

The “Freeland Doctrine” and Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Between isolation and confusion

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Introduction

For a country that has not undertaken a comprehensive foreign policy review in nearly two decades, Canada has been fortunate to have two visions for its international engagement articulated this autumn alone.

The first took the form of a [speech](#) delivered by Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland to the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC on October 11. Instantly dubbed the “Freeland Doctrine”, her remarks outlined how Canada should navigate the *post*-post-Cold War world, which she contends is framed by competition between democracies and autocracies.

Just over one month later, Canada released its long-anticipated [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly has [described](#) the strategy as reorienting Canada’s foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region, although Ottawa will retain its existing commitments in other theatres as well.

These two visions offer separate blueprints for how Canada should position itself in a world of rivalry and change. Yet while both feature evident strong points, in both cases these threaten to be outweighed by their weaknesses.

The Freeland Doctrine: A recipe for isolation

Freeland’s address in Washington acknowledges a now-unavoidable reality, namely, that the liberal international order of the post-Cold War unipolar moment is gone and will not return. Although certain norms and practices traditionally associated with liberal internationalism will continue to inform interstate conduct, the conditions which sustained the fullest expression of liberal order simply no longer exist.

For the past three decades, the era of liberal hegemony [has allowed](#) Canada to conduct a comfortable, values-centric foreign policy. By contrast, the emerging international order threatens

to decouple some of Canada’s foreign policy imperatives from the country’s national identity. As such, Freeland should be commended for her courage to confront her country’s entrenched – and [outdated](#) – foreign policy culture.

Yet while Freeland’s diagnosis is accurate, her proposed treatments are problematic. Her vision outlines three pillars of a revised Western approach to the world: relations among democracies, with authoritarian regimes, and with “in-between” states. Each pillar is beset by fundamental flaws. Together, they present a recipe for deepening – rather than reversing – Canada’s isolation on the world stage.

Freeland’s first and, in her words, “most fundamental” pillar calls for a deepening of relations between the world’s democracies. While on its face one would find little to disagree with in such a proposal, the devil will be in the details.

For example, the notion that “friendshoring” offers a solution to the security challenges of today encounters difficulties as soon as specifics are discussed. What would friendshoring allow us to obtain from our allies that we don’t already get from them? In which specific sectors should we decouple from adversaries? How long would such a reorientation of supply chains take and how can it be enforced? What would be the cost to consumers? And would not deeper economic ties between the United States and its European and Asian allies threaten Canada’s privileged position in relation to the US economy? While a single speech cannot be expected to address all these questions in sufficient detail, they nonetheless raise doubts over the feasibility of “friendshoring” as a framework.

After the collapse of 19th-century imperial-periphery relations and 20th-century geopolitical blocs, we now inhabit the [first truly global order](#) in history. It remains unclear how friendshoring offers a path for liberal democracies to enhance their relative influence and appeal in this new order, which will inevitably be shaped by political and cultural pluralism. Indeed, the concept is divisive even within the West, with some [arguing](#) that reinvesting in the open and rules-based architecture of global trade is a more worthwhile endeavour that plays to Western strengths. Calls for decoupling risk a possible race to the bottom that Western countries – especially dependent economies such as Canada – may not win.

Freeland’s second – and least conceptually developed – pillar concerns relations with so-called in-between countries, who are neither our democratic allies nor our authoritarian adversaries. Such terminology is likely to reduce our influence with these countries rather than help us to build bridges with them, if indeed we intend to undertake a substantial effort to build such bridges and branch out beyond the largely ally-centric approach which has characterized Canadian foreign policy in recent decades. These “in between” countries do not view themselves as proxies in a grand ideological struggle but as authors of their own destiny. They are sovereign states and do not need to be told what their interests are.

The third – and most problematic – pillar of Freeland’s speech calls for a rethinking of our relations with authoritarian countries. This pillar is replete with assumptions which do not reflect the complex nature of the emerging international order.

The very notion that today’s world is framed by a competition between democracies and autocracies is belied by numerous easily observable facts. In the case of Ukraine, democratic Western countries are turning to authoritarian Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Azerbaijan to help address the war’s energy fallout. Meanwhile, some of the world’s largest democracies such as India and Brazil have largely shied away from condemning Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. In the Indo-Pacific, Vietnam’s Leninist political system has not prevented it from partnering with the West regarding its security concerns related to China. These facts suggest that Canada should not adopt the “democracy vs. autocracy” paradigm as a lodestar for strengthening its international engagement, given that it fails to capture the dynamics of the biggest geopolitical challenges of today (Ukraine) and tomorrow (the Indo-Pacific).

The democracy-autocracy binary also lacks shades of gray in capturing the diverse array of political systems across the world, as well as the different foreign policy goals that authoritarian states may possess. While Russia is running roughshod over established norms and emerged as a loser from the Cold War, China has been a major beneficiary of the status quo and seeks to maintain economic and technological links with the West to fuel its modernization and growth.

Although there are many legitimate security concerns resulting from China’s rise, the imperatives shaping Canada’s relations with China fundamentally differ from the question of how to deal with a revanchist Russia. This is especially so given the central place that Beijing occupies in global trade and multilateralism, on which Ottawa has traditionally depended. Freeland’s blanket assertion that “authoritarian regimes are fundamentally hostile to us” and “our success is an existential threat to them” would reduce Canada’s room for manoeuvre to conduct a foreign policy reflective of the national interest on a case-by-case basis. Given that cooperation is a two-way street, this must involve establishing an overall framework for relations that facilitates rather than discourages working together where our interests align.

For someone whose [signature address](#) as foreign affairs minister in 2017 centred on the need to uphold the “rules-based international order”, there is [shockingly little attention](#) in Freeland’s speech paid to how an embrace of ideological competition might undermine the resilience of international rules. And while Freeland does admit that cooperation with authoritarian countries remains necessary on areas of shared interest such as climate change, such cooperation may become immeasurably harder when the paradigm for relations is focused overwhelmingly on securitized competition (if not outright containment).

It is intellectually consistent to embrace a vision of Canadian foreign policy that does less – one that seeks to join fewer clubs, that avoids spreading ourselves thin, and that is more narrowly focused on Canada’s core interests. One suspects, however, that this was not Freeland’s intention. The consequences of Freeland’s vision would be for Canada to retreat within the non-geographic West, but without the benefits of a more tightly focused foreign policy.

The Freeland paradigm of Canadian foreign policy is ideological in nature and global in scope. However, Canada does not have the wherewithal to be a core player in North America, Europe, Asia and multilateral fora all at the same time. Might a more geographic mentality and regional focus serve Canadian interests better?

Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: A recipe for confusion

Canada released its Indo-Pacific Strategy in late November. The paper has been [praised](#) as the “most substantive strategic document” on foreign policy from a Canadian government in years.

Given the central role of the “[North Atlantic anchor](#)” in shaping Canada’s foreign policy since World War II, the mere exercise of crafting an Indo-Pacific strategy may help to rebalance Canada’s international priorities to account for the shift in the world’s geopolitical and economic centres of gravity. In particular, the absence of a “free and open” framing of the region in the document is a welcome development, as this may signal that Ottawa’s regional strategy will differ from Washington’s more confrontational approach. And the government’s differentiated conceptualization of the region – excluding the West Indian Ocean and carving out a special “neighbourhood” role in the North Pacific – laudably demonstrates the Strategy’s targeted focus.

However, beneath the surface, three key shortcomings are visible.

First, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is not couched in a more general understanding of the nature and scope of Canada’s interests across the board in a shifting international order. Without a comprehensive foreign policy review that situates Canada’s Indo-Pacific interests within an overall frame of reference, weighing the relative importance of the region against policy imperatives in other geographic theatres, there will be an absence of clarity regarding the purpose of Canada’s regional aims.

This situation is exacerbated by the Strategy’s pledge to bolster Canada’s military presence in the region, suggesting an inability to target limited national resources in a more focused way. This goes against the [recommendations](#) of the Network for Strategic Analysis and reflects an unwillingness to acknowledge that an increasingly securitized environment on the European continent will consume a large proportion of Canada’s attention on the military front. Even a Ukrainian victory in its current war will not eliminate the long-term challenge that Russia is likely to pose for the European security system. A token Canadian military presence in the Indo-Pacific is more likely to disorganize Canada’s overall foreign policy than it is to deter China.

Second, although China is front-and-centre and takes up a significant chunk of text, the Indo-Pacific Strategy has not been used as an opportunity to pursue a detailed and calibrated China strategy. As such, the worry persists that Canada may have developed an Indo-Pacific strategy as an excuse not to come up with a comprehensive and revised approach toward China.

The Strategy is clear-eyed in terms of the multifaceted nature of the challenge that China poses for Canadian security and global order. However, there is no clear statement regarding whether preventing China from dominating the Indo-Pacific as a security actor represents a vital Canadian interest, and if so, whether this could be achieved through measures short of full-blown containment and decoupling. While a symbolic nod toward the need for cooperation on some files is mentioned, no concrete platforms for cooperation are identified. On the flip side, no comprehensive delineation of where cooperation should be restricted due to security concerns has been undertaken.

Whether at the domestic, bilateral, regional or multilateral levels, the focus is overwhelmingly on challenging China or defending against the negative impact of its actions. Gone is the emphasis on coexistence identified by Joly’s predecessor Marc Garneau in his “[four Cs](#)” approach toward China. The result is that Canada has failed to articulate clearly, on a basic level, whether it favours an open region or one framed by a new cold war. And, as with the Freeland Doctrine, a relationship in which the intellectual starting point is confrontation rather than coexistence may have difficulty making room for cooperation, even when this is in the interest of both sides. One cannot treat an adversary as an existential threat, pursue a strategy of confrontation across the board, and still hope to pick and choose areas for cooperation according to one’s own preference.

Finally, the Strategy misses an opportunity to disentangle values and interests in a way that would clarify the scope of Canada’s regional aims. While we have become accustomed to the sort of thinking that asserts that promoting our values is akin to advancing our interests, the decline of liberalism’s hegemony in global politics ensures that these two goals have (at least partly) [become decoupled](#).

To emphasize the document’s Indo-Pacific scope, India is listed second (after China) in the description of Canada’s regional engagement. Yet the Strategy frames the desire to deepen relations with New Delhi using the language of democracy and human rights, rather than shared strategic interests, despite India’s clear and widely acknowledged [democratic backsliding](#). The Indo-Pacific paradigm, developed in reaction to China’s rise, is by nature a strategic rather than values-based concept. Emphasis on shared values with India, when in many respects these are lacking, reveals the extent to which Ottawa still has difficulty articulating what its interests are.

The Strategy also makes multiple references to forging relations with “like-minded” countries. However, several of Canada’s regional partners have abstained from criticizing Russia’s illegal aggression against Ukraine. Similarly, much of Southeast Asia views China as an important economic partner and not as an existential threat, irrespective of whatever territorial disputes these countries may have with Beijing. It is unclear just how “like-minded” countries such as India are. This begs the question of whether Canada is truly committed to engaging on the priorities of the region’s indigenous actors or whether Ottawa’s focus will inevitably drift toward deepening relations with its few truly “like-minded” partners such as Japan and Australia.

Ultimately, Canada is paying the price for its years of holding a reactive posture toward Asia. Canada’s document comes nine months after the US and more than a year after the EU published their own strategies for the region. And Washington’s so-called pivot to Asia, for all its faults, dates to the Obama administration.

We are late to the game and have failed to articulate our overall foreign policy priorities clearly. We are therefore forced to catch up on terms set by others. This includes with respect to the confrontation with China, where the US will reserve the right to advance its own interests while imposing limitations on its allies’ right to define their own interests. This will invariably reduce the potential range of Ottawa’s engagement across the region.

Conclusion: Canada’s hemispheric future?

On the one hand, Freeland’s conceptual shift from preserving the rules-based international order to a quasi-embrace of another Cold War should concern all Canadians who believe that a degree of global predictability is necessary for Ottawa to carve out a foreign policy that goes beyond ensuring national sovereignty and safeguarding relations with the US. If the deputy prime minister believes that Canada’s interests are largely hemispheric in scope, then she should make this case explicitly. Such an act would be of great service to Canadian foreign policy by helping it overcome decades of purposeless drift.

On the other hand, despite the great anticipation surrounding the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Canada appears to have learned very little from its regional partner Australia. Canberra is far more cognizant of the targeted and geographic nature of its interests, having crafted itself into an integral player in the Indo-Pacific region while avoiding the perils of overstretch.

Admittedly, Australia’s geography differs from ours – Canada is simultaneously a Western Hemispheric, Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific state. But in this century, middle power status [depends](#) in part on having a decisive presence in a regional security complex. Canada does not occupy such a position, neither in the Americas, in Europe, nor in Asia. For decades, we have refused to confront the reality that our relative global influence was in decline, largely for reasons related to our national identity and domestic politics. In doing so, we have perversely spread ourselves too thin and lost opportunities to retain middle power status.

Canada is too isolated from core economic and strategic dynamics in Asia to be taken seriously as a top-tier regional player, on a par with Japan, India or Australia. Canada will also never play a role as significant as France or Germany in Europe’s political fabric. However, with a [larger population](#), Canada could eventually come to be taken more seriously by its American neighbour. And climate change opens possibilities for Canada’s backyard in the Arctic to gain added strategic significance for actors across the globe.

These facts favour a more hemispheric foreign policy for Canada as the most likely path back to middle power status over the (possibly very) long term. For all the talk surrounding Canada’s Indo-Pacific *Strategy*, too little attention has been paid to the fact that strategy is about making choices, especially when faced with limited resources.