

# Commentary



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## The leadership Canadians expect in the post-COVID world order

Balkan Devlen

### Overview

This commentary is the first of three releases based on a public opinion survey done as part of MLI's project "Leading a community of democracies in the post-COVID world order," which is supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The full results of the survey will be released in three parts in a separate attendant document, each one coinciding with (and covering the issues addressed in) each of these three commentary releases. We undertook this project to ensure that Canadians are aware of the challenges the changing international order brings, and that Canada has the necessary tools and the political will to protect and promote Canadian security, prosperity, and values. This can only be done if we take the lead in working with other democracies and like-minded states from Europe to the Indo-Pacific.

Such a reorientation of foreign policy is only sustainable if it reflects the views and priorities of everyday Canadians and not only the foreign policy elite. Therefore, it is imperative to understand Canadian attitudes and views towards foreign policy and international affairs. In this wide-ranging survey, we asked Canadians across the country their views on our allies as well as adversaries, how they see different international institutions, alli-

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ances, and partnerships (from the UN and NATO to the WTO and Five Eyes), as well as what they think Canadian foreign policy priorities should be.

This first release provides a look at how Canadians view different countries around the world and what they think Canada's influence in international affairs is and should be. The results, details of which you will find below, suggest Canadians have a clear-eyed view of our adversaries. Opinions of China have sunk to new lows, and Russia isn't far behind. Canadians need to know more about some of our "new" allies and partners such as Latvia and Taiwan, and despite the indispensable role played by our most important ally, the United States, Canadians views toward the US remain negative. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Canadians want Canada to take a leadership role in world affairs. Contrary to the rhetoric of some politicians, Canadians don't think "Canada is back" but wish we were.

## Key Takeaways

### 1. Canadians don't think Canada is back but they want Canada to be back.

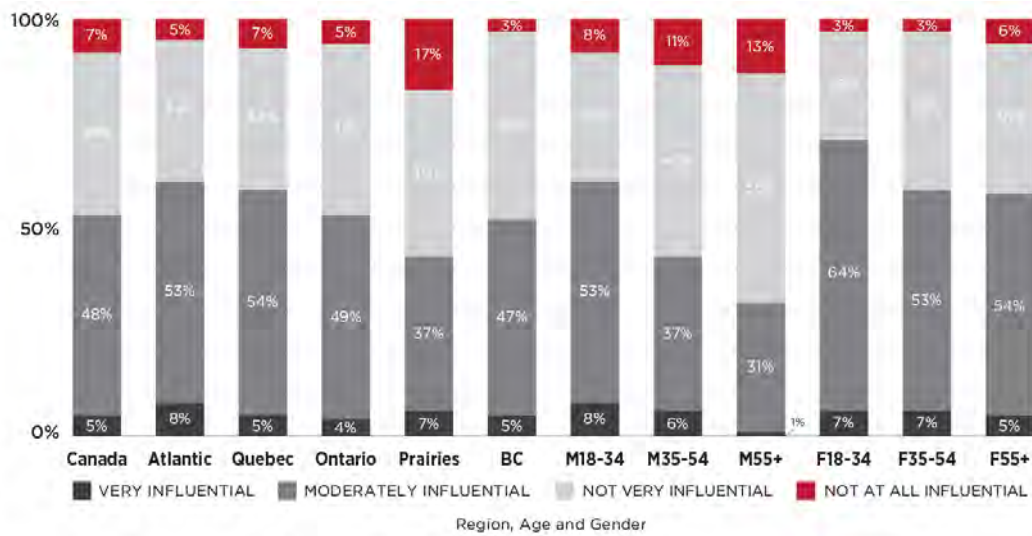
The largest cohort of Canadians (48 percent) view Canada as moderately influential (see Figure 1). Few Canadians believe that Canada is very influential (5 percent) or not influential at all (7 percent). Conservatives (33 percent) and older men (32 percent) are significantly less likely than the average (53 percent) to believe Canada is at least moderately influential.

A significant majority of Canadians (72 percent) believe that it is very important (22 percent) or moderately important (50 percent) for Canada to be influential on the world stage. Out of highly informed Canadians, 77 percent believe it is very important (32 percent) or moderately important (45 percent) for Canada to be more influential. The only significant dissenters from this consensus are people with graduate degrees (63 percent) and those who say that foreign policy is not important at all when it comes to how they vote (43 percent).

**What does this tell us?** Canadians appear to understand Canada's limited relative power internationally, and thus view our role as a middle power that can have some influence. However, almost three-quarters of Canadians believe Canada should have more influence in the world, demonstrating public demand for a project that sees Canada rise from middle to major power. Some of our polling, set to be released soon, also suggests that influence can best be applied by working cooperatively with our allies and other like-minded democratic states.

"A world disrupted by new great power contests, populism of the left and the right, and technology, challenges Canadians to define their national

**FIGURE 1: HOW INFLUENTIAL IS CANADA ON THE WORLD STAGE?**



interests,” notes MLI Munk Senior Fellow and Program Director Shuvaloy Majumdar. “Canadians are demanding their leaders chart a course for the country that sheds middle power apathy in favour of major power ambitions. Our national interests must feature prominently in the agendas of Canadian leaders. They must adopt a clear-eyed view of adversaries such as China and Russia, invest in Canadian national security and economic partnerships, enhance strategic cooperation with democracies around the world, and prioritize stronger relations with established and emerging allies.”

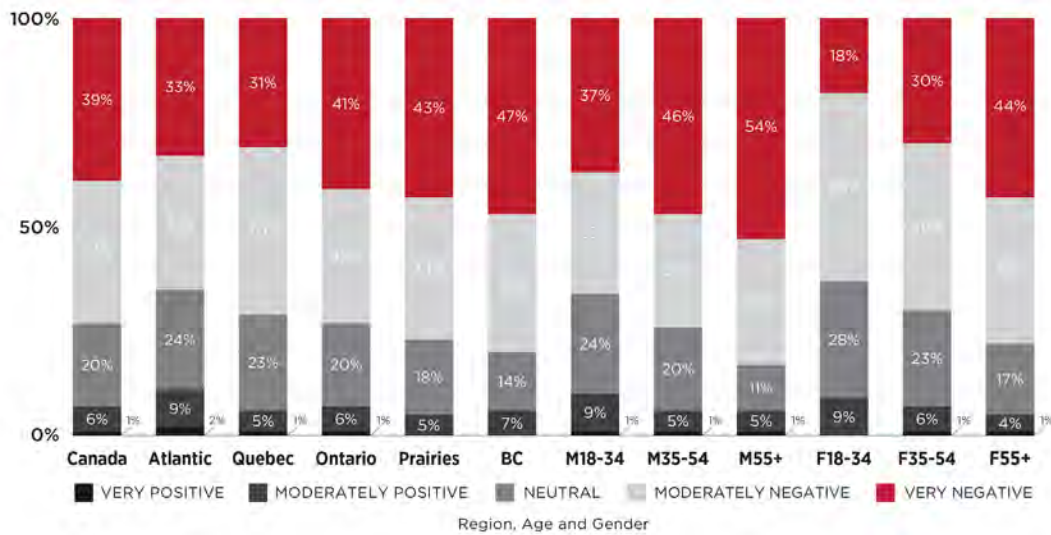
## 2. China ranks worst, closely followed by Russia.

Canadians viewed China most negatively (73 percent), with 72 percent of Canadians holding negative views of Russia within the survey’s margin of error (see Figure 2 and 3). This cuts across all demographic groups. The views are even more negative among highly informed Canadians and older men. For example, 85 percent of high-information Canadians and 84 percent of older men have a very negative or moderately negative view of China; this decreases to 82 percent among highly informed Canadians and 81 percent among older men for Russia. High income Canadians also have an overwhelmingly negative (85 percent) view of Russia.

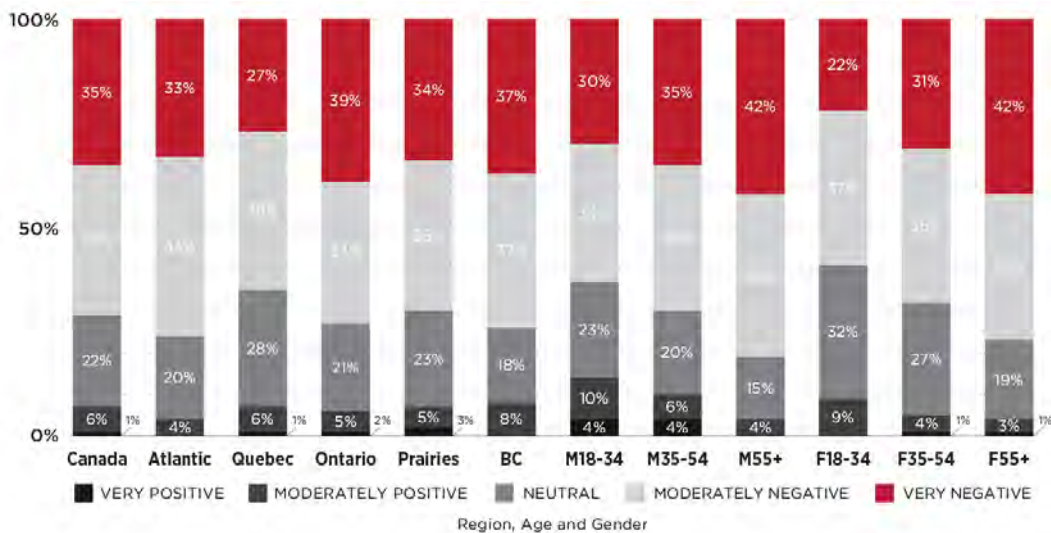
Our poll found that Canadian views of China have continued to worsen, even against other polls in the field. In 2017 Pew found that 48 percent of Canadians had a “favourable view” of China; and, even in the spring of 2020, the Angus Reid Institute had this measure at 14 percent (Angus Reid 2020). This survey found only 7 percent had a positive view of China.

A sizable number of Canadians view China (44 percent) and Russia (28 percent) as a serious threat to Canada (see Figure 4), though China is noticeably

**FIGURE 2: OPINION OF CHINA**



**FIGURE 3: OPINION OF RUSSIA**



higher than Russia. This number increases to significant (and more comparable) majorities – 79 percent for China and 68 percent for Russia – who see both countries as a serious or moderate threat to Canada. Threat perception regarding China (88 percent) and Russia (73 percent) are even higher among highly informed Canadians. Interestingly, Iran ranks less than either China or Russia as a serious threat (21 percent) or a serious/moderate threat (55 percent).

**What does this tell us?** This polling data reinforces the notion that Canadians have grown increasingly disenchanted with both China and Russia. “China has replaced Russia as our principal rival,” says MLI Munk Senior Fellow Shuvaloy Majumdar. “In the outlook of a vast majority of Canadians, the imperatives around our national interests exceed our ability to respond

**FIGURE 4: COUNTRIES AS A SERIOUS THREAT TO CANADA**



to them, and both nation building and alliance building is needed to achieve the influence Canadians expect of their leaders.”

“This study confirms yet again how out of sync the Government of Canada is with public opinion on China’s emerging threat to Canadian sovereignty and national security,” notes MLI Senior Fellow Charles Burton. “As a consequence, the credibility of Canada’s claim of principled commitment to the international rules-based order rings hollowed and hollowed as the years go by.”

Similarly, Canadian public opinion of Russia remains low despite the Kremlin’s best public relations efforts to reverse the downward trend. According to Marcus Kolga, MLI Senior Fellow and the Director of Disinfowatch, “The ongoing assassination of critics and opposition leaders, endemic corruption, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and parts of Georgia, the mass incarceration of LGBTQ community members in Chechnya and the information warfare it engages in against Canada and its allies all lend themselves to the overwhelmingly negative view that Canadians have of Russia.”

“Canadian foreign policy towards Russia does not reflect Canadian public sentiment,” adds Kolga. “Unlike the United States, Canada has failed to add high profile Russian officials who have been clearly identified as engaging in human rights abuse and assassinations to our sanctions list.”

### **3. More than half of Canadians hold negative views of the United States.**

About six in ten Canadians (63 percent) hold at least a moderately negative view of the US. However, this is an improvement compared to just two years ago when an Abacus poll in 2018 found that 81 percent of Canadians have a negative view (Abacus Data 2018).

Immigrants (26 percent), Conservatives (36 percent) and highly informed Canadians (25 percent) all have more positive views of the US compared to the average (20 percent). On the other hand, only 6 percent of NDP voters and 10 percent of young women have positive views of the US. Men generally have a better impression of the US than women, and older people than younger people.

Despite the US being Canada's closest ally and trading partner, 26 percent of Canadians see it as a serious threat to Canada (see Figure 4). This opinion is more prevalent among older women (37 percent), NDP voters (35 percent) and the highly informed (36 percent). Conservatives (15 percent) and older men (17 percent) consider the US a serious threat, viewing the partnership starkly differently.

This stark difference continues on the other end of the spectrum when it comes to threat perception. Conservatives (29 percent) and foreign policy voters (26 percent) perceive the US posing no threat at all. Only 6 percent of NDP voters and 10 percent of young women think the US poses no threat at all to Canada.

**What does this tell us?** The Trump administration's narrowly defined national interest agenda had significantly reduced public support among US allies, including Canada. "Modern American populism (of both the left and the right) is facilitating Canadian anti-American sentiments, despite the fact that this strategic relationship provides the bedrock for Canada's national security and economy" notes MLI Munk Senior Fellow Shuvaloy Majumdar. "Even with the incoming Biden administration, the US will continue to operate in the new multipolar mindset, focusing more narrowly on its own interests. For Canadians, overwhelming skepticism toward the American relationship will test how Canadian leaders balance this essential relationship with the need for self-reliance."

### **4. Canadians have mostly positive views of other democracies but need to know more about key allies and regions where Canada has interests (see Figure 5).**

Canadians have favourable views of countries with democratic political systems such as Japan (60 percent), Germany (64 percent), UK (60 percent),

**FIGURE 5: NET IMPRESSION SCORE FOR EACH COUNTRY**



South Korea (47 percent), and Australia (75 percent). The net average score for all democracies was +19 percent, whereas the net average score for authoritarian regimes was -66 percent. The score for democracies were driven down significantly by Canadians' views of the US.

Those with high knowledge and interest in Canada's role in the world are more likely to view our allies positively and are more likely to view our adversaries negatively. This relationship is true for all countries except for the United States and Israel. For both democracies, as Canadians' international knowledge increases, positive and negative views alike become more prevalent. This suggests that among highly informed Canadians, the views on the United States and Israel are highly polarized.

Ukraine, Israel, India, Taiwan, and Latvia, despite their vital strategic importance for Canada, hold surprisingly neutral standing in the opinions of Canadians. For instance, 43 percent of Canadians hold neutral views on Israel, 76 percent for Latvia, 58 percent for Ukraine, 48 percent for India, and 51 percent for Taiwan. In the case of Taiwan, however, despite high neutral views among Canadians, the country also maintains an impressive net positive view.

Significantly more Canadians hold positive views of democratic partners in Asia, including Japan (60 percent), Taiwan (36 percent), and South Korea (47 percent) compared to negative views (6 percent for Japan, 13 percent for Taiwan, and 14 percent for South Korea).

**What does this tell us?** Alliances that are critical to Canadian national interests suffer from apathetic or agnostic levels of public support. While Canadians are receptive on the value of these partnerships, public opinion has

yet to compel national leadership to prioritize and effectively engage more democratic partners.

“Canadians have clearly indicated their strong positive inclinations towards democratic partners who promote and uphold similar values and have shared equities in a rules-based order,” says MLI Senior Fellow Jonathan Berkshire Miller. “This is most abundantly clear in the Indo-Pacific, with Canadians looking favourably at relations with democratic partners like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Australia – while maintaining deep and growing mistrust of China.”

“Canadian neutral opinion about Latvia is not surprising and may be attributed to the fact that the Baltic nation is relatively small and is often caught in the media shadow of its much larger EU allies and neighbours” adds MLI Senior Fellow Marcus Kolga. “However, Canada’s contributions to the NATO mission in Latvia are very well regarded in the region. Greater efforts to publicize Canada’s NATO contribution in The Baltics would likely shift Canadian opinion about Latvia from neutral to positive.”

## **5. Canadians believe we have many opportunities for engagement, both in the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, that do not involve the US, China, or Russia.**

Canadians have positive views of middle-sized powers like Australia, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the UK. Australia was the least-negatively viewed country by Canadians (4 percent). Australia also had the highest net impression score (71 percent), with Germany (57 percent), Japan (53 percent), and the UK (49 percent) coming just behind.

Canadian opinions about other countries fall into three broad categories. Negative views of great powers: China, Russia and the US. More neutral views of countries with more complicated stories: India, Taiwan, Israel, Ukraine and Latvia. Very positive views of advanced democracies: Japan, Germany, UK, South Korea and Australia.

Canadians appear to reject the notion that our foreign affairs must be framed as an “either/or” proposition between cooperation with countries like the US or siding countries like China. Those who dislike the US hold very negative views on Russia (54 percent) in particular, and to a lesser extent on China (46 percent). Canadians, in other words, do not prefer China or Russia even if they have negative views of the US.

Canadians who dislike China fall into two camps – those who dislike great powers and those who see China as an opponent of the West. The same can be said about Russia, but the definition of the groups is slightly fuzzier.

**What does this tell us?** Canadians are suspicious of great powers in the



world, including our American allies. We believe we can engage in foreign affairs without subordinating our interests to great powers, and should explore opportunities for strategic engagement with other democratic states around the world. Canadians expect their leaders to chart an interest-led agenda for Canada in a disrupted world, self-reliant and faithful to the values that underpin Canadian democracy.

## Conclusion

While Canadians understand Canada's position as a middle power country, they largely believe that Ottawa must do more to improve our stature and standing on the global stage. However, despite promises that "Canada is back," Canadians largely believe that this is not the case; that our place in the world remains underleveraged.

Canadians have a clear-eyed view of our allies and adversaries, although perceptions of the United States remain negative, continuing the trend of the past few years. That said, the polling demonstrates that other advanced democracies present ample opportunity for Canada to engage more actively on the world stage.

It is often assumed that foreign policy is not an important issue, or is poorly understood by Canadians. This polling suggests just the opposite: Canadians have opinions about Canada's place in the world, and want our policy-makers to work alongside our allies to advance Canada's interests abroad.

# About the author



**Balkan Devlen** is a Senior Fellow at Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Adjunct Research Professor at Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, and Superforecaster for Good Judgment, Inc. He is also the publisher of Hindsight 20/20, a newsletter on uncertainty, foresight, and geopolitics.

His primary research interests are; geopolitics from the Baltics to the Middle East, foreign and security policies of Russia, and Turkey, decision-making under uncertainty, and forecasting and strategic foresight.

He has published extensively on foreign policy, international security, and international affairs and has given several invited talks and lectures to diverse audiences including senior policy-makers in Europe, the US, and Canada. He is a regular commentator in a wide range of international media outlets on Turkey, Russia, and the Middle East. He has nearly two decades of international experience in teaching, research, and academic management in Europe, the US, and Canada. Dr. Devlen is an external expert for the European Commission's Horizon 2020 program since 2014 and has been a Vice-Chair for panel of experts. He was a "Superforecaster" in IARPA-sponsored geopolitical forecasting competition (ACE).

Previously he was Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow, Ozerdinc-Grimes Fellow at Carleton University, Black Sea Young Reformers Fellow, and Levin Institute Fellow.

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