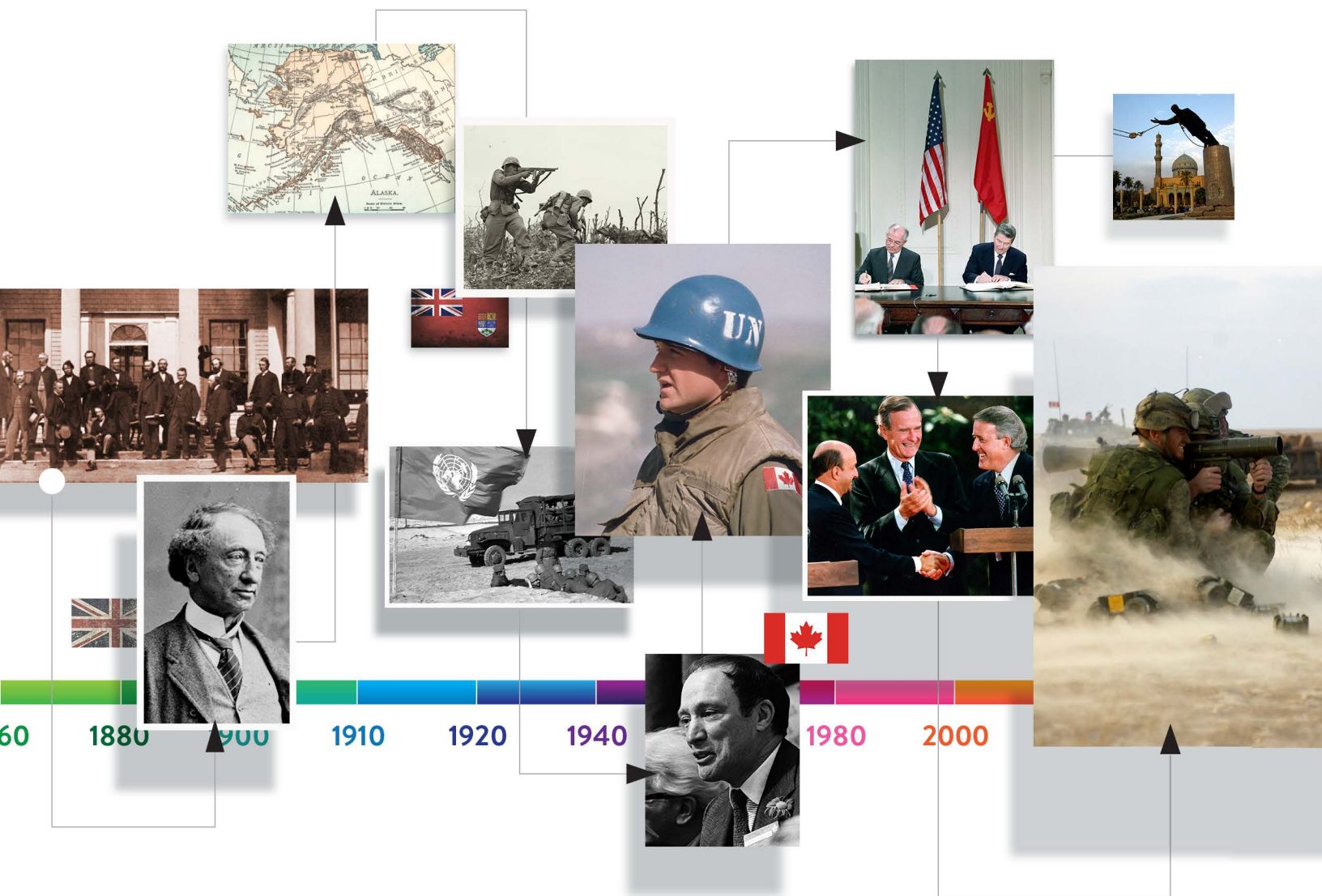


A GRAND STRATEGY FOR CANADA?

Patrick James



March 2024

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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Does Canada have a grand strategy? If so, what is it, and how is it working out? Furthermore, how might a grand strategy become more effective? This study of Canadian grand strategy unfolds in five sections. After an introductory overview, the first section seeks to answer basic interconnected questions: What is grand strategy, in the abstract, and how does it emerge? Section two explores what grand strategy means in the case of Canada. The third section reviews contemporary discourse on grand strategy in the Canadian context. Section four traces the evolution of Canadian grand strategy and looks ahead to the future; I utilize a graphic approach, systemism, to achieve these goals. The fifth and final section sums up what has been accomplished and addresses potential future research.

Canada has long been known as a “middle power.” What it lacks in sheer military or economic power, it makes up for in terms of influence – its ability to collaborate with and to persuade great powers, such as the United States, to achieve its broader strategic goals. A relatively small power, seeking to make the best of things in world politics, will work within geopolitical limitations set by the great powers. Often, small powers must focus on regional or even sub-regional concerns shared with one or more key neighbours. In this context, Canada is often cited as an exemplar of a smaller state with a grand strategy.

History helps to reveal the principal contextual elements of a Canadian grand strategy. These include an awareness of a strategic triangle, a middle power identity, and a pursuit of “defence against help” (i.e., being able to defend your sovereignty as a nation without overly relying on the assistance of a great power). These concepts, to varying degrees, have throughout history helped to shape Canada’s foreign policy and grand strategy.

Viewing Canada’s actions on the world stage through the lens of systemism can help to focus and sharpen our understanding of Canada’s grand strategy. A systemist graphic conveys the history of Canadian foreign policy and effectively assists in highlighting three elements of a grand strategy: a strategic triangle involving the United States and United Kingdom/European states; middle power identity, and defence against help.

It is my contention that Canada does have something that resembles a grand strategy. However, it remains a work in progress. My analysis suggests that Canada, by focusing so intently on long-term challenges such as climate change, risks being unprepared for swiftly changing security threats, such as the Arctic territorial ambitions of Russia and China.

This study has implications beyond Canada. Is Canada's experience with regards to grand strategy typical, or an anomaly compared to other middle powers? Future research should focus more specifically on what is feasible for Canadian grand strategy in an era when public opinion focuses more on climate change than immediate dangers. As a middle power, Canada is not able to lead that campaign. However, it can take decisive action to prepare for new and imminent challenges to its sovereignty. [MLI](#)

Le Canada dispose-t-il d'une « grande stratégie »? Dans l'affirmative, quelle est-elle et fonctionne-t-elle bien? Et, comment en accroître l'efficacité? Cette étude sur la grande stratégie canadienne est divisée en cinq parties. Après un bref exposé initial, la première partie entreprend de répondre aux questions de base interreliées, à savoir ce qu'est une grande stratégie sur le plan abstrait et comment elle émerge. La deuxième explique ce qu'on entend par grande stratégie au Canada. La troisième examine le discours contemporain sur la grande stratégie, à la lumière du contexte canadien. La quatrième retrace l'évolution de la grande stratégie canadienne et pose un regard sur l'avenir; j'utilise une approche graphique, le systémisme, pour atteindre ce but. Enfin, un sommaire des réalisations passées et un survol des possibilités de recherches futures font l'objet de la cinquième et dernière partie.

Le Canada est depuis longtemps considéré comme une « puissance moyenne ». Il supplée à son impuissance militaire ou économique par son influence – sa capacité à assister et persuader les grandes puissances, comme les États Unis, lui permet de combler ses larges ambitions stratégiques. Toute puissance relativement petite, qui cherche à s'accommoder de la réalité politique mondiale, est amenée à travailler à l'intérieur des limites géopolitiques fixées par les grandes puissances. Souvent, elle doit se concentrer sur des enjeux régionaux, voire sous-régionaux, qu'elle partage avec un ou plusieurs voisins importants. Dans cet environnement, le Canada est souvent donné en exemple à titre de petit État doté d'une grande stratégie.

L'histoire nous aide à mettre en évidence les principaux éléments de contexte d'une grande stratégie canadienne : une compréhension de la conscience d'un triangle stratégique, de l'identité de puissance moyenne et de l'argument de « la protection contre l'aide » » (c'est-à-dire la capacité à défendre notre souveraineté en tant que nation sans trop compter sur l'aide d'une grande puissance). Ces concepts, à des degrés divers, ont contribué à façonner la politique étrangère et la grande stratégie du Canada tout au long de l'histoire.

Envisager les actions du Canada sur la scène internationale dans l'optique du systémisme peut nous aider à approfondir et affiner notre vision de la grande stratégie du Canada. L'histoire de la politique étrangère canadienne peut être illustrée au moyen d'un graphique systémiste, une démarche qui permet du même coup de souligner de manière efficace trois éléments d'une grande stratégie : un triangle stratégique rejoignant les États Unis et le Royaume Uni/les États européens, l'identité de puissance moyenne et la protection contre l'aide.

À mon avis, le Canada dispose d'une approche qui relève d'une grande stratégie. Toutefois, elle est toujours en cours d'élaboration. Mon analyse indique qu'en s'attachant avec tant de concentration à des enjeux à long terme tels que les changements climatiques, le Canada risque d'être mal préparé à un accroissement rapide des menaces pour la sécurité, comme celles rendues possibles par les ambitions expansionnistes de la Russie et de la Chine dans l'Arctique.

La présente étude a une portée qui dépasse le Canada. L'expérience canadienne en ce qui touche la grande stratégie est-elle typique ou constitue-t-elle une anomalie par rapport à d'autres puissances moyennes? Les recherches futures doivent s'attarder plus particulièrement à ce qui est faisable en matière de grande stratégie canadienne à une époque où l'opinion publique est davantage concernée par les changements climatiques que par les dangers immédiats. En tant que puissance moyenne, le Canada est incapable de prendre la tête de cette campagne. Toutefois, il peut mettre en œuvre des mesures décisives pour se préparer à relever les défis nouveaux et imminents pour sa souveraineté. [MLI](#)

Introduction

Does Canada have a grand strategy? If so, what is it, and how is it working out? Furthermore, how might a grand strategy become more effective? While not a great power, Canada is a member of the G7, and prominent in many other ways. An assessment of Canadian grand strategy can be informative for both academic and policy-related reasons.

This study of Canadian grand strategy unfolds in five sections. The first section seeks to answer basic interconnected questions: What is a grand strategy in the abstract, and how does it come into being? Next, I explore what grand strategy means in the case of Canada. The third section reviews contemporary discourse on grand strategy in the Canadian context. Section four traces the evolution of Canadian grand strategy and looks ahead to the future. I utilize a graphic approach, systemism, to achieve these goals. The fifth and final section summarizes what has been accomplished and speaks to potential future research.

What is grand strategy and how does it emerge?

Grand strategy is a hybrid concept that sits between and among the fields of history, international relations, and policy development. The literature interrogating the meaning of grand strategy is extensive, but it lies beyond the purview of this paper to review it here.¹ As Balzacq (2022) points out, grand strategy “consistently resists easy definition.” With respect to our interest in

TABLE 1: Grand strategy: definitions

Source	Definition
Pratt (2008: 61, 67)	...at its very basic level, it is nothing more than a state's (and a people's) long-term plan to survive and thrive in what can be an often chaotic, dangerous and unpredictable world. A grand strategy must (i) enjoy a high level of political acceptance; (ii) offer a clear conception of threats, interests and values; (iii) convey a unity of purpose; and (iv) be willing to apply elements of both hard and soft power.
Doran and Pratt (2012: 25-26)	Grand strategy manifests the values, interests, and aspirations of a country and its citizens.... It transmits sense of purpose and requires combination of hard- and soft-power tools.... Properly conceived, grand strategy provides a government with an understanding of structural change within the international system.
Trudgen (2012: 3)	Grand strategy is a policy that brings together all elements to preserve and enhance long-term interests.... There is a need for continuity and consistency over a long period and a diverse set of policies can be included.
Murray (2013: 91, 92)	Matching national means to national ends: helping policymakers understand how issues and relationships are entwined; aiding in setting priorities and allocating resources; assisting bureaucrats to coordinate activities; reassuring allies and deterring adversaries via communication of national interests and intentions; improving accountability; and forcing systematic thinking about medium to long term.... A grand strategy will and must change with time.
Tremblay and Bentley (2015: 7)	Grand strategy is a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so.
Silove (2018: 31-32, 45-46)	Scholars broadly agree that grand strategy refers to something that is long-term in scope, concerned with the state's most important priorities, and inclusive of all spheres of statecraft (military, diplomatic, and economic).... Grand strategy may be seen as a plan, principles, or a pattern of behavior; in each instance, the common characteristics are (i) constituted by means and ends; (ii) grand in the sense of having multiple characteristics (i.e., long-term, holistic, and concerned with making trade-offs).
Balzacq (2022: 10)	Grand strategy combines elements which recur in political processes – through which a state articulates its ways, means, and ends.... The tasks – plan, guide, set patterns – and forms of grand strategy vary by case.

the Canadian context, it will be sufficient to introduce the most important elements for consideration.

Table 1 is a set of definitions selected from the academic literature on grand strategy. While by no means complete, the contents of the table combine to provide a point of entry for analysis of the Canadian case. A grand strategy is a plan for how to allocate resources toward means in pursuit of ends. It includes explicitly stated values, principles, and purpose. The domain is comprehensive and long-term. All spheres of statecraft, spanning hard and soft power, must

TABLE 2: Factors influencing grand strategy

Source	Factor
Brawley (2010: 3)	...distribution of power in the system (which locates the threat, but also identifies if allies are available), the time horizon for responding to a threat (must you respond now or can you wait till later?), and the rate at which domestic economic resources can be converted into military power (can your own resources be transformed into military force immediately, or will it take several years to convert your peacetime economy to a war footing?). The three combine to shape evaluations of the relative effectiveness of respective grand strategies.
Doran and Pratt (2012: 30)	A state's foreign policy role normally follows the pattern of change on its cycle of relative power.
Neiberg (2012: 21)	Experiences of the past condition the choices of the present and future.
Murray (2013: 97)	The structure of the international system can be a key explanatory variable.
Tremblay and Bentley (2015: 6)	Strategic culture, leading to a grand strategy, is influenced by: geography; history; culture, religion, and ideology; and governance.
Lepreucht and Sokolsky (2015: 556)	States may be locked, to some extent, into patterns with regard to resource allocations for security purposes.
Balzacq (2022: 14)	Grand strategy is a manifestation of the struggle for power, both inside and outside.... It reflects ideational (e.g., ideology) and material (e.g., relative military capability) conditions.

be brought to bear in implementation of a grand strategy. A grand strategy therefore can be expected to exhibit a pattern of behaviour.

How does a grand strategy come into being? Table 2 pulls together ideas from the literature on the determining factors that govern the development of grand strategy. In considering the contents of this table, keep in mind the standard levels of analysis for international relations: system (or global), state, and individual.

At the system level, the geostrategic position of an actor is perhaps the most obvious constraining factor. Compare, for example, the Swiss and Belgian experiences with policies of neutrality in the twentieth century. Geographic location is the fundamental factor in explaining that difference. So too, economic strength, industrial, military, and diplomatic capacity, and the general international standing of a given state, all form a context for the development of grand strategy, in addition to rapid change in any of these areas. For example, the opening and closing of the Chinese “century of humiliation” forms a significant context of grand strategy for both China and other nations.

At the state level, there is path dependency to consider. The history and culture of a state will constrict the range of feasible choices for leaders at a given time. While Canada and Mexico are both North American states, their leaders are constrained by different national experiences. The governance of a state will also matter; what are the conditions imposed on leaders by its (un)written constitution? An obvious point of comparison is democracy versus autocracy.

Finally, at the individual level, there is nothing addressed in the studies under review. With its sustained character, grand strategy may largely be considered immune to the effects of individual leaders, aside from extraordinary circumstances. At the same time, leadership can matter significantly at the level of implementation over the short-term. The “Free Trade” election of 1988 in Canada would be one such exceptional instance; it is difficult to imagine the shift to liberalization with John Turner rather than Brian Mulroney as prime minister.

Does Canada have a grand strategy?

Can a state that is not a great power have a grand strategy? I argue the affirmative. Leaders of relatively small states may formulate grand strategies that aim toward survival and prosperity through judicious management of their resources and alliances (Granatstein 2011). This is contrary to the theory of *Weltpolitik*, or “world politics,” as envisioned of great powers in the modern era. Indeed, an intrinsic aim of the grand strategy of a smaller state is the preservation of sufficient sovereignty to formulate its own grand strategy. A relatively small power, seeking to make the best of things in world politics, will work within geopolitical limitations set by the great powers. Rather than focus on goals that pertain to the global system as a whole, a smaller power will focus on regional or even sub-regional concerns in connection with one or more key neighbours. Canada is often cited as an exemplar of a smaller state with a grand strategy.²

Should a state that is not a great power have a grand strategy? Again, I argue the affirmative. Without it, a state is doomed to operate merely at a tactical level. Rather than dealing with each foreign policy decision as a discreet moment, a

strategy facilitates the achievement of long-term goals. If there is no strategy, decision-making on foreign policy can become overly responsive to domestic pressures. While public opinion in a democracy should not be ignored, it often proves poorly informed and subject to rapid change. It is appropriate, therefore, to have an overarching set of principles at hand to prevent foreign policy from turning into chaotic self-contradiction. A mercurial record in foreign policy is a hinderance to the furthering of national interests, as it is likely to produce distrust and animosity within the international community. For example, some of the swings between Democratic and Republican administrations in the US have created diplomatic uncertainty around the globe.

“*While public opinion in a democracy should not be ignored, it often proves poorly informed and subject to rapid change.*”

Among those states outside the circle of great powers (and this paper will not attempt to specify membership under such rapidly changing global conditions), Canada is typical in most aspects, such as having relatively limited military capability. A brief review of Canadian history will reveal the principal contextual elements of a Canadian grand strategy, that is: awareness of a strategic triangle, a middle power identity, and a pursuit of defence against help. These concepts can be discerned, to varying degrees, throughout Canadian history as structuring factors of foreign policy and grand strategy.³

Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald is the figure most commonly invoked in the telling of the story of Confederation. While Macdonald is not known as a grand strategist, Doran and Pratt (2012) assert that he “probably deserves such a title.” Canada’s founding prime minister focused on integration through the National Policy of high tariffs and a transcontinental railway, with an attendant avoidance of conflict (Doran and Pratt). Canadian foreign policy began under the formal control of Britain, and in the looming shadow of the United States. As such, the geostrategic positioning of Canada necessitated immediate efforts toward shielding the territory from foreign interference, and seeking cohesion.

After Confederation, as articulated in a classic work on grand strategy, *North American Triangle* (Brebner 1945; see also Haglund 2004/2005; Pratt 2008; McCulloch 2010–11), Canada sat at one corner of a geostrategic triangle with the United States and United Kingdom. There was the rising power immediately to the south, rebuilt in the wake of civil war, and the distant colonial empire with its global reach. Ottawa learned, through the unfavourable resolution of the Alaska Boundary Dispute in 1903, that Canada would have to defend its own interests (Pratt 2008). From the end of the First World War onward, Canada tried to manage its relationships with the US and UK by “playing one off against the other” (Haglund). This approach succeeded. Canada gradually increased its autonomy from the UK while avoiding absorption by the US.

When the US rose to the role of global hegemon after the Second World War, and Britain ceased as a world power, Canada’s geopolitical position shifted. As the Cold War set in, the figurative triangle shifted to a focus on Atlanticism. Ottawa sided with Washington when deemed appropriate, but also joined in with European allies to balance US actions in exceptional circumstances (Haglund; McCulloch). Canada, according to Pratt, “successfully pursued objectives which strongly complemented the overall US and Allied grand strategy of containment.” The pillars of Canadian grand strategy became: membership in NATO toward the defence of Western Europe, activity in international institutions in support of allies, and the development of a positive relationship with the US (Trudgen 2012). The International Joint Commission and NORAD stand out, among a much longer list, as the most significant security-related bilateral institutions between the US and Canada. The preceding items comprised a fully implemented strategy of commitments, through which Canada successfully built a reputation as a trustworthy ally (Trudgen).

During the Trudeau years in the 1960s, concern grew among the political establishment about low military spending, a perspective that found its way into policy (Trudgen). Even while there developed a new perspective that valued self-reliance, the Canadian frame of reference continued to reflect strategic dependence on the US and UK (Neiberg 2012). The Third Option – a Trudeau-led movement away from traditional connections with the UK and the US – ran aground on a number of issues, perhaps most notably reactions from NATO allies about force reductions. Thus, the traditional triangular

structure of Canadian grand strategy reasserted itself, against the wishes of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and those of a like mind.

Canada contributed to the ultimate victory of the Western powers in the Cold War at the end of the 1980s (Trudgen). With the collapse of the USSR, the West entered a period of triumphalism and security concerns receded. Trade liberalization through NAFTA stands out as the most important foreign policy development in the early 1990s – a high water mark of cooperation with the US. At the same time, Canada preserved some distance from the US in certain areas, perhaps most notably with regard to the apartheid regime in South Africa.⁴

At the turn of the millennium, however, the Canadian government increasingly moved in various ways away from the consensus that the Cold War had enabled. From the human-rights inspired idealism of the Paul Martin, Jean Chrétien, and Justin Trudeau mandates, to the lack of direction under Stephen Harper, Canada appears to have exhibited an issue-by-issue approach toward foreign policy, rather than anything resembling a well-integrated grand strategy (Murray 2013). A trend away from military spending is one point of consistency, against the wishes of NATO allies and pro-defence lobbyists at home (Tremblay and Bentley 2015; see also Lepreucht and Sokolsky 2015). This change in military spending even proved resistant to efforts made by prominent Chief of the Defence Staff Rick Hillier, who from 2005–8 envisioned more kinetic expeditionary force projection (Lepreucht and Sokolsky). All of this took place against the backdrop of the ongoing, and increasingly controversial, Canadian deployment in Afghanistan.⁵

Canada is commonly referred to as playing out a “middle power” grand strategy.⁶ This involves an investment in multilateralism via international institutions and the development of peacekeeping as an identity (Pratt 1990; Norton and Horton 2023). Perhaps the most memorable moment in the Canadian middle power story came in 1956, when future Prime Minister Lester Pearson successfully prevented the escalation of the Suez Crisis into a war, with the US and USSR on one side and France, the UK, and Israel on the other. Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize the next year, and his role as an advisor and mediator greatly reinforced “middlepowermanship” as the chosen foreign policy role for Canada.

From a middle power standpoint, “Canada’s strategic interests overlap with those of Britain and the United States most closely when stabilizing the

global system is the goal” (Neiberg). Canadian commitment to multilateralism and security cooperation has been “critical as a means of moderating or tempering the US inclination toward unilateralism, and as an instrument for expressing Canadian values, interests, and aspirations” (Doran and Pratt). The role of middle power therefore fits within the triangular security architecture, in particular as a ballast against the vast power of Canada’s southern neighbour.

The role of middle power therefore fits within the triangular security architecture, in particular as a ballast against the vast power of Canada’s southern neighbour.

The Canadian responses to calls for support in American-led wars in Iraq reveal limitations of the desire to please the other members of the triangle. When their policies are out of line with other principles of Canadian grand strategy – notably a middle power identity that prizes a commitment to international institutions – Canada will part ways with its Anglo-American partners, at least to some degree. Canada supported President George H.W. Bush in the initial Gulf War, when the US formed a UN-endorsed coalition that decisively ejected Iraq from its occupation of Kuwait. However, when President George W. Bush led a “Coalition of the Willing” that invaded Iraq and overthrew the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, the Liberal Chrétien government balked at participation. Absence of compelling intelligence about purported weapons of mass destruction played a central role in the decision, but the prime minister knew instinctively that the lack of a UN resolution made Canadian public support for the US venture rather unlikely (James 2012). The Iraq War, which moved forward without UN approval, indeed proved quite unpopular among Canadians. From an Atlanticist standpoint, Canada found itself in good company, with France and others, as an Iraq War skeptic among US allies.

One further aspect of Canadian foreign policy at a macroscopic level should be noted: an essential “floor” with regard to military spending. Canada

has engaged in “defence against help” (Ørvik 1973), which is a strategy to manage the existential problem of the proximate United States. This approach entails the maintenance of enough strength to convince the US that Canada would be able to defend itself from invasion without the need for US troops (Lagassé 2010). “The evolution of Canadian-US relations during the Cold War,” Philippe Lagassé observes, “further hinted at a Canadian commitment to defence against help.” Sustained military cooperation via NATO and especially NORAD supports that conclusion. In the new millennium, Lagassé adds, Canadian defence against help “is as much about passing legislation, improving police and intelligence capabilities, and tracking shipments and money as it is about antisubmarine warfare, aerospace defence, and military aid of the civil power.” The range of security issues has expanded well beyond direct military threat and, in the embryonic years of Artificial Intelligence, is likely to become increasingly multivalent. Overall, defence against help is a key explanatory pillar of Canadian grand strategy with respect to security-related resource allocation (Lagassé).

While the triangular imagery shows no signs of fully going away, evidence is lacking that the Government of Canada “pins much hope in any economic counterpoise being obtained from the old continent” (Haglund). At the same time, events such as the military operations in Afghanistan show something of a legacy effect of the triangle: Canada, the UK, and the US “still share common values and have common security concerns that they are prepared to pursue above and beyond the other western democracies” (McCulloch). This is all complicated, however, by the multifaceted development of globalization.⁷ For example, how should Canada pursue the critical issue of the border with the US in a post-pandemic era of massively increased migration? What should Canada do about the alarming increase in threats to Arctic security? And how might middlepowermanship and defence against help fit into foreign policy today? It would seem that the difficult questions of grand strategy are accumulating faster than any obvious answers.

TABLE 3: Critiques of Canadian grand strategy

Source	Critique
Pratt (2008: 71)	Unfortunately, Canadians have enjoyed and expect almost unlimited security on the basis of a very small investment.
Crowley (2010: 45, 78)	The share of the national economy directed by government rose from about 28 percent in 1960 to a peak of 53 per cent in 1992.... Indeed, 1997–98 marked the first time in nearly twenty-five years that Ottawa had a balanced budget.
Neiberg (2012: 16)	One important strategic consequence of the French/English divide has been Canada's inability to make maximum use of its human resources.
Trudgen (2012: 27)	While a new Canadian grand strategy would be nice to deal with the challenges of today's world, it is unlikely to emerge any time soon.
Tremblay and Bentley (2015: 8)	Necessity of keeping double majority of French and English together on certain key issues.... Canadian strategic culture has caused senior civilian security officials to neglect serious study of grand strategy, Canadian or otherwise.
Lepreucht and Sokolsky (2015: 545)	Canadian strategic culture always has included a tendency toward expediency.
Exner-Pirot (2023: 1-2)	Canada is shutting down Arctic centre headquarters in Norway and moving it to Ottawa.
Crowley (2023: 2)	The principle of burden-sharing is central to NATO, and Canada's defence spending falls short of its allies' expectations and its own promises, leaving a disproportionate burden on other member states.

Critiques and ideas

Table 3 organizes critiques of grand strategy, covering both domestic characteristics and foreign policy. To begin, multiple internal dynamics constrain policy in unhelpful ways. Of special note is the French-English duality, along with a tendency for the public to be effectively “spoiled” by the expectation that security is maintained on the cheap. For such reasons, extension of military expenditure in service of meeting foreign policy objectives – and particularly deployment – will run into opposition, regardless of merit. It is therefore unsurprising that Canadians embrace government expansion that produces public goods, while accepting a self-reinforcing status quo wherein the military budget slowly deteriorates to a level just above that which would antagonize the American foreign policy establishment. Insufficient military spending over the long-term, especially failure to take rising security risks in the Arctic seriously (Huebert 2023), poses a significant obstacle to the execution of effective grand strategy.

TABLE 4: Ideas about Canadian grand strategy

Source	Ideas
Segal (2003: 4, 5)	Canada, given its political and economic limitations, cannot be active on all fronts with equal strength and therefore should aim for a grand strategy for a small state that integrates military, diplomatic, and foreign aid instruments in a thrust that preserves security and opportunity at home, advances leverage with our allies, and responds in an integrated way to threats that are real from abroad.
Pratt (2008: 73)	Canadian grand strategizing should be focused completely upon working with our friends to have the Americans construct an Allied grand strategy that all can rally behind and support.... It might also be tempting to simply conclude that another grand strategy of “containment” is in order.
Crowley (2010: 167)	Canada should seek from the US: a new treaty on continental security and a common external tariff; a new joint commission on border management; a new joint committee of Congress and Parliament on Canadian-American issues; and a joint tribunal on issues that arise under our various cross-border agreements.
Doran and Pratt (2012: 31-3)	Policy conclusions about Canadian grand strategy: structural change on a massive scale cannot be prevented; must adopt grand strategy to protect interests; assets in place will help to promote interests; do not isolate from international politics.... Resulting guidelines: need for (i) flexibility; (ii) high level of acceptance at home; (iii) clear conception of threats, interests, and values; (iv) unity of purpose and predictability; and (v) willingness to provide capability to meet objectives.
Neiberg (2012: 19-20)	Options for coping with opening of Arctic waterways: working with alliance partners, especially US; developing an independent strategic voice and risking tensions with US; and an independent institutionalist approach – seek global agreements.
Tremblay and Bentley (2015: 16)	Canada’s grand strategy must fully address development and security of the Canadian Arctic.... It is imperative that the strategy be firmly based on a Whole of Government approach that integrates all elements of national power.
Overfield (2023: 2)	The Arctic 7 should not rush to revive the full Arctic Council while Russia continues its war in Ukraine.
Robertson (2023: 4)	Spending on defence, diplomacy and development is an investment against chaos. Doing it collectively through multilateral institutions such as NATO is a force-multiplier.

Table 4 presents proposals for Canadian grand strategy that build upon the points of criticism summarized in Table 3. Ottawa should get behind a multilateral US-led grand strategy, and update bilateral institutions. These interrelated ideas make good sense, particularly under conditions of rapid change in the international system that go to the very foundations of the power

structure. The US-led world-order has faced, over the course of decades, a number of challenges created by globalization, coalescing in the rise of China. Elements of Canadian policy should become more integrated with each other and essential priorities of the US-led coalition, with greater spending in general and deployment of resources to the Arctic in particular. The implementation of this project, however, would need to secure a high level of acceptance at home – a daunting task indeed.












Canadian grand strategy: a systemist vision

The primary goal of systemism is to convey ideas in a way that facilitates comparison and analysis by means of a visual approach (Bunge 1996; James 2022).⁸ The systemist approach enables understanding of arguments through clear and comprehensive graphic presentation. Contrary to first impressions, the idea of “more box and arrow diagrams” is not banal but serves to promote intellectual rigour and lucidity. Accordingly, the display of arguments organized in systemist visualization allows for targeted criticism and productive debate, in turn providing analysis of greater relevance to policy.⁹

“ *The systemist approach enables understanding of arguments through clear and comprehensive graphic presentation.* ”

Table 5 illustrates the notation used in the process of creating systemist figures. In line with findings from educational psychology, the notation is relatively simple and relies upon shape and colour to distinguish between component types.¹⁰ The starting point of the diagram – before any connections are introduced – is the designation of a diagram’s system, recognizable visually

TABLE 5: Systemist notation

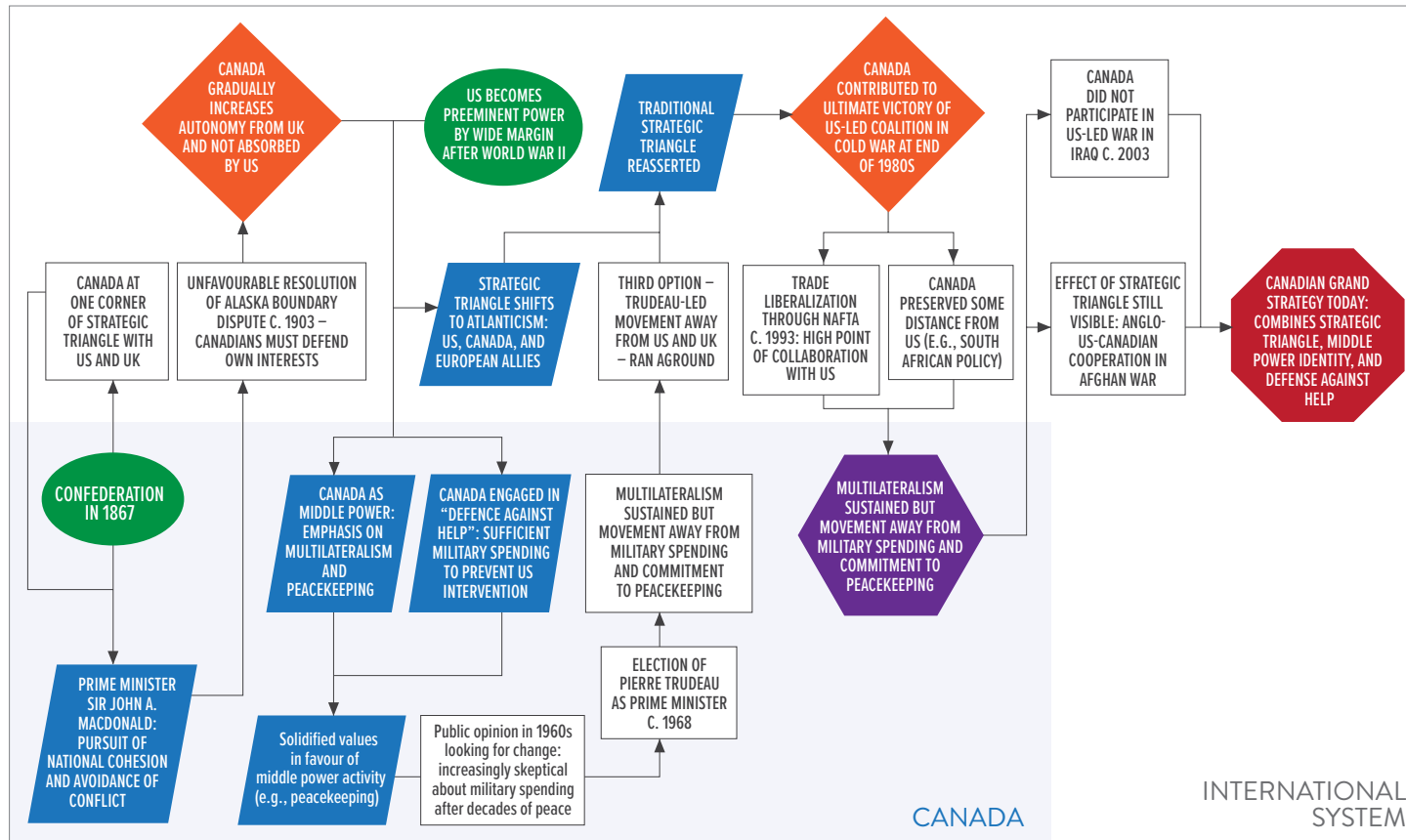
Initial variable		The starting point of a series of relationships.
Generic variable		A step in the process being depicted.
Divergent variable		Multiple pathways are created from a single linkage.
Convergent variable		A single pathway is created from multiple linkages.
Nodal variable		Multiple pathways are created from multiple linkages.
Co-constitutive variable		Two variables that are mutually contingent upon each other.
Terminal variable		The end point of a series of relationships.
Connection stated in study		A linkage explicitly made by the author.
Connection crossing over		Two separate linkages that do not interact.
Connection inferred from study		A linkage inferred by the reader but is not made explicit by the author.
Interaction effect		Two variables that depend upon the effect of each other.

as its “inner box,” and the corresponding environment in which the system is embedded being the diagram’s “outer box.” In the present context, “Canada” will serve as the system, with the “International System” as its environment. Within “Canada,” the macro level (the upper part of the system with components in all upper-case characters) would be the government, while the micro level (the lower part of the system with components in all lower-case characters) corresponds to society.

Figure 1 tells the story of Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy. As stated above, the system is Canada, with the macro and micro levels corresponding, respectively, to government and society. The international system is the environment. A series of subfigures will be used to express the arguments in turn.

Connections get underway in Figure 1.a with “CONFEDERATION IN 1867” → “PRIME MINISTER SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD: PURSUIT OF NATIONAL COHESION AND AVOIDANCE OF CONFLICT”; “CANADA AT ONE CORNER OF STRATEGIC TRIANGLE WITH US AND UK.”¹¹ The initial component is designated with a green oval, while the

FIGURE 1: Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy



convergent component appears as a blue parallelogram. Like Confederation itself, initial Canadian foreign policy is partial at the onset. Canada would expand from coast to coast and become an active member of the international polity in later years. At the outset, however, a culture of risk aversion, and managing the “three body problem” with the UK and US, revealed the outlines of a grand strategy.

FIGURE 1a: Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy



Movement from the governmental level of Canada toward the international system takes place in Figure 1a with “PRIME MINISTER SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD: PURSUIT OF NATIONAL COHESION AND AVOIDANCE OF CONFLICT” → “UNFAVOURABLE RESOLUTION OF ALASKA BOUNDARY DISPUTE C. 1903 – CANADIANS MUST DEFEND OWN INTERESTS.” The UK sided with the US in the arbitra-

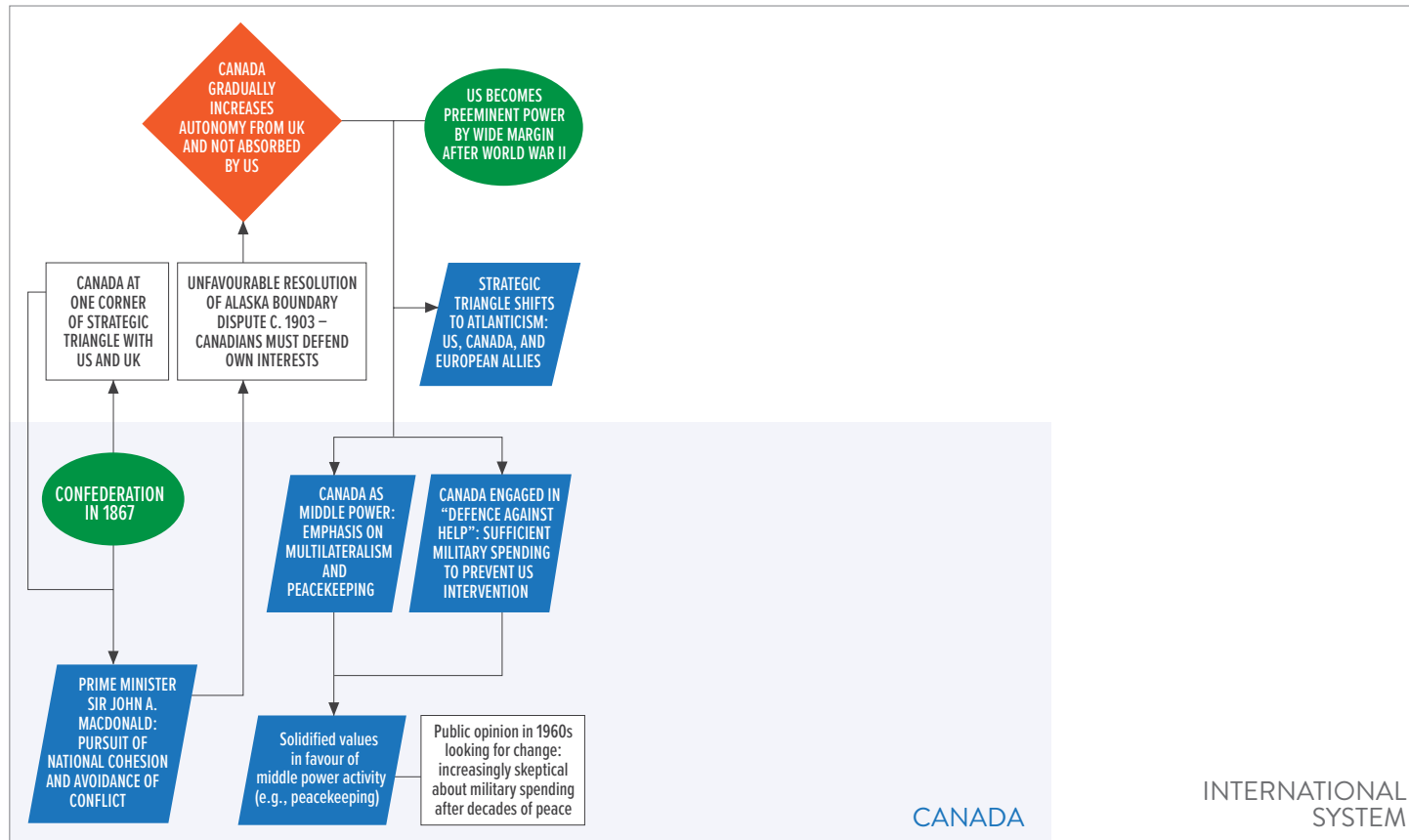
tion over the Alaskan boundary and left Canada displeased with the outcome (James 2021). With Germany rising quickly and engaging in ‘gunboat diplomacy’ at the outset of the twentieth century, the UK pursued solidarity with the ever more powerful US as a matter of necessity. This situation could be expected to continue and therefore Canada had to adjust to the new reality.

“ *This situation could be expected to continue and therefore Canada had to adjust to the new reality.* ”

This pathway from Figure 1a continues in the international system with “UNFAVOURABLE RESOLUTION OF ALASKA BOUNDARY DISPUTE C. 1903 – CANADIANS MUST DEFEND OWN INTERESTS” → “CANADA GRADUALLY INCREASES AUTONOMY FROM UK AND NOT ABSORBED BY US.” As a divergent component, the latter appears as an orange diamond. The strategic triangle with the UK and US, metaphorically speaking, needed to be kept close to equilateral – whether thought of in terms of autonomy or alignment with regard to values and priorities – with each side neither too long nor too short.

Multiple pathways unfold in Figure 1b (see page 23): “CANADA GRADUALLY INCREASES AUTONOMY FROM UK AND NOT ABSORBED BY US”; “US BECOMES PREEMINENT POWER BY WIDE MARGIN AFTER WORLD WAR II” → “STRATEGIC TRIANGLE SHIFTS TO ATLANTICISM: US, CANADA, AND EUROPEAN ALLIES”; “CANADA AS MIDDLE POWER: EMPHASIS ON MULTILATERALISM AND PEACEKEEPING”; “CANADA ENGAGED IN ‘DEFENCE AGAINST HELP’: SUFFICIENT MILITARY SUFFICIENT MILITARY SPENDING TO PREVENT US INTERVENTION.” Observe that the latter component prior to the arrow is initial and designated with a green oval, while all the components after the arrow are convergent and appear as blue parallelograms. The US in 1945 towered over the world, with the UK in a disastrous state by comparison, and even the USSR could not match it

FIGURE 1b: Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy



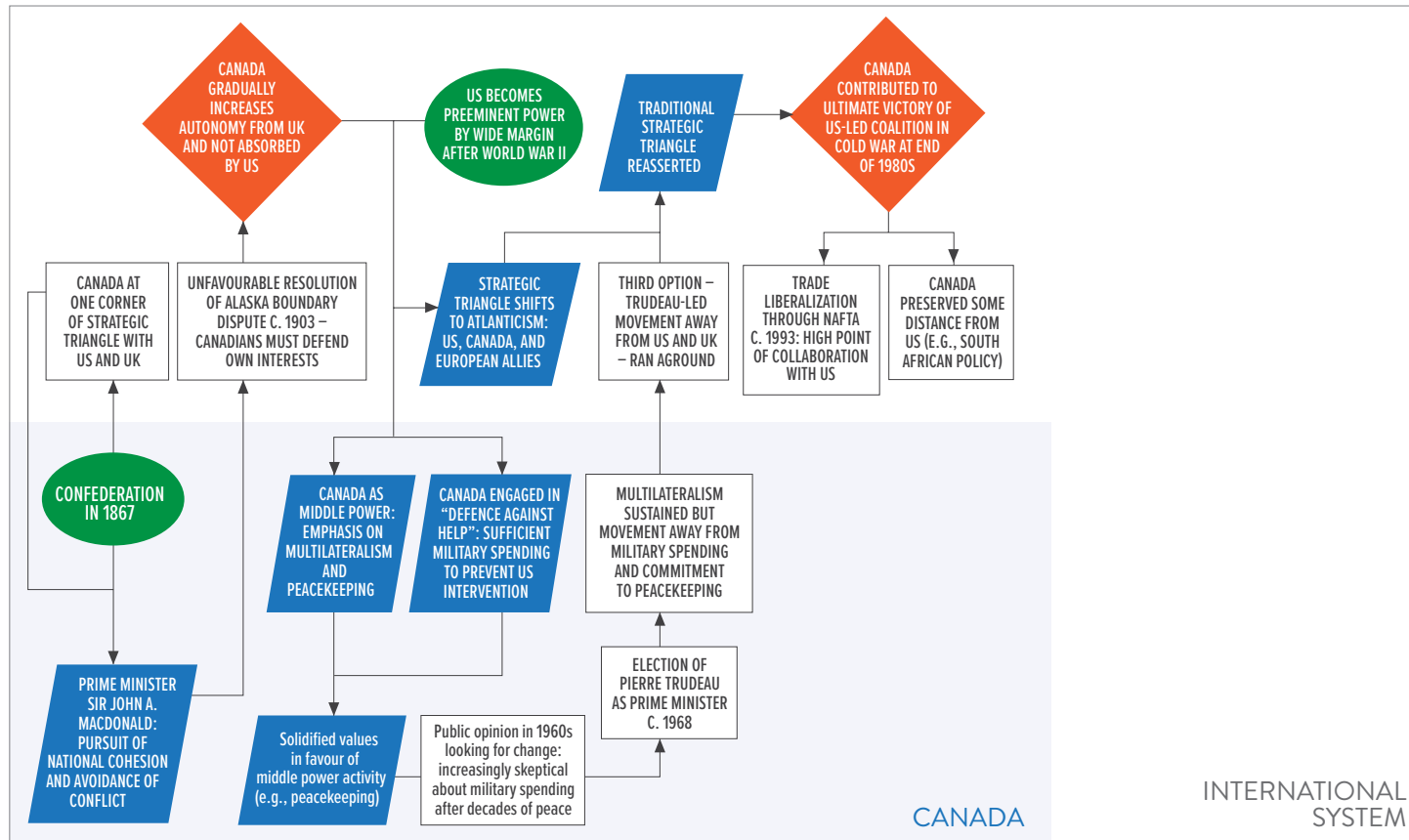
across all dimensions. Canada pragmatically turned to Atlanticism so as to increase the counterweight against the US. A multilateral approach to foreign policy also effectively magnified Canadian impact on world affairs. Moreover, multilateralism in general, and specifically regarding peacekeeping, became effective means of pursuing defence against help.

Figure 1b moves on from the governmental level to a point of convergence at the level of society: “CANADA ENGAGED IN ‘DEFENCE AGAINST HELP’: SUFFICIENT MILITARY SPENDING TO PREVENT US INTERVENTION” → “solidified values in favour of middle power activity (e.g., peacekeeping).” Over the course of decades, support for the key elements of a grand strategy were gradually entrenched within the Canadian identity. This pathway continues in society with “solidified values in favour of middle power activity (e.g., peacekeeping)” → “public opinion in 1960s looking for change: increasingly skeptical about military spending after decades of peace.” While not the only reason for change in Canadian public opinion, the Vietnam War stimulated a wave of anti-Americanism that tended to involve antipathy to military endeavours.

Over the course of decades, support for the key elements of a grand strategy were gradually entrenched within the Canadian identity.

Figure 1c (see page 25) depicts movement from society to government with “public opinion in 1960s looking for change: increasingly skeptical about military spending after decades of peace” → “ELECTION OF PIERRE TRUDEAU AS PRIME MINISTER C. 1968.” The election of Trudeau, who occupied the left of the Liberal Party, reflected in part a wave of Canadian nationalism favouring increased distance from the US and its perceived inclination to military action beyond reasonable boundaries. The pathway continues at the level of government: “ELECTION OF PIERRE TRUDEAU AS PRIME MINISTER C. 1968” → “MULTILATERALISM SUSTAINED BUT MOVEMENT AWAY FROM MILITARY SPENDING AND COMMITMENT TO PEACEKEEPING.” The Trudeau government had an agenda that emphasized domestic politics over foreign policy, with attendant efforts to increase Canadian autonomy away

FIGURE 1c: Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy



from the perceived militarism of the US. For example, Trudeau established the Foreign Investment Review Agency in an attempt to limit what he regarded as an alarmingly high American presence in the Canadian economy. The prime minister also had a notoriously bad relationship with US President Richard Nixon.

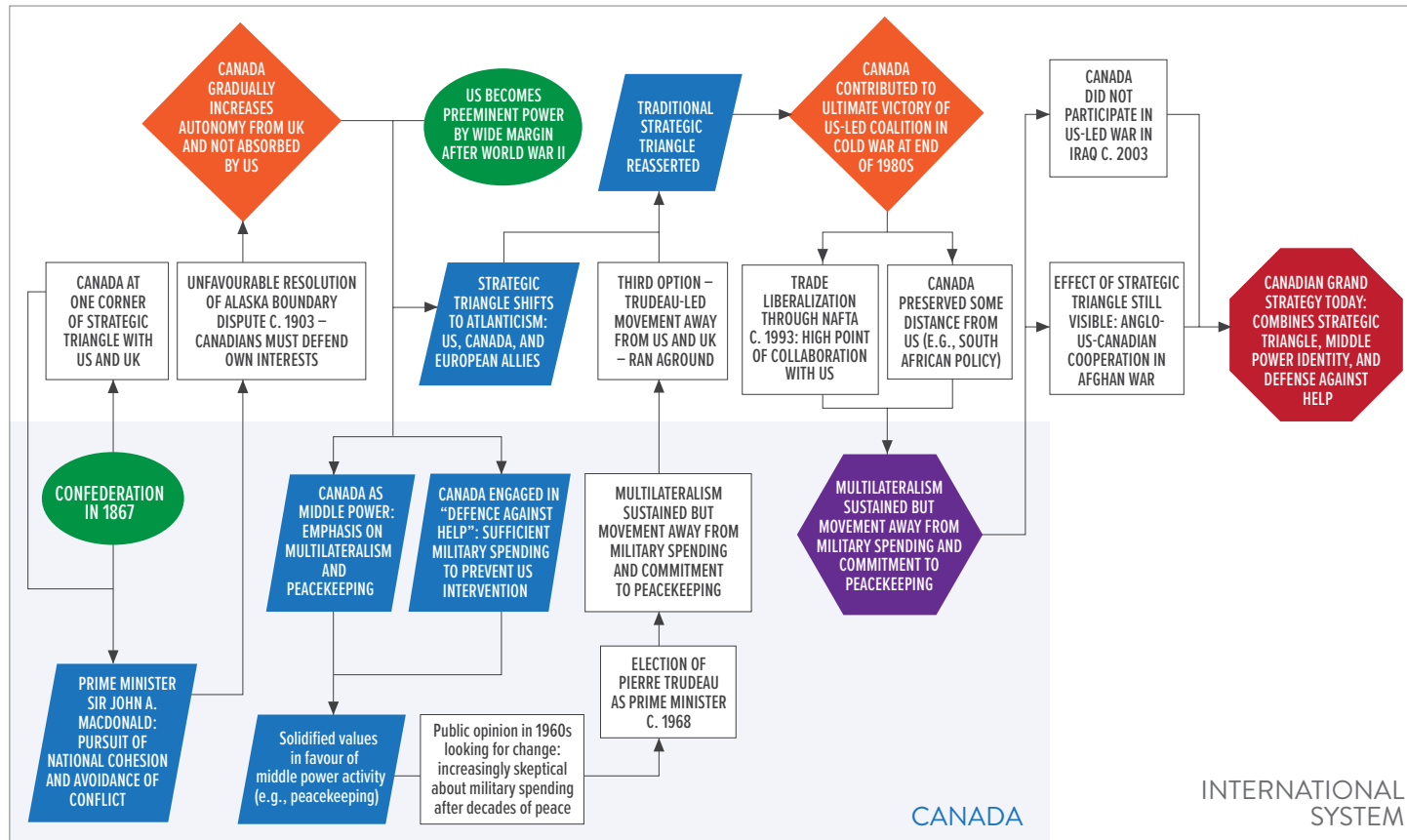
Movement from the level of government to the international system ensues in Figure 1c with “MULTILATERALISM SUSTAINED BUT MOVEMENT AWAY FROM MILITARY SPENDING AND COMMITMENT TO PEACEKEEPING” → “THIRD OPTION – TRUDEAU-LED MOVEMENT AWAY FROM US AND UK – RAN AGROUND.” Efforts to get out of the figurative strategic triangle by pursuing other connections, the Third Option, proved futile in an era preceding globalization. The route continues in the international system: “THIRD OPTION – TRUDEAU-LED MOVEMENT AWAY FROM US AND UK – RAN AGROUND” → “TRADITIONAL STRATEGIC TRIANGLE REASSERTED.” The component after the arrow is convergent and therefore appears as a blue parallelogram. In spite of efforts to shift away from the US and, for example, emphasize foreign aid and reduced NATO spending, inertial path-dependency ultimately preserved traditional connections.



The sudden fall of the USSR ushered in a period of triumphalism for democracy and capitalism.

Figure 1c moves forward to a point of divergence, depicted as an orange diamond: “TRADITIONAL STRATEGIC TRIANGLE REASSERTED.” → “CANADA CONTRIBUTED TO ULTIMATE VICTORY OF US-LED COALITION IN COLD WAR AT END OF 1980S.” The sudden fall of the USSR ushered in a period of triumphalism for democracy and capitalism. The pathway continues with “CANADA CONTRIBUTED TO ULTIMATE VICTORY OF US-LED COALITION IN COLD WAR AT END OF 1980S” → “TRADE LIBERALIZATION THROUGH NAFTA C. 1993: HIGH POINT OF COLLABORATION WITH US”; “CANADA PRESERVED SOME DISTANCE FROM US (E.G., SOUTH AFRICAN POLICY).” The Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney moved closer to the US in advantageous ways while trying not to take on unpopular “baggage” associated with certain US policies.

FIGURE 1d Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy



Movement from the international system back into the governmental level of Canada occurs in Figure 1d with “TRADE LIBERALIZATION THROUGH NAFTA C. 1993: HIGH POINT OF COLLABORATION WITH US”; “CANADA PRESERVED SOME DISTANCE FROM US (E.G., SOUTH AFRICAN POLICY)” → “MULTILATERALISM SUSTAINED BUT MOVEMENT AWAY FROM MILITARY

SPENDING AND COMMITMENT TO PEACEKEEPING.” The latter, a nodal component, is depicted as a purple hexagon. Reduced military spending impacted Canada’s peacekeeping capacity, with it being de-emphasized relative to other initiatives.

Pathways continue in Figure 1d with “MULTILATERALISM SUSTAINED BUT MOVEMENT AWAY FROM MILITARY SPENDING AND COMMITMENT TO PEACEKEEPING” → “CANADA DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN US-LED WAR IN IRAQ C. 2003”; “EFFECT OF STRATEGIC TRIANGLE STILL VISIBLE: ANGLO-US-CANADIAN COOPERATION IN AFGHAN WAR.” With the Cold War in the rear-view mirror, Canada appeared increasingly to act in an *ad hoc* way, while some traces of the old strategic triangle were still visible. Significant differences regarding the Afghan and Iraq Wars serve as prominent examples of how Canada tried to keep an (approximately) equilateral strategic triangle in place.

“*With the Cold War in the rear-view mirror, Canada appeared increasingly to act in an ad hoc way.*”

Figure 1d reaches a point of termination, displayed as a red octagon, with the following connections: “CANADA DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN US-LED WAR IN IRAQ C. 2003”; “EFFECT OF STRATEGIC TRIANGLE STILL VISIBLE – ANGLO-US-CANADIAN COOPERATION IN AFGHAN WAR” → “CANADIAN GRAND STRATEGY TODAY: COMBINES STRATEGIC TRIANGLE, MIDDLE POWER IDENTITY, AND DEFENCE AGAINST HELP.” The component after the arrow is terminal and therefore appears as a red octagon. Canadian foreign policy over 150 years can be summarized most readily, it would seem, by the three elements that appear in the final component of the diagram.

Figure 1 includes 22 components. The figure includes nine points of contingency – summing up divergent (2), convergent (6), and nodal (1) –

which forecloses any deterministic interpretation. Pathways come together and move apart quite frequently. Note that only two components appear in society, so that part of the history might be elaborated in future work. Overall, however, the diagram is sufficient to enable answers to the questions that have motivated this study of Canadian grand strategy.

Figure 1, it should be noted, is just one way among many of telling the story of Canadian foreign policy and grand strategy since Confederation. It is possible to imagine alternative systemist diagrams that could provide more or less detail. For instance, elements could plausibly be added or subtracted.¹² Systemist visualization, and the ease with which it can be edited, provides interlocutors with an effective tool towards constructive debate.



*Does Canada have
a grand strategy?
Yes, but in a partial form.*

Does Canada have a grand strategy? Yes, but in a partial form. The strategic triangle, middle power activity, and defence against help are sustained features of Canadian foreign policy. However, when read against the generalized definitions of grand strategy as summarized in Table 1, Canada clearly falls short of a fully developed grand strategy. The three elements noted are not sufficient to constitute, in themselves, a plan to allocate means toward ends in a comprehensive way. In particular, the meaning attached to defence against help is difficult to identify, and even erratic at times. While middle-power multilateralism is consistent enough over time to constitute a pattern of behaviour, there are serious questions to ask about the current and future role of peacekeeping.

Canada may even be drifting away from the traditional elements identified with the development of its grand strategy. Regarding middlepowermanship, Canada failed on two occasions to obtain a seat on the United Nations Security Council, and has long since moved away from a major role in peacekeeping. Atlanticism may also be on the wane in the face of the rising importance of Asia, symbolized by the advent of an Indo-

Pacific Strategy. Perhaps most noteworthy is the historically low level of defence spending as a proportion of the Canadian economy. Should these trends continue, Canada will likely move toward a more short-sighted tactical, rather than strategic, approach to foreign policy. If Canada is to try to develop a coherent foreign policy, let alone anything approaching the status of grand strategy, it must reconsider and consolidate its institutional framework for decision-making. The conduct of Canadian foreign policy is currently so diffused within the government that internal coordination is an ongoing challenge to coherence (Jackson 2023).

How is the Canadian grand strategy working out? It would be most accurate to say that results have been satisfactory, but there is cause for concern. The strategic triangle and middle power activities have provided a solid foundation for success in terms of safety for the homeland, and implementation of a foreign policy in line with liberal values. Under conditions of globalization, however, Canada needs the capacity to meet new and rapidly arising threats. In contrast, with a brief interruption in the Harper era, Canadian public opinion has moved steadily away from support for military spending in particular, and realist principles in general. An emphasis on counteracting climate change, and even a commitment to being a “moral superpower,” will not keep Russia and China out of the Canadian Arctic. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently courted embarrassment by asserting that it would be unrealistic to expect Canada to ever reach a 2 percent level of military spending; The government of Canada, a successful and notably prosperous state, effectively had “thrown in the towel” regarding meeting NATO obligations. It seems fair to say that the grand strategy – always hybrid in its development – has shifted too far along the continuum from realist to liberal principles. Moreover, the current highly liberal foreign policy also has a *global* skew – increasingly contrary to the character and capabilities of a middle power.

How might the grand strategy of Canada be made more robust? By realizing that, put simply, “you get what you pay for.” Ottawa’s recognition of the need to meet a more visible Sino-Russian threat to sovereignty in the Arctic may be the only way to reactivate support for military spending that would be sufficient to serve as a defence against help. This will be difficult to achieve if the government of the day continues to put emphasis on global and long-term issues over more immediate and proximate concerns.

Summing up

Canada does have something that resembles a grand strategy. However, it remains a work in progress. A systemist graphic conveys the history of Canadian foreign policy and effectively assists in highlighting three elements of a grand strategy: a strategic triangle involving the US and UK/European states; middle power identity, and defence against help. Canada faces rapid change at the global level and is especially unprepared for traditional security-related threats in new venues, with the Arctic at the top of the list.

This study has implications beyond Canada. Is Canada an exemplar or anomaly among middle powers regarding grand strategy? Future research should focus more specifically on what is feasible for Canadian grand strategy in an era when public opinion focuses more on climate change than immediate dangers. While action against harmful climate change is admirable, Canada is not capable of leading that campaign, and decisive action is needed to meet new and imminent challenges to its sovereignty. [MLI](#)

About the author



Patrick James is the Dana and David Dornsife Dean's Professor Emeritus of International Relations at the University of Southern California (Ph.D., University of Maryland, College Park). James is the author or editor of over 30 books and more than 180 articles and book chapters. Among his honours and awards are the Louise Dyer Peace Fellowship from the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Eccles Professor of the British Library, Official Visitor at Nuffield College of Oxford University, the Governor-General's International Award in Canadian Studies, and six Distinguished Scholar awards from the International Studies Association (ISA). He served as president of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (2007–09), president of the International Council for Canadian Studies (2011–13), president of the Peace Science Society (2016–17), and president of the ISA (2018–19). James is the editor-in-chief of the Oxford Bibliographies in International Relations and also served a five-year term as editor of *International Studies Quarterly*. [MLI](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 For a review of the many studies that engage with grand strategy as a concept, see Balzacq (2022).
- 2 For examples of that viewpoint, see Pratt (2008), Granatstein (2011), Neiberg (2012), Trudgen (2012), Lepreucht and Sokolsky (2015), and Silove (2018).
- 3 A comprehensive treatment of Canadian foreign policy is available in Nossal, Roussel, and Paquin (2015).
- 4 For a personal account of this issue area, see the memoirs of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (2007).
- 5 For a range of views on the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, see James (2012) and Saideman (2016).
- 6 See Neiberg (2012), Murray (2013) and Tremblay and Bentley (2015).
- 7 See Hebron and Stack (2017) for an authoritative treatment of globalization along political and other dimensions.
- 8 The following introduction to systemism is based primarily on Gansen and James (2022) and James (2022).
- 9 Over 900 systemist diagrams now appear in the archive of the Visual International Relations Project (VIRP) (www.visualinternationalrelationsproject.com). These graphics cover a wide range of publications in terms of subject matter, theoretical perspective, and methods. The VIRP archive is intended to serve multiple purposes in scholarship, teaching, and policy analysis. Note also that while IR has been the starting point for application of systemist graphics, work from all academic disciplines can be represented via this approach.

- 10 For a full treatment of the foundations in educational psychology in connection with the systemist graphic approach, see James (2022). The word “variable” is used as a shorthand in Table 5; the notation is meant to extend beyond empirical studies and thus “component” is used the rest of the way instead.
- 11 When an arrow points out of, or into, two or more components, these are separated with a semicolon.
- 12 The notation in Table 1 includes the broken line, which can be used to represent components that have been added to the original version based on a given publication.

constructive *important* *forward-thinking*
high-quality *insightful*
active

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