

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Allan Gotlieb
To: Canadians Concerned about Canada's Place in the World
Date: September 19, 2018
Re: **TOWARDS A REALITY-BASED FOREIGN POLICY FOR CANADA**
(AN UPDATED EXTRACT FROM THE 2004 C.D. HOWE INSTITUTE BENEFACTORS LECTURE.)

Every nation needs a psychiatrist, Robertson Davies once observed, although I have never found the quote. He must have said it because it is so true in Canada's case.

We seem constantly attracted to opposite poles in our thinking about our role in the world. One pole ties us to hard reality, *realpolitik* if you will, and makes us want our governments to protect the national interest when it deals with other states. Canadians, when they think this way, talk in terms of our sovereignty, security, territory, trade, economic growth and prosperity.

In contrast to the pole of realism, there is another pole that attracts Canadians to an idealistic vocation. Its advocates tend to have a visionary, at times almost romantic, approach to our position in the world. The vision changes from time to time, but at its most expansive, it is based on a mission to create a more just world, promote democracy, reduce inequities among nations, protect victims of injustice and alleviate the conditions of the poor and oppressed. Our squabble with Saudi Arabia is a perfect current example. Canadians believe, as the slogan of a national book chain proclaims, "the world needs more Canada."

When asked to define Canadian foreign policy, Lester Pearson was reported to have replied, "Ask me at the end of the year and when I look back at what Canada has done, I'll tell you what our foreign policy is." Our new government would be well-advised to follow Pearson's example. Whatever we do, we should not try to conceptualize or package our foreign policy in value-wrapped formulations about Canada's place in the world. New directions are increasingly self-evident because they are based on unavoidable realities.

A reality-based foreign policy has a number of requirements. The first is to recognize that transcendent US power is the dominant feature of the contemporary international order. The United States is the only state that articulates and acts on a global strategic vision. At least for the foreseeable future, it is the only state that has the power to do so. China may at some later point come to exercise much greater power than it does today. The European Union might also come to pursue a global strategic vision, but it is not a superpower today, nor does it wish to be. This does not require Canada to blindly align itself with the U.S. global strategic vision. But the worst prescription for a realistic foreign policy for Canada is to seek differentiation from the U.S. for the sake of being different.

A second requirement for a realistic policy is the recognition that Canada's role as a middle power can never be regained. The reasons for this are many. For one thing, Canada hardly qualifies as a middle power because of the size of its economy — one of the world's largest. For another, the very concept of middle power, a creature of cold-war geopolitics, is passé.

A third requirement for a reality-based foreign policy is that Canadians liberate themselves from the belief that the UN is the sacred foundation of our foreign policy. Support for multilateralism and support for the UN are not equivalent. We are, of course, right to be multilateralists, where circumstances warrant. But a practical or realistic perspective would make the choice of unilateralism, bilateralism or multilateralism a question of appropriate means to achieve particular ends.

As a fourth prerequisite for a reality-based foreign policy, we must also abandon our fixation with international rule-making. Canada is no more qualified to be a leader in rule-making than most other members of the UN.

Utopianism, millenarianism and visionary crusades should have no place in Canadian foreign policy. This is a fifth requirement for a reality-based foreign policy. The extreme emphasis placed by our leaders in recent years on Canada's role as advocate for a world of human security, as with Saudi Arabia, is a recipe for our continued marginalization.

A sixth requirement for a realistic foreign policy is the willingness to commit significant resources to achieving Canada's goals. Canada's international aspirations will ring hollow and will be divorced from reality unless Canadians are willing to accord a significantly higher financial priority to the achievement of our foreign policy goals. As a substantial contributor to the hard resources necessary for keeping the peace, holding states together and relieving pain and suffering, Canada's voice will have far greater resonance than as an advocate of "norm creation." We may even regain some of the influence that we wielded in earlier times.

For a full transcript click [here](#).

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