

Multilateral Myths:

On the Attractiveness of Multilateral Approaches in Canada

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Lauded as “one of the most prominent and persistent themes in the practice of Canadian foreign policy,”¹ multilateralism has also been a motif in its study. Surprising in a country where foreign policy is so politicized, multilateralism has attracted the favor of governments of nearly every partisan stripe since the end of the Second World War. Nor has the approach been much questioned in the academic discourse of commentators seeking to explain and account for the foreign policy decisions of successive Canadian governments. Indeed, as a vehicle for both the implementation and analysis of Canadian foreign policy, multilateralism has attained nearly mythical proportions. The word ‘mythology’, however, has also been employed by a small number of prominent scholars in their theoretical analyses of the discursive traditions surrounding the practice of Canadian ‘multilateralism’.

Understanding and maintaining the distinction between theory and practice in assessing the reasons for multilateralism’s attractiveness to Canadian governments over the past half-century, and the costs

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and benefits derived therefrom, is critical. As Keenes observes, “an arm’s length relationship developed between mythology and practice in Canadian foreign policy;”² thus, while a close relationship exists between theory and practice, inquiring into its nature requires that the two be kept analytically distinct. As shall be demonstrated, the principle motives accounting for the appeal of multilateralism manifest themselves in the mythical dimensions of the approach. Interrogating these myths provides a more nuanced understanding not only of multilateralism as a practice, but also of its resulting costs and benefits to both the practice and study of international relations in Canada.

The notion that multilateralism is a myth does not mean that it is necessarily ‘true’ or ‘false’; rather it means that it is ‘real’ for those who believe it.³ In a field that is nearly entirely socially constructed,⁴ beliefs are critical. Indeed, even Keating, who treats multilateralism as ‘real’ by restricting his analysis principally to its practical dimensions, acknowledges that it is “an article of faith.”⁵ Furthermore, the notion that multilateralism is a myth does not mean that it is not significant or that it does not have significant and practical implications. Tracing the manner in which Canadian foreign policy has historically been constructed upon multilateral foundations is a useful perspective from which to observe the practical dimensions of this approach while connecting them to their theoretical underpinnings.

After gaining its independence from the British empire, Canada eschewed its imperial status for an isolationist approach which saw it shield its new international identity from most international affairs; World War Two, however, forced Canada to become a more involved actor on the world stage. The primary vehicle for Canadian involvement in international relations during this period was manifest in a series of multilateral arrangements. As these measures were institutionalized, Canada’s influence in the world was institutionalized within them; multilateralism may therefore be regarded as lying at the foundation of the Canadian approach to the practice of foreign policy. In many respects, the arrangements subsumed under this rubric continue to define Canada’s place in the world order, and it is around this definition, often referred to as an ‘identity’ or ‘personality’, that the ‘mythology’ of multilateralism have grown.

While it defines Canada’s place in the world and has been defined by the Canadian government as our official security and defense policy,⁶ the academic community has yet to concretely define what multilateralism denotes. Rather, it has become significant as a set of connotations posited by commentators who invoke it as a “form of shorthand for interpreting historical experience,”⁷ that is, as a founda-

tion upon which Canada's identity may be (re)constructed and articulated through foreign policy. These connotations together constitute a 'mythology', one which, moreover, has "become an important element of the Canadian political personality, both at home and abroad,"⁸ and an essential aspect of Canada's 'national identity'.⁹ As a country perpetually perceived to be experiencing an identity crisis, the contention that multilateralism is an essential aspect of this identity provides an invaluable insight. As is characteristic of Canada in dealing with crises, multilateralism as a concept seems to represent a compromise, a intentional but perhaps subconscious willingness to embrace ambiguity so as to please as many people as possible. On the analytical level, the discursive tradition surrounding Canadian multilateralism has thus come to be regarded less as a 'hard' concept with "substantive and normative dimensions,"¹⁰ and more as a 'mythology'.

At the same time, however, it is evident that on the level of practice, multilateralism has been endowed with some significant substantive and normative dimensions in terms of particular policies and the scholars, practitioners, and politicians who alternately defend or denounce them. It also seems at least intuitively evident that a relationship between the mythology of multilateralism and its actual practice exists. The answer lies in explanations accounting for the attraction of practitioners to multilateral approaches and parallels the attraction of analysts to these approaches: Just as the approach has been espoused by commentators as a "form of shorthand for interpreting historical experience," so too has it been invoked by policy makers in the pursuit of certain policies.¹¹ Explanations for the attractiveness of multilateralism in foreign policy practice are thus rooted in the theory surrounding multilateralism in foreign policy discourse. Interrogating the principle myths generated through this interaction between multilateralism in theory and practice elucidates the nature of the relationship between the two. Among these myths, the following are most salient: the myth that multilateralism is necessarily internationalist or altruistic; that Canadian government's have genuinely and consistently espoused a multilateral approach; that multilateralism is neutral or objective; and, most significantly, that multilateralism is a choice.

This first myth is one very close to the heart of the Canadian identity. Multilateral approaches are often seen not only as being good means, but are also assumed either to be aimed at 'good' ends, or good ends in and of themselves. This conflation of multilateralism with 'dogoodism' has especially deep roots in the mythology surrounding Canada's reputation in the international community. Best understood in the in the context of the post-World War II period in which the

approach became popular in Canada, multilateralism was seen as representing a mechanism for overcoming the destructive anarchy of an international system that had produced two world wars. Multilateral arrangements were thus seen as a means of maintaining peace and security, and preventing the recurrence of such devastation.¹² Canada's longstanding commitment to these arrangements has generated a legacy in which it has come to be perceived by both itself and others as the proverbial 'boy scout' of the international community, selflessly solving the problems generated by the self-interested actions of other states.

This is the view of multilateralism from a 'liberal institutionalist' perspective. In so far as it conflates ends with means, seeing multilateralism as inherently good as an end in and of itself, it is a distorted view. As can be readily demonstrated through the remarks of a former prime minister, Canadian governments have been attracted to multilateralism not as a purely altruistic end, but rather as a means of achieving concrete foreign policy objectives of national interest: "As St. Laurent put it: 'we have thus a useful part to play in world affairs, useful to ourselves through being useful to others'."¹³ This reference to Canada's role in world affairs also alludes to another myth of multilateralism; that is, the presumption that multilateralism is synonymous with internationalism. In fact, multilateral diplomacy and institutions first caught the eye of the Canadian government when it was seeking a means of protecting its isolationist objectives.¹⁴

Multilateralism does not positively correlate with internationalism out of any logical or practical necessity, nor does altruism with either of these two. Indeed, the association between multilateralism, internationalism, and altruism is so weak that continentalism, an approach usually considered to be antithetical to multilateralism, may in fact serve internationalist or altruistic objectives where multilateralism does not.¹⁵ The same may be said of unilateralism, a similar contradiction which is illustrated by the Ottawa Process: Much cited as testament to Canada's multilateral tradition, the initiation of the process actually represents an example of unilateralism and the boundaries of multilateralism were pushed throughout it.¹⁶ Significantly, however, the myth of this correlation has made multilateralism an attractive approach for policy makers seeking to enhance Canada's reputation on the international stage. In this way, the mythology surrounding multilateralism is informed by its practice to an extent and its attractiveness derives from the fact that as a theoretical lens for interpreting past historical experiences, it is distorting. These distortions are then strategically invoked by practitioners wishing to pursue particular policies which might otherwise reflect less favorably on Canada's international reputation.

This notion that Canadian governments have been attracted to multilateral approaches not because they are inherently altruistic or internationalist, but rather because they may be used instrumentally as tools of foreign policy alludes to another myth of multilateralism. Namely, it undermines the fundamental notion presupposed by the liberal institutionalist perspective: the premise that the government actually is committed to multilateral institutions and arrangements. The 'realist-rational choice' model, by way of contrast, posits the view of multilateral institutions as being "merely 'tools of their member states - instruments of policy - to be used, abused, or ignored'."¹⁷ And indeed, Canada has been accused of using, abusing, and ignoring the multilateral institutions that it has claimed to have committed itself to both building and maintaining. Keenes' argument is worth quoting at some length here:

[W]hile Canada has made significant generalized contributions to the building of postwar multilateralism (in practice and in myth), it has exhibited such normative inconsistencies and behavioral non-conformity that bilateralism, exception, and exemption are more characteristic [of its foreign policy since World War Two].¹⁸

These inconsistencies, of course, were instrumental rather than arbitrary. By no means did exceptions make the rule; rather, exceptionalism *became* the rule, exposing a significant disjuncture between theory and practice in foreign policy.

While in theory Canada espoused a doctrine premised on coalitions and alliances, "in practice we acted independently when we wanted to and joined the team when that was more useful."¹⁹ This is not to say that Canada never promoted altruistic or internationalist ends in its foreign policy; however, these situations are systematically patterned around self interest, indicating that multilateralist measures were used as means rather than ends. Sometimes Canada's self interest and the general interest of the international community coincided. "Building a society of states through internationalism," for example, "was in Canada's self interest;" even when they did not coincide "the selfless tendency of thought has dominated the selfish strain of public discourse and myth-making."²⁰ If one espouses the orthodox view that "multilateralism must not be a selective endeavor," the contention that Canada demonstrates something beyond a mere pretense of multilateralism collapses; even if one adopts a less demanding criterion, a significant disjuncture between theory and practice remains. It is this disjuncture, or 'arms-length relationship', however, which accounts for

much of the attraction of Canadian governments to multilateralist approaches: The disconnected relationship between theory and practice creates a space in which mythology shrouds actual policy objectives which use, abuse, or ignore articulated multilateral commitments from scrutiny in public discourse, and projects them instead as selfless tendencies.

The use of multilateral strategies to obscure intent is also connected to a third myth, namely that of objectivity or neutrality. The personality of particular officials is an important factor in explaining the persistent Canadian interest in multilateral approaches.²¹ According to Richter's analysis, Canada's 'obsession' with multilateralism coincides directly with the election of Jean Chrétien in 1993. Both the prime minister and his minister of foreign affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, have been characterized as sharing a marked disdain for the United States.²² In an effort both to depersonalize foreign policy and to frame it more constructively, the label 'anti-Americanism' has been eschewed for the more politically sensitive signifier 'multilateralism'.

This 'multilateralism', however, is pursued not for its own sake but rather as a counterweight to an otherwise continentalist foreign policy²³ argued to be dominated by the interests of the United States. This subjugation of theory to practice renders multilateralism a "cover for those determined to evade or counter US power"²⁴ on a practical level, and little more than a myth on a theoretical one. This myth, however, is powerful enough to create the appearance of increased Canadian autonomy vis a vis the US while giving policy preferences the appearance of being less personal and more constructive. This accounts for much of the attractiveness of multilateralism to successive Canadian governments, including some of their most prominent personalities.

As Holmes notes, however, "foreign policy is determined more by the changing scenes than by changing ministers."²⁵ The context in which Canadian governments might choose multilateral strategies is very different from what it was when the multilateral tradition began.²⁶ Crucially, this context has undergone a change in kind rather than simply in degree: Political realities have changed in such a way as to undermine the fundamental assumption that the government *chooses* a multilateral approach, as is implied by the use of the term 'attraction' which usually taken to connote the selection of a preferred option from among several. Inquiring into the most significant transformations that have combined to restrict the policy-making autonomy of the government is vital to understanding and assessing the validity of this hypothesis. Economic transformations in Canada's domestic policy

environment and structural changes in Canada's position and role within the international system merit close analysis.

Domestic economic interests have always influenced the manner in which Canada has involved itself in multilateral arrangements.²⁷ The contemporary neoliberal environment of fiscal restraint has had the affect of incrementally yet significantly reducing Canada's military capabilities. As Kay contends, "it is precisely because our military *is* so weak that we are such doctrinaire adherents to multilateralism."²⁸ The attractiveness of multilateral approaches to Canadian foreign policy makers is thus a reflection of both the country's interests and its capabilities²⁹ as Keating suggests, but it is the nature of the relationship between these that is most significant. Namely, it is increasingly economic, rather than security or defense, interests that are given priority, and these economic interests are no longer just correlated to, but increasingly determining of, capabilities. In an important sense, then, Canada's multilateral approach is determined by its fiscal policy, rather than chosen by its foreign policy makers.

Canada's autonomy to act in the international sphere has always been constrained. Although it has been ambiguously classified as a 'middle power', Canada has successfully employed instruments of foreign policy to exploit this position so as to accrue to itself disproportionate influence.³⁰ Multilateral arrangements such as coalitions of like-minded, like-sized states were principle among these, and multilateralism therefore appeared attractive to Canadian governments as an influence-optimizing strategy. As Holmes observes, "the determination to play as effective a role as was possible for a middle power was based on a very hardheaded calculation of national interest."³¹ 'Determination', however implies an element of choice that may no longer be consistent with international political realities. That is to say, the Canadian government employs middlepowermanship as a multilateral strategy not because this is a particularly attractive 'option', but rather because there are no other options available to it.³²

This reading emphasizes the pressures that are generated by structural forces of globalization and increasing integration. These pressures constrain and limit the options open to policy makers undermining the notion that multilateralism is a strategy pursued not "merely by accident, or even as a pragmatic response to changing circumstances, but by deliberate choice and planned intent."³³ The fact that the government has declared it to be Canada's official security and defense policy certainly gives the appearance that multilateralism was a choice, however this appearance has no rational basis beyond the discursive level. Myth-making thus produces the illusion of state autonomy in an

international system in which “[t]he power and complexity of the transnational forces now impinging on [this autonomy] are such that all states everywhere are being compelled to co-operate with one another in dealing with them.”³⁴

Changing geopolitical realities have produced the same pressures for co-operation on most developed western countries, but co-operation may take any number of different forms. Like Canada, Western European states have responded to these transnational forces by promoting an agenda of continentalism. On the European continent, of course, continental co-operation is necessarily multilateral. On the North American continent, by contrast, continental cooperation has been bilateral by default due to the disengagement of Mexico as a security and defense partner.³⁵ If continental co-operation is a response determined by the impingement of transnational forces on state sovereignty, then it would be inappropriate to conclude that Canadian governments *choose* multilateralism. A more apt characterization would be that Canada’s foreign policy is multilateral by preference, continental by default, and bilateral out of necessity.³⁶

The introduction of the idea of necessity, however, fundamentally alters how costs and benefits must be conceptualized. While multilateral approaches have often been attributed with advantages such as being flexible enough to accommodate the achievement of foreign policy objectives which are of both national and international interest, contributing to an admirable reputation for Canada internationally, maintaining international peace and security, and providing Canada with disproportionate influence in the world order, all claims of benefit depend on the possibility of alternate worlds where costs could be higher and benefits lower. In the case where alternate possible worlds are extremely improbable, however, claims of cost and benefit lose their purchase. In this way, if it is conceded that Canadian governments have no choice but to adopt multilateral approaches, then assessing its relative merits is not particularly germane beyond a rhetorical level.

Synonymous with the discursive or theoretical level, however, this rhetorical level is not insignificant: It is on this level that the mythical dimensions of multilateralism, and therefore as has been demonstrated also the factor accounting for the ‘attractiveness’ of the approach to successive Canadian governments, is manifest. Whether multilateralism is altruistic, objective, consistently espoused, or a choice remains somewhat secondary to the fact that as an approach to both the implementation and analysis of Canadian foreign policy, multilateralism has not been subject to much genuine debate. While this ubiquitous appeal has created the appearance of consensus and legiti-

macy, the “uncritical acceptance of the mythology of multilateralism,” as Keenes observes, “has restricted debate about Canada’s international relations.”³⁷ Moreover, the closeness of the relationship between the theory – or mythology – of multilateralism and its practice, as demonstrated above, indicates that the approach’s distorting and constraining effects on one level will ultimately affect the other. Ultimately, the myth-making powers of multilateralism can only conceal the disjuncture between theory and practice up to a certain point, the worry being that once this point is exceeded, it will be too late to engage in serious debate on the potentially very different realities of Canada’s international relations. As Richter warns, “unless Canada begins to pay the price of sovereignty, this country’s influence will continue to wane, and no amount of . . . myth-making will be able to conceal that decline.”³⁸

Notes

¹ Thomas Keating, *Canada and World Order: The Multilateralist Tradition in Canadian Foreign Policy*, Second Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 1.

² Ernie Keenes, “The myth of multilateralism: exception, exemption, and bilateralism in Canadian international economic relations,” *International Journal*, Volume L, Issue 4 (1995): 759.

³ David G. Haglund, “The Comparative ‘Continentalization’ of Security and Defense Policy in North America and Europe: Canadian Multilateralism in a Unipolar World?” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Volume 38, Issue 2 (2004): 11.

⁴ Robert Wolfe, “Most Safely on the Fence? A Round Table on the Possibility of a Canadian Foreign Policy Post 9/11,” *Canadian Foreign Policy*, Volume 11, Issue 1 (2004): 97.

⁵ Keating 2002, 1.

⁶ Haglund, 10.

⁷ Haglund, 11.

⁸ Keenes, 759.

⁹ Mira Sucharov, “Canadian Multilateralism Inside Out: A Response to Ignatieff,” In *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker, (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 45; and Jennifer M. Welsh, “Canada in the 21st Century: Beyond Dominion and Middle Power” *Behind the Headlines*, Volume 61, Number 4 (2004): 12.

¹⁰ Keating, 184.

¹¹ Haglund, 11.

- ¹² Denis Stairs, "Choosing Multilateralism: Canada's Experience After WWII and Canada in the New International Environment," *CANCAPS*, Number 4, July (1994): 2.
- ¹³ Louis, A. Delvoie, "Canadian Multilateralism: Back to Basics," in *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 205.
- ¹⁴ Keating, 8.
- ¹⁵ Haglund, 20-21.
- ¹⁶ Adam Chapnick, "The Ottawa Process Revisited: Aggressive Unilateralism in the Post-Cold War World," *International Journal*, Volume LVII, Issue 3 (2002): 286.
- ¹⁷ Michel Fortmann, S. Neil MacFarlane, and Stéphane Roussel, *Multilateralism and Regional Security*, ed. Michel Fortmann, S. Neil MacFarlane, and Stéphane Roussel (Clemensport: Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1997) 4.
- ¹⁸ Keenes, 776-777.
- ¹⁹ John W. Holmes, "Most safely in the middle," *International Journal*, Volume XXXIX, Issue 2 (1984): 370.
- ²⁰ Keenes, 759.
- ²¹ Keating, 6.
- ²² Andrew Richter, "The Invisible Country: Canada After September 11," in *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 261, my emphasis.
- ²³ Delvoie, 205.
- ²⁴ Reginald C. Stuart, "Potential for Partnership: A Commentary on Michael Ignatieff," in *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 211.
- ²⁵ Holmes, 381.
- ²⁶ Jane Boulden, "Missing the Mark With Multilateralism? A Response to Michael Ignatieff," in *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 109.
- ²⁷ Keating, 15.
- ²⁸ Jonathon Kay, "The 'Pretend Universe' of Multilateralism and the Non-Fiction of Unilateralism," in *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 201.
- ²⁹ Keating, 9.
- ³⁰ Welsh, 2.
- ³¹ Holmes, 369.

³² John van Oudenaren, "The Missing Atlantic Dimension," in *Independence in an Age of Empire: Assessing Unilateralism and Multilateralism*, ed. Graham F. Walker, (Halifax: Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2004) 96.

³³ Stairs, 1.

³⁴ Stairs, 6.

³⁵ Haglund, 20.

³⁶ Muirhead qtd. in Haglund, 13.

³⁷ Keenes, 777.

³⁸ Richter, 257.

