

The 2015 Federal Elections’ Impact on Canada’s Foreign Policy¹

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INTRODUCTION

A new government always brings with it the hope of change for the country. This happened in Canada after its October 2015 federal elections, which represented new opportunities in many aspects of public life. The Liberal Party victory, headed by Justin Trudeau, opens new prospects for the country, leaving behind nine years of Conservative domination in the federal government.

The aim of this article is to relay a series of reflections about the impact of the 2015 elections on Canadian foreign policy.

I will touch on some background, the difference between Conservatives and Liberals in foreign policy, and will ask if it will change or remain the same. I will also draw a balance sheet of bilateral and multilateral relations in some areas, particularly with the United States, Latin America, and, in that context, with Mexico.

THE 2015 ELECTIONS

As pointed out above, the 2015 elections put an end to nine years of Conservative government, opening up new perspectives for change both domestically and abroad. Justin Trudeau

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staged a comeback despite negative polling results published during the longest campaign in recent history: 78 days.² The Liberals, self-defined as center-left, won a parliamentary majority in Canada's lower house.³

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSERVATIVES AND LIBERALS ON FOREIGN POLICY

Historically, the dispute for power in Canada has been between Liberals and Conservatives. These two parties have alternated in federal government in recent years. Although Canada has a multi-party system, these two parties have had a parliamentary majority, accompanied by a minority party. The minority party generally does the work of balancing power;⁴ today it is the New Democratic Party (NDP).

The Conservatives prioritize economic and trade interests and international security on their foreign policy agenda. These premises guided the outgoing Conservative government in relations with the world, as it maintained a strategic economic relationship with the United States, the G-7, and the European Union; Latin America came after these regions. Although Canada behaved like a middle-sized power during the Cold War, the Conservatives tried to take advantage of that image to maintain a strategic relationship with the great powers.⁵

The Liberals' foreign policy is pragmatic. In contrast with the Conservatives, theirs is more conciliatory, more tolerant on religious matters, such as in the case of the clothing worn by Muslims in Canada. The new Liberal prime minister has announced that he will strengthen the United Nations, continue to participate in peacekeeping missions in conflict areas, and distance himself from Israel.⁶

CHANGE OR CONTINUITY?

When the Organization of American States (OAS) was created in 1948, Canada decided to remain on the margins and not become a full member, above all to avoid unnecessary friction with the United States. However, to gradually grow closer to Latin America, Pierre Elliot Trudeau decided in 1972 that Canada would become an observer nation at the OAS. Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, however, decided to make Canada a full member in 1990. This decision was due to several circumstances, particularly because of the

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regional and international situation at the time of the breaking apart of the Soviet Union and the strengthening of the single-power world led by the United States. It is also probable that with this decision, Mulroney sought to differentiate his administration from the Liberal governments that had preceded him; foreign policy can be considered an exercise in the international arena that can help a government strengthen its domestic legitimacy.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has already announced foreign policy changes, and I deduce that, like Mulroney, he is also trying to differentiate himself from the Conservative government that preceded him for nine years. Clearly, Trudeau is also going to take on an out-and-out battle with regard to climate change, compared to Stephen Harper, who in 2011 decided to withdraw Canada from the Kyoto Protocol. Harper's argument was that, if the country had continued as a signatory, it would have to pay a series of fines for not reaching the greenhouse gas emission targets promised by his Liberal predecessors.

CANADA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY

If the trend holds, like his father Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Justin will continue fostering multilateralism and positioning Canada as a modern, medium-sized power, open to trade and to strengthening international political institutions. Newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs Stéphane Dion will seek to renovate Canada's relations with the regions of the world by presenting multilateral forums with proposals for key issues on the world agenda like the promotion of democracy and human rights, taking action around climate change, promoting international security, and lending aid to refugees from countries in conflict. Similarly, Canada's new Liberal government is expected to continue fostering free trade and the Transpacific Partnership. Suffice it to remember that Justin Trudeau said that he himself would take charge of repairing Canada's relations with the Obama administration.⁷

CANADA'S RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

With the Liberal government, new prospects open up for relations with the United States, Canada's main political and trade partner, since under the Harper government, bilateral relations were cool and distant on specific issues like the Keystone Pipeline. Trudeau has already made it clear that, while he openly supported the pipeline, he respects Washington's decision to reject and definitively cancel it.

It is important to underline that this relationship has continued to be firm in other institutional spheres like trade and security. Other sectors for fruitful bilateral cooperation are transportation and aerospace, both hugely strategic for the region. Proof of this real cooperation is that Trudeau appointed Marc Garneau as transportation minister, the first Canadian astronaut and veteran of three space flights; Trudeau based his decision on the collaboration between NASA and the Canadian Space Agency, projects that will definitely continue in the future. In one of his first speeches, Trudeau pointed to relations with the United States as a priority:

The Canada-U.S. relationship has changed over the years. We Canadians are more confident about ourselves than we have ever been. People from my generation in particular see no contradiction between a strong national identity and an economic interdependence that brings greater prosperity to all of us. But the Canada-U.S. relationship is no less definitional for us today than it was 100 years ago.⁸

WILL TRUDEAU MAKE LATIN AMERICA A PRIORITY AGAIN?

In the 1960s, then-Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau opened up a new relationship with Latin America launching the so-called "white book" and the "third way." He strengthened political and economic ties, and to do that, made several working trips there, meeting with various heads of state in the region. Pierre Elliot Trudeau spoke Spanish fluently, something that definitely helped him establish strong ties with more than one head of state, like Fidel Castro in Cuba. These were all important pieces in pumping up relations with Chile, Argentina, Cuba, and Mexico, key countries on Canada's foreign policy agenda in Latin America.

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In relations with Cuba, Justin Trudeau will now be able to reinforce its place in the region, just as his father and other Liberal prime ministers did, like Jean Chrétien, who decided to invest in the renovation of the José Martí International Airport in Havana. Canada could also support Cuba's greater participation in hemispheric meetings like the OAS Americas Summit. This time, with the normalization of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, this would not at all be a remote possibility.⁹

RELATIONS WITH MEXICO

Canada and Mexico established diplomatic relations in 1944, and for the last 70 years they have been consolidating them. In fact, former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau was the one who encouraged them the most in the 1970s when he dubbed his Mexican counterparts nationalist politicians like himself. Now under Justin Trudeau, relations will tend to strengthen, since during his campaign, he announced that he would re-launch the North American Leaders Summits ("The Three Friends") and eliminate the visa requirement for Mexicans that Harper imposed in 2009, which Trudeau considers an insult.

Since Mexico is Canada's third-largest trade partner, and its largest in Latin America, when NAFTA was negotiated in the early 1990s, Canada opened up the possibility of broadening its relations with other countries of the region. This is already happening today, since its mining industry has the world's biggest presence in the region.

Canada has already launched free trade agreements with Chile and Costa Rica. In addition, it has fostered very dynamic forms of trade with other nations of Central America. With the new opening of Justin Trudeau's Liberal government, "it may establish greater communications with Mexico and the world, with a more humanitarianism —and solidarity-based leading role in the international context."¹⁰

During their campaigns, the Conservatives continued in the same tenor about relations with North America, but Justin

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Trudeau announced that his diplomacy *vis-à-vis* the United States and Mexico would change. So, relations got off on to a good start: Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto congratulated Trudeau on his victory, saying that it heralded a new era in bilateral relations, strengthening the historic economic, political, and social ties that join our two countries. The two heads of government even had bilateral meetings when they coincided at the G-20 summit in Turkey and at the APEC meeting in the Philippines in November 2015, where they reiterated their intention to strengthen ties between the two countries.

CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing some of the aspects of the impact of the Liberal electoral victory on Canada's foreign policy, changes are clearly in the works that will draw a dividing line between the new Liberal government and its Conservative predecessor. The diplomatic practice that gave Canada such good results is expected to be renewed, strengthening its neutral, conciliatory position in the international arena. We will also have to wait to see how national interests are posed since, domestically, the federal government will have to once again deal with Quebec's special dynamics and its status as a distinct society since, like Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, Quebec is one of those that most contributes to the country's economic prosperity and has its own international relations.

With regard to its relations with the world, Canada will have to deal with certain essential issues, like the Mideast crisis, climate change, the crisis in oil prices, the disputes over the Arctic, and its relations with the Asian Pacific region. Its links to the United States will certainly become stronger with the passing months, marking a clear difference with its Conservative predecessor. The elimination of the visa requirement for Mexican visitors to Canada and the re-launch of bilateral contacts seem to be the big challenges. We will have to wait to see what Canada's real position and behavior will

be with Justin Trudeau at its head *vis-à-vis* the United States, Latin America (in particular its partner, Mexico), and with the rest of the world. Good luck to him. ■■■

FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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³ *Forbes* staff, "Partido Liberal gana elecciones en Canadá," *Forbes*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com.mx/partido-liberal-gana-elecciones-en-canada/>, accessed November 21, 2015.

⁴ Julián Castro Rea and Nidia M. Castro, "La democracia en Canadá: partidos políticos, elecciones y grupos de interés," in Athanasios Hristoulas, Claude Denis, and Duncan Wood, comps., *Canadá: política y gobierno en el siglo XXI* (Mexico City: Cámara de Diputados/ITAM/Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2005), p. 42.

⁵ Leonora Chapman, "Política exterior en la campaña electoral, ¿importa América Latina?" Radio Canada International, August 18, 2015, <http://www.rcinet.ca/es/2015/08/18/politica-exterior-canadiense-en-la-campa-pana-electoral-importa-america-latina/>, accessed November 22, 2015.

⁶ Mauricio Sáenz, "El viraje canadiense: la centro-izquierda recupera el poder," *Semana*, October 22, 2015, <http://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/justin-trudeau-primero-ministro-de-canada-recupera-el-poder-de-la-centro-izquierda/447005-3>, accessed November 23, 2015.

⁷ *Forbes* staff, op. cit.

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¹⁰ Jesús Rivero Casas, "Canadá, elecciones 2015: ¿qué esperar del nuevo primer ministro?" *SDPnoticias*, October 25, 2015, <http://www.sdpnoticias.com/nacional/2015/10/23/canada-elecciones-2015-que-esperar-del-nuevo-primero-ministro>, accessed November 21, 2015.