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It is widely accepted in the study of international relations that the world has entered a new era of great power competition. Much of this work resides within American academia, specifically centered on whether and how to maintain the U.S. superpower position and global role in the face of rising challengers in China and to a lesser degree Russia.[1] Such approaches lend themselves to dyadic studies between U.S./China and U.S./Russia pairings, which risks marginalizing the agency of allies as more or less strategic appendages of American hegemony. Exploring these states' interpretation of and adaption within this structurally altering environment is, however, an important area of study in its own right, as well as for appreciating its effect on American strategy and contemporary great power politics dynamics more generally.

Leigh Sarty's recent article is a case in point, examining one of the United States' oldest allies – Canada. He investigates how Canada should pursue relations with China and Russia as the most serious rivals to American hegemony. He argues that while both are adversaries who pose unique challenges, they are more "fragile than frightening" (627) in terms of their revisionist potential which should temper concerns that engaging with them will reward bad behavior and harm national interests. As well, while Canada will always prioritize and value its relationships with the U.S. and allies, in an increasingly multi-polar world relations with both China and Russia must be entrenched as high priorities in foreign policy. Sarty is well-positioned to explore these matters given his three decades of diplomatic experience at Global Affairs Canada (Canada's foreign affairs department) including postings in both Moscow and Beijing.

A New Global Balance of Power Requires a Rethink of Canadian Foreign Policy

Sarty begins by arguing that "the structure of the international system" (615) is the most important factor influencing Canadian foreign policy. A structural orientation allows one to "step back and consider the tectonic shifts at the heart of international change" (616), examining patterns and changes in the global balance of power rather than fixating on any specific event or outcome. Currently the world is moving away from American unipolarity and towards becoming multi-polar with other great powers emerging. Two main features of this transition are the growing unreliability of the U.S. as an order-defending liberal superpower and China and Russia as the main challengers to U.S. primacy. This requires a fundamental rethink in Canadian foreign policy, specifically acceptance that Canada must do more independently to secure its own interests and prosperity. Such changes, Sarty envisions, would bring a "welcome new degree of realism in thinking on Canadian foreign policy" (616), which has increasingly rested on commitments to multilateralism and support for the Rules-Based International Order (RBIO) without appreciation for the structural foundations underpinning these features – American unipolarity in the post-Cold War era. These structural foundations are now eroding.

[1] Daniel Nexon, "Against Great Power Competition." *Foreign Affairs*, 15 February 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-15/against-great-power-competition

Sarty acknowledges that Canadian observers and practitioners are not totally blind to these changes, but that the focus is too lopsided towards understanding the altered nature and behavior of the U.S., especially given the turbulence in bilateral relations during the Trump Administration. Left under-studied is the emergence of China and Russia as revisionist powers and their impacts on Canadian foreign policy. Sarty explores this matter in three steps: 1) explaining the different types of powers that Russia and China are; 2) the common challenges both face which limit their great power potential and help explain the nature of their revisionism; and 3) how Canada should approach relations with these powers based on these preceding points.

As great powers, Russia and China are qualitatively distinct from one another.[2] Russia has regained much of its military strength, but its mono-product economy, shrinking population, and kleptocratic form of government limits it to being a disruptive power playing the role of spoiler in global politics. Russia lacks the power to become an "alternative pole" (619) and can only hope for a loose spheres of influence system to emerge among a concert of powers which includes itself. In contrast, China's greater economic power – as evidenced in its network building projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative- and alternative visions to global governance make it a definitive great power which could become a "junior superpower" (620) in an eventual shift towards a bipolar system with the United States. However, given China's need for global stability and the international order, as well as gradual balancing against it by others, Sarty warns against assessments of China becoming an inevitable global hegemon ruling the world.

Despite their power differences and resultant impact on global politics, both confront the same limiting factor – weak domestic bases and internal situations – that inhibits them from becoming juggernaut superpowers. The most serious of these issues are demographic imbalances, environmental damage, uncertain economic outlooks, and heightened concern over the survival of their political systems due to 'coloured revolutions' (623) in neighbouring states that further international (and possibly domestic) promotions of civil and political liberties. As such, revisionism by these states may not be a product of strength but in fact a desperate attempt to mask such weaknesses and minimize these risks.[3] An international environment that promotes democracy and liberalism is an existential threat to these authoritarian regimes, whereas many of their own 'revisionist' actions – island building and militarization of the South China Sea or a Russian cyber 'troll factory' (623) – are not to the West and Canada.

Sarty urges Canada to strengthen relations with both powers – realizing they are not hulking behemoths nor paper tigers – who are important in ensuring global stability and peace even while recognizing that they are rivals. China is too large a power to ignore, especially economically, and Russia is a major partner in the Arctic and in addressing climate change. While the U.S. relationship 'will always take precedence' (625), Canada must develop its own relations with China and Russia directly and not just follow in Washington's footsteps. Sarty is clear, though, that Canada should continue to prioritize relationships with like-minded allies and that furthering relations with China and Russia does not have to come at the expense of promoting its values. Indeed, he argues that Canada should continue to advance human rights by working to 'convince' (627) these leaderships that it is in their national interests to support them. Ultimately, it is not that Canada needs to re-assess its interests and values wholesale, but that the pursuit of these needs to be done from a more independently informed and pursued foreign policy rather than reliance on and operating in the wake of American leadership and action. Seeking out other powers which are also concerned about U.S. reliability and wanting to balance the excesses of Chinese and Russian revisionism will be a major task for Canadian foreign policy in the decades ahead.

[2] Sarty's analysis of China and Russia mirrors that of a recent RAND study: James, Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

[3] A related but not explored aspect of understanding Chinese and Russian assertiveness is the growing reliance on nationalism as a 'legitimation strategy' to mobilize the population in their great power projects which are inextricably linked to the legitimation and thus survival of their regimes. Stacie Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Connecting the Dots

Sarty's piece contributes to the overall push for more acceptance and overt use of realism in understanding and informing Canadian foreign policy, which has an enduring, though rarely discussed, influence over the decades. [4] Through this structural analysis, Sarty's article is a welcome addition to the debate in Canada about how to approach relations with China and Russia with a well-reasoned understanding of the nature and types of challenges these rivals pose. This allows for a more nuanced reasoning and legitimation for furthering these relationships and finally cementing them as priorities in Canadian foreign policy, despite tensions rising with them.[5] This necessitate seeing the world through their eyes in order to appreciate the threat environment they confront.[6]This is an important counterbalance to the growing calls from some for across the board for the severing of relations with both Russia and China as grave, serious threats requiring a 'tougher' response from Ottawa, specifically deepening relations with existing allies in order to, and predicating further international partnerships on, exclude and confront these powers.[7] The author makes several strong points and arguments throughout the article, but there are some gaps in terms of the theoretical connections between them and the drawing of policy-relevant inferences.

First, it is unclear whether and to what degree global polarity really does have a decisive effect on Canadian foreign policy. Are multi-polar worlds more unstable,[8] meaning that there is a need to engage with China and Russia to prevent war and/or address a myriad of global challenges? As well, after declaring the world as multi-polar, Sarty hedges this assertion by arguing that Russia is not even really a pole and that the world becoming bi-polar between the U.S. and China is a real possibility. Another future not really explored, which does stem logically from his characterisation of the weak nature of these powers as challengers, is the possibility and implications of the world shifting back to U.S. unipolarity. The practical consequences and effects on Canadian foreign policy of different polarity systems (and the transitions between them) are left under-explained. Part of the confusion stems from the dual characterization of Russia and China as being too important in global politics to ignore and exclude *and* too weak to be existential threats and thus not inhibit mutually beneficial relations. While this may be the case, it is unclear where and how polarity matters.

Second, while Sarty's article is focused on relations with China and Russia as a neglected part of Canada's understanding of this changing world, there are some major connections between this matter and the United States. First, Sarty never explains the cause of Canada's concerns about U.S. reliability. Is the U.S. becoming a different type of power because of the change in polarity/relative material decline and/or due to other reasons? Sarty implies that something recent has caused the

[4] See, for example, David G. Haglund, "The Paradigm That Dare Not Speak Its Name." *International Journal* 72.2 (2017): 230-242, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702017709976.

[5] Some have argued these relations have always been under-developed as a function of the influence of American strategic competition against these powers limiting their prioritization and development in Canadian foreign policy. See, for example, Paul M. Evans and Michael B. Frolic, eds., *Reluctant Adversaries: Canada and the People's Republic of China, 1949-70* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

[6] For a similar argument see: Nicole J. Jackson, "Canada, NATO, and Global Russia." *International Journal* 73.2 (2018): 317-25, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702018786080.

[7] See, for example, Jeffrey Collins, Shuvaloy Majumdar, and Jonathan Berkshire, "From Middle to Major Power: Correcting Course in Canadian Foreign Policy." *Macdonald-Laurier Institute*, December 2020, https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20201124_CorrectingCourse_Collins_Majumdar_Miller_PAPER_FWeb.pdf. Private think-tanks, such as the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, are becoming increasingly influential vehicles and voices in these types of Canadian foreign policy debates, with their members regularly appearing in the media and at Parliamentary committees.

[8] Kenneth Waltz is categorical that the international system is more unstable in multi-polar than bipolar arrangements, but others disagree and even question the causal linkage between polarity and stability entirely. Ariel Ilan Roth, "Structure and Stability Reconsidered." *European Journal of International Relations* 17.3 (2011): 567-84, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110374659.

U.S. shift in behavior but does not detail what exactly. This puts the analysis at risk of being a 'prisoner of the moment' which a structural argument is designed to avoid, but does not detail any evidence showing U.S. decline. There is a difference, furthermore, between determining whether the U.S. will remain a superpower (there are strong arguments that it will do so from a material capability stand point into the future[9]) or will remain committed to defending the liberal order and maintaining its regional-alliance based hegemonies in Europe and Asia, as it has done so over different polarity systems in the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras.[10] As well, even if the U.S. remains committed to the order and its alliances, could the ways in which it pursues competition with China and Russia pose challenges for Canada, specifically if it tries to impose an exclusion/containment strategy towards these powers? If so, how should Canada balance the need to maintain strong ties and overall strategic alignment with the U.S. alongside pursuing its own interests towards these powers when they go against the preferences of Washington?

Finally, Sarty's depiction of China and Russia as being existentially threatened by forces of liberalism and democracy is an important point, but he does not explore whether Canada, and the West in general, have contributed to the erosion of relations with these powers unnecessarily via their promotion of a liberal world order where democratic states have the prime place in decision-making positions. As a result of the emergence of the multi-polar world does the international order – in terms of organizational structure, norms, and values - need to reflect these changes and become not just less Western but less liberal? If so, where does this leave human rights and democracy promotion as a priority in Canadian foreign policy in general and towards these states in particular? In this regard, Sarty's recommendations that human rights promotion should be a major role in relations with Russia and China seems to be a call-back to Canada's foreign policy approach of the 1990s – one based on the idea that over time these powers will slowly transform and become more liberal, democratic and status-quo supportive – rather than a new approach which appreciates the embedded authoritarian systems in both powers which are unlikely to radically change anytime soon. Again, it is not clear whether structural changes globally affect the placement of values promotion as a priority in Canadian foreign policy or simply the ways in which this is conducted. This includes, also, what the main considerations for Canada should be in establishing and furthering relations, specifically security-wise, beyond the West and towards the Indo-Pacific. Given Sarty's analysis, Canada does not need to sacrifice its interests and values to 'go along to get along' in building grand coalitions against China and Russia. As a result, an important though unstated challenge in a new Canadian foreign policy for this altered world will be the need to push back against attempts by allies and the U.S. for across-the-board uniformity and strategic solidarity against these powers.

Such a position may motivate and create space for a re-imagined 'middle power role' (a concept Sarty sidelines early on) wherein Canada would position itself, and work with others similarly positioned and motivated, to help diffuse tensions between these powers rather than move towards exclusive alignment with the United States.[11] This in many ways was the impetus for Canada's original characterization as a middle power in the early Cold War - a Western ally for sure but a power working to resolve disputes between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, most memorably the establishment of peacekeeping missions that addressed the 1956 Suez crisis.[12] Perhaps Canada is too weakly positioned – both materially and in term of its alignment – in today's environment to play such a role. Such an exploration, though, may offer practical ways to answer

[9] Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[10] There have been previous concerns about America's commitment to the Liberal International Order before, including fears of become a 'liberal leviathan' increasingly acting unilaterally during the 2000s. G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Concerns about a 'rogue superpower' contributed to tension in Canada-U.S. relations, specifically Ottawa's refusal to join Washington's 'coalition of the willing' against Iraq in 2003.

[11] For example, see Jeremy Paltiel, "Facing China: Canada between Fear and Hope." *International Journal* 73.3 (2018): 343-363, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702018792908

[12] Greg Donaghy, "The Politics of Accommodation: Canada, the Middle East, and the Suez Crisis, 1950–1956." *International Journal* 71:2 (2016): 313-327, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702016643261

Sarty's call to infuse more realist-influences alongside liberal impulses in creating a more appropriate equilibrium in Canadian foreign policy that is required to successfully navigate another period of seismic change in global politics.

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