

Canada: A Great Power? Or Merely Great?

Can Canada become a Great Power? Whether Canadians want this or not is another question, but does this nation have the attributes and will to become a key player in the “great game” of nations?

Realistically, we suffer from some serious drawbacks. There are only 33 million Canadians in a world where the great nation-states like China, Russia, or the United States have vastly greater numbers. On the other hand, nations such as Britain, France, and Germany in living memory were Great Powers with populations well below 100 million. Still, there can be no doubt that, as in other areas, size matters.

China, Russia, and the U.S. hold vast territories, much like Canada. The former European Great Powers were relatively small in area. There can be little doubt, however, that geography is a Canadian weakness. With a small population strung for several thousand kilometres along the border with the United States, with muskeg and mountains dividing us, no one can doubt the problems of distance.

Then, while most Great Powers have restive populations within their boundaries (blacks in the U.S., for example, or Muslim Uighurs in China), Canada has Quebec. This nation's federal system has allowed Québécois to bargain skillfully for increased autonomy over the decades, and hesitant national political leadership has permitted this. And Québécois historically have taken very different attitudes from other Canadians to overseas military ventures. The present straitened conditions of the Canadian Forces, the tiny numbers in uniform, inevitably also limit what Canada could do, even if the nation wanted more.

That matters because Great Powers see themselves as mission-oriented. Sometimes they play imperialist as Britain and France did. Sometimes they seek global domination as Germany and the Soviet Union tried. Sometimes they aim to spread their capitalist/democratic vision of the world, as Washington does. But they all had or have a vision of the world they want. Canadians can't even agree on the kind of nation – or *deux nations* – that they desire. It's difficult to tell the world how to act in such circumstances, and Canadian moralizing that “the world needs more Canada” can only be a poor substitute.

Of course, Canada has oil, metals and minerals, wheat, lumber, vast resources. Often these are owned abroad, and too often global commodities markets fluctuate, creating boom and bust cycles. Historically, the Canadian difficulty has been that we extract the resources but do not process, refine and turn them into finished goods here with our own people getting the lion's share of the benefits. There's not much sign of that changing soon.

Above all, what Great Powers have is drive and will. They want to be supreme; they want control; they believe in their destiny and strive to achieve it. Adolf Hitler was a monster, but he had the will to dominate and brought the world to ruin in the process. Happily, no Canadian has tried to emulate Hitler, but no Canadian could readily argue that this country has the drive to succeed, let alone the will to create an industrial strategy or even an internal free trading market. Canadians are divided and diverse, unfocussed and ordinarily rudderless, and that is not a recipe for an aspiring Great Power.

So we can't be a superpower. But don't be too sad. That relieves us of heavy obligations and Great Power responsibilities for the preservation of peace and, when peace collapses, it saves us in all likelihood from heavy casualties in (some) overseas wars of empire. We are now and will be what we are – a developed democratic nation-state with a high standard of living, and that is no mean estate.

But if we can't be a Great Power, can we at least be great? A great nation, in contrast to a state of no distinction, understands its weaknesses and strengths and seeks to maximize its potential. It strives to better the economic and social well-being of its people as it protects them from the threats of others. It jealously guards its sovereignty at the same time as it tries to play a responsible role in the global community. Greatness demands self-knowledge, and this regrettably may also be something that Canadians lack. Too many Canadians trumpet our virtues, real or imagined, overestimate our influence, and despise our neighbours for their success.

Greatness for Canada means becoming both modest and honest. We need to know what we are and understand what we can be. We must strive to be not more powerful, but better. If we can do that, we can make Canada great.

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