elected, Scheer has promised to list Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist entity, a measure that the US took this spring. Scheer also announced that he

would recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. As a result, Scheer's foreign policy might differ significantly from the EU's positions on the Iran nuclear deal and the Israel-Palestine conflict. With regards to environmental and climate policies, Scheer promised to repeal the carbon tax and has not yet given details on how his administration would meet the Paris Agreement targets.

Similar to Stephen Harper, who established a close relationship with the George W. Bush administration in the early 2000s, Scheer would likely seek a close cooperation with the US President, and probably would pursue a more hawkish foreign policy than Trudeau. This shift might come at the expense of Canada's focus on strengthening multilateralism and a rules-based international order, including in the area of climate policies – an area in which the EU and others need like-minded international partners. While the EU has been able to cultivate a close relationship with Canada under Trudeau due to shared values and similar foreign policy positions, working with a conservative-led Canada might prove to be more difficult. However, Trudeau's popularity has ebbed and his policies increasingly face scrutiny in Canada. If he manages to be re-elected in October, he may well have to spend more time on domestic issues than on global affairs to ensure his political survival.



Dr. Dominik Tolksdorf is program director for Foreign affairs at the Heinrich Böll Foundation Washington, DC. Focusing in his work on US politics and transatlantic relations, Eastern Europe and EU politics, he has published a number of peer-reviewed publications, commissioned studies, think-tank papers and op-eds, and in 2012 published a book on the EU's policies towards Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Xandie (Alexandra) Kuenning is a senior pursuing a BA in International Affairs at Northeastern University. She was formerly the Transatlantic Dialogue Intern at the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Washington, DC where she focused on the international support of LGBTQ+ rights in the Republic of Georgia.

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