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The UN Failure in Yugoslavia: Lessons from Canadian Peacekeeping

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ALEN HRISTOV, NOV 24 2018

In 1992, Canada, the pioneer and world leader in peacekeeping operations, initiated the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) which operated in the former Yugoslav republics of Bosnia and Croatia. The period during which the UNPROFOR was in operation—February 1992-March 1995—coincided with a time of political change for Canada: after two consecutive terms in office, the Conservative Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, was replaced by the Liberal Jean Chrétien. With regards to the international system, too, the UNPROFOR took place during a turbulent time period: the war in the former Yugoslavia erupted right after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, an event that put an end to the protracted Cold War.

Since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, Canada has been one of the staunchest supporters of the organisation, contributing to virtually every mission with both funds and troops. During the Suez Crisis of 1956, for instance, Canada accomplished its greatest achievement in peacekeeping, when the Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, resolved the conflict by establishing the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), the first armed peacekeeping mission in the history of the United Nations. This courageous act later granted Pearson a Nobel Peace Prize for the inspiration and the courage that he demonstrated. Ever since then, Canada has regularly participated in peacekeeping missions all around the world, being one of the few countries that have been paying its financial obligations to the United Nations on time and in full.[1]

Given the Canadian traditions and leading role in peacekeeping, it becomes intriguing to investigate the reasons as to why Canada could not positively influence the performance of the UNPROFOR in the former Yugoslavia. Why did Canada seem impotent to improve the work of the UNPROFOR? Is this Canadian inability related to domestic and/or international political factors? Could Canada implement a different approach towards the UNPROFOR—one that could have prevented the atrocities and at the same time satisfied the international legal standards for intervention of the period?

The object of this paper is to demonstrate that the Canadian incapability to influence the performance of the UNPROFOR is due to *two* primary reasons. The first one refers to the Canadian inability to apply a *consistent* foreign policy approach toward the UNPROFOR in Yugoslavia. Brian Mulroney abandoned the traditional Canadian approach to peacekeeping and humanitarian missions and further replaced it with a more interventionist one—i.e. a policy of aggressive multilateralism. Jean Chrétien's foreign policy, in contrast, comprised cautious and careful maneuvers, cuts in defence and foreign aid funding, as well as a general restriction of Canadian engagements in the international stage, all of which contributed to the decreased Canadian involvement in Yugoslavia. Hence, in merely three years, the Canadian foreign policy shifted drastically: from being a staunch advocate of an armed intervention in 1991, Canada moved to a position of a country that wanted to extricate itself from the Yugoslavian crisis. The inconsistency of Ottawa's foreign policy compromised the Canadian ability to shape the decisions of the United Nations, which ultimately contributed to the failure on the part of Canada to improve the performance of UNPROFOR.

The second reason pertains to the *changing nature* of the international system in the immediate years after the Cold War. In 1991, the Canadian position in the international system was different from the one from 1956, for instance,

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when the Suez Crisis was successfully resolved. Some of the major powers then, such as France and Great Britain, which had been weakened by the consequences of the Second World War, were still in the stage of economic recovery. This power vacuum allowed Canada, one of the few middle powers then, to leverage its considerable economic and diplomatic influence in order to resolve the conflict by peaceful means and in its own favour. In 1991, however, Canada found itself in an expanding group of powers with a growing influence which then included those same states weakened by the war in 1945, pushing Ottawa to the corner of the 'middle power' club. In the end, owing to the inconsistent Canadian foreign policy approach and the changed post-Cold War international environment, Canada faced a restricted ability to influence the decisions and the performance of the UNPROFOR in the former Yugoslavia.

The Foreign Policy of Brian Mulroney

"It may well be said that Brian Mulroney's foreign policy has been the most radical in history in that it sought, as no other government in Canadian history had, to reshape the contours of international relations." [2] – Nicholas Gammer

In mid-1991, the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia sought a greater autonomy from the Yugoslav federation. This situation led to a military conflict between Serbia on the one hand and the two independence seeking republics on the other.[3] By the end of 1991, the conflict intensified, and Germany insisted on a recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as independent countries which facilitated the admittance of the two Yugoslav republics to the United Nations in May 1992. In a similar way, Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet another Yugoslavian republic whose population was predominantly Muslim, also demanded independence from Yugoslavia. Serbia and Montenegro, however, resisted Sarajevo's secession from Yugoslavia and further engaged in a bloody war with the Bosnians.

The Western powers were initially divided on the matter of how to respond to the Balkan crisis. The countries from the European Union, for instance, were eager to assist the Yugoslav republics by promptly recognizing their independence and by further protecting the peace and in their regions. The United States, on the other hand, was hesitant to intervene as Washington believed that peace could be achieved through a stable and unimpaired Yugoslavian federation. The United States was also highly concerned about sending a wrong signal to Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist regime in Russia which then advocated for greater openness and economic reformation.[4]

In 1991, therefore, the Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney took the lead and became "the first Western leader to call for active intervention by the United Nations in the growing civil war in Yugoslavia."[5] Mulroney's interest in a prompt resolution of the Balkan conflict was to a certain extent due to Canada's considerable South Slavic immigrant community and his wife's Serbian ethnic background.[6] As Paul Heinbecker indicates, "what many people may not have realized was that the prime minister knew and cared a lot more about Yugoslavia than a lot of other world leaders."[7] In addition, while the United States remained hesitant to intervene in Yugoslavia and the leading European powers were still divided on the issue of how to proceed with the crisis, Prime Minister Mulroney recognized an opportunity to fill the "policy vacuum" gap that was left out.[8]

Overall, Mulroney's foreign policy approach can be characterised by two main elements: a desire to be America's 'super ally', and a development of new definitions of state sovereignty in cases of humanitarian concerns.[9] While the former element had been outlined as early as 1984, the time when Mulroney first came to power, the *latter* component was developed later, in the early-1990s.

Mulroney embraced a rethinking of the central idea of the Westphalian state system, the notion of state sovereignty.[10] In 1992, he firmly stated his advocacy for an armed humanitarian intervention: "Some Security Council members have opposed intervention in Yugoslavia, where many innocent people have been dying, on the grounds of national sovereignty. Quite frankly such invocation of the principles of national sovereignty are ... out of date."[11] The Mulroney's position regarding the use of force in relation to state sovereignty during humanitarian crises was an aspect that departed from the Canadian traditional notion of peacekeeping. An early example of this was the Canadian participation in the U.S.-led group of states that forced the Iraqi troops to leave Kuwait in 1991. This was the first time since the Korean War in which Canada engaged in an armed conflict — a clear indication of

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Mulroney's enthusiasm to change important norms of international relations. In the same way, he also joined the forceful American mission in Somalia in 1992. Following this *interventionist* approach, Mulroney further stated in 1993 that the international community ought to use force in Yugoslavia, "should the courageous peacekeeping attempts by UN forces fail."[12] Mulroney's response to the war in Yugoslavia, therefore, marked a novel approach to peacekeeping in the early post-Cold War period.[13]

Mulroney's foreign policy view accentuated on an "enhanced Canadian and international involvement in conflicts and crises, even when such engagements might violate traditional norms of non-intervention in the affairs of sovereign states."[14] Nelson Michaud and Kim Richard Nossal point out that "the Mulroney government moved Canada from a traditional peacekeeping role to a more interventionist position."[15] While the United States remained hesitant to intervene in Yugoslavia and the leading European powers were still divided on the issue of how to proceed with the crisis, Prime Minister Mulroney recognized an opportunity to take the initiative and assert his ideas.[16] In sum, Mulroney was a leader "determined to shape rather than be shaped by his times."[17] As it will become evident, however, Mulroney's ability to shape was highly constrained by the international legal standards and ethics of intervention of his period. Before that, however, the foreign policy of his successor, Jean Chrétien, must be examined.

The Foreign Policy of Jean Chrétien

"The Chrétien government has been in practice, if not in word, the most isolationist government since Mackenzie King's in the 1930s." [18] – Jean-Francois Rioux and Robin Hay

In 1993, Jean Chrétien replaced Brian Mulroney as the new Prime Minister of Canada. Overall, this transition marked a large decrease in Canadian involvement in international affairs. During the Chrétien government, "[f]oreign aid, defence, and the country's diplomatic service all experienced major reductions."[19] Chrétien's external affairs took a back seat to his domestic policy, which left the Liberal Government with little room for maneuvers in the international stage.[20] According to Tom Keating, "Chrétien ... came to power ... actively seeking to avoid the kind of activist foreign policy that had been pursued by the Mulroney government."[21] Mulroney's aggressive multilateralism, therefore, was replaced, in 1993, by Chrétien's "wait-and-see" approach.[22]

The "new ethic of intervention," proposed by Chrétien while still in opposition, was rethought after he came to power.[23] Chrétien's desire to bring back the traditional, less risky peacekeeping approach was one of the first foreign policy initiatives that he undertook after assuming power. This does not necessarily mean that Chrétien was uninterested in challenging the notion of state sovereignty in times of humanitarian necessity. Yet, Chrétien failed to demonstrate the level of political will that his predecessor had manifested.[24]

The Liberal government was seriously concerned in 1994 that the war in Yugoslavia might not end anytime in the near future. Recognizing that it could be the one bearing the negative consequences resulting from the decisions previously taken by the Conservatives regarding the former Yugoslavia, the Liberal Government decided to implement a less interventionist external policy not only toward the region but also in general terms.[25] The Liberals argued that "humanitarian intervention could not be fully realized in Bosnia unless and until it was backed by the political will of the international community and Canadian public opinion."[26]

In addition to the fear of criticism and the preoccupation with his domestic policies, Chrétien was also eager to decrease the Canadian participation in Yugoslavia because of a number of events that not only endangered the safety of the Canadian peacekeepers but also questioned the morality of the actions undertaken by the international community. One such event was the increasing pressure on the part of the United States for air strikes against Serbia. Ottawa was concerned that the sudden American insistence on air bombing on Belgrade could violate the international legal and moral standards for intervention. While Canada insisted on the so-called "dual key" approach, according to which both NATO and the UNPROFOR must come to an agreement in order to authorize the use of air force, the United States insisted that NATO should be given the power to take unilateral decisions when it comes to the use of air power.[27]

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Ottawa was also concerned about the violations of the United Nations' arms embargo on the former Yugoslavia. The embargo allowed third-party states to supply the Bosnian and Croat Muslims with weapons, thus not only enriching themselves illegally but also protracting the conflict between the different ethnic groups within the federation. The United States, in turn "formally, but covertly, decided to turn a blind eye to Iranian arms shipments to the Bosnian Croats and Muslims," arguing that these supplies would ultimately improve the two groups' overall resistance against the better-equipped Serbs.[28]

Finally, in 1994, a group of five hundred United Nations troops, which included fifty Canadians, was taken hostage by the Serbian forces after NATO had bombed Serbia prior. The hostage crisis angered Chrétien, who from then on became highly concerned about the safety of the Canadian peacekeepers and troops. For this reason, in 1994, Chrétien resisted further NATO bombings of Yugoslavia as long as Canadian troops were still operating on the field.

As a result of the negative consequences of the aforementioned events, Chrétien decided to decrease the number of peacekeepers in Yugoslavia. This was further consolidated by the fact that between 1992 and 1995, ten Canadian soldiers were killed while another forty were seriously injured. Moreover, a number of studies completed during the time demonstrated that most of the troops that served in Yugoslavia suffered from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.[29] In addition, public opinion surveys in Canada after 1993 were pointing out that the majority of Canadians were advocating for a withdrawal of the Canadian troops from the former Yugoslavia. Chrétien's less interventionist approach, therefore, was further influenced by factors that were beyond his control. [30]

Jean Chrétien became Prime Minister during a period when the Bosnian Serb attacks on the safe areas of Srebrenica, Sarajevo, and other cities put the lives of Canadian peacekeepers at risk. For this reason, the Prime Minister agreed that the danger of enforcing peace in Yugoslavia at all cost was not justified. The domestic policy concerns and the overall lack of political will in shaping foreign affairs further strengthened the Chrétien foreign policy approach of *relative* isolationism. As Jean-Francois Rioux and Robin Hay argue, "the Chrétien government has been in practice, if not in word, the most isolationist government since Mackenzie King's in the 1930s."[31]

What can be observed, hence, is that in just three years, Canada moved from a position of a staunch supporter of an aggressive intervention in Yugoslavia during the Mulroney years to a position of a country that wished to isolate itself from world affairs in the case of Chrétien. The transition of these two policy approaches, however, cannot be considered as a favourable factor that could have enhanced UNPROFOR's problematic mandate in Yugoslavia. In merely four years, the war in Yugoslavia spread like a disease: from the regions of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, it comprised virtually every single territorial part of the former federation by 1995. For this reason, in order to positively influence the work of the UNPROFOR, Canada should have applied an appropriate "cure" to the Yugoslavian problem—a panacea in the form of a consistent, unambiguous foreign policy strategy.

As a result of their divergent policies, however, Canadian leaders found themselves in a very awkward situation: when Mulroney was initially advocating for a firm approach in bringing the wars in Bosnia and Croatia to an end, the United States and the countries from the European Union were divided on the matter of how they should respond to the crisis in Yugoslavia. Subsequently, when the rest of the international community was more inclined to respond to the Bosnian Serb attacks with force, the Chrétien government decided to step back and advocate for less Canadian involvement in Yugoslavia. The lesson for Ottawa is that a country cannot shape the performance of the most powerful multilateral organ in the world without being consistent and persistent in its decisions and actions. Canada, however, was not willing to follow such a strategy. Instead, as Nicholas Gammer argue, "Canada had gone from a government at the forefront of states actively supporting early humanitarian intervention in the former Yugoslavia to a government whose priority was to extricate itself from the conflict."[32]

The Changing post-Cold War International Environment

"We are living off a Pearsonian reputation that we no longer deserve." [33]-Michael Ignatieff

After the end of the Cold War, the international community witnessed a large increase in United Nations peacekeeping operations around the world. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, U.N. peacekeepers were

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deployed on a regular basis to various parts of the world. In 1992, for instance, the demand for peacekeeping operations increased fivefold, comprising operations in countries such as Angola, *Bosnia, Croatia*, Cambodia, Iraq, Kuwait, El Salvador, Mozambique, Macedonia, and Sudan, among several others.[34] From all these cases, nevertheless, Yugoslavia posed the most complicated challenge, as the atrocities there evolved into genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. In 1991, Canada suggested that the international community should intervene in the former federation even if its sovereignty becomes violated. Yet, the majority of the international community decided to turn a blind eye to the Canadian proposal. Part of the reason why Canada could not convince the UNPROFOR to intervene aggressively in the former Yugoslavia can be found in the so-called 'ethics of intervention' concept.

Ethics of intervention are "situational ethics defined by the norms and conditions of the international system in existence at the time and the circumstances of the case in situation."[35] How to conduct a particular intervention, therefore, depends heavily on these ethics. The term intervention, in turn, is defined as a "dictatorial interference by a sovereign state, a group of such states, or an international organization, involving the threat or use of force or some other means of coercion, in the domestic jurisdiction of an independent state against the will or wishes of the government of the targeted country."[36] In the early-1990s, most scholars would agree that states were essentially separated by well-defined boundaries, within which the state itself would have the rights and the duties to deal with issues concerning its population. For this reason, in the early-1990s, "humanitarian concerns and human rights still [took] a back seat to the rights and legitimate interests of sovereign states."[37]

The ethics of intervention of the early-1990s, therefore, "[were] negative ethics premised on a sovereign state's immunity and its consequent right not to be interfered with arbitrarily and without cause: the fundamental right of non-intervention." [38] The international legal system in the 1990s considered sovereign rights like the right of non-intervention as primary norms, whereas human rights concerns were still considered secondary norms. The Canadian proposal for aggressive intervention, thus, faced enormous resistance from the global community as the international legal standards of the early-1990s were in a disagreement with the nature of the Canadian proposition.

Earlier, during the Cold War, the two superpowers, the USSR and the U.S., participated in a number of peacekeeping operations, most of which were guided by a balance of power purposes. Despite being the only two superpowers in the international stage, both Moscow and Washington felt obliged to find legal justifications for their interventions, which confirmed the assumption that legal considerations were an important factor when a state desired to intervene militarily for humanitarian purposes.[39] The United Nations peacekeeping missions, too, respected the norms of non-intervention and state sovereignty. In virtually every case during the Cold War, peacekeeping missions were operated with the agreement of the conflicting parties, which became a precondition for the United Nations Security Council to sanction these operations.[40]

As a result of the question concerning the ethics of intervention in times of human rights violations, the United Nations faced three possible courses of action in Yugoslavia. The first one contemplated absolute non-intervention, which meant that the responsibility for the resolution of the conflict would be given to the main parties, namely Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. The second course of action assumed a full-scale armed intervention, where the United Nations would bear full responsibility for the consequences, be they sovereignty violations, deaths of civilians, etc. To choose the first option would mean to neglect humanitarianism and the Canadian desire to intervene aggressively. On the other hand, the second option would bring the war to an end faster, yet it would breach the sovereignty of both Serbia and Bosnia, thus violating the principle of non-intervention—perhaps the most respected international law aspect of the time. The leading United Nations member countries, therefore, faced a normative dilemma in the case of Yugoslavia, one that they had not witnessed during the previous, Cold War period.[41] The western leaders could refrain from intervention, thus abandoning humanitarianism, or perform a large-scale invasion, and take an incalculable risk as a result. This policy contradiction was the reason why the major powers choose the middle course of action of limited intervention.[42] It does not mean that western leaders simply neglected the humanitarian aspect of intervention; they considered humanitarianism, yet the extent to which they adhered to it was limited, owing to the early-Cold War ethics of intervention and normative complications.

Apart from the international legal framework of armed intervention of the period, however, Canada also faced

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obstacles in terms of its position in the international stage—a position which in the 1990s appeared much less influential than it had been a few decades ago. Canada, as one of the few countries that were paying their bills to the United Nations in full and on time, attempted to convince the rest of the international community to follow its example. The Canadian attempts, however, did not quite succeed. The international community, especially the powerful United States and the countries from the European Union, pretended that the United Nations was capable enough to protect the lives of civilians in war zones around the world even without their large financial commitments. Yet, they failed to provide the UNPROFOR with the additional 34 000 troops that were necessary for the successful implementation of the highly ambitious aims of the mission. In fact, "only 7 600 soldiers were allocated under the so-called 'light option' and only roughly 5 000 arrived in reasonable time." [43] The restrictions that the UNPROFOR faced in terms of finance and manpower compromised the performance of the organization. Canada certainly wanted to improve the work of the UNPROFOR, yet Ottawa's voice was not influential enough to be heard by the rest of the international community.

Another example that demonstrated the diminished Canadian influence in the international stage was the creation of the so-called Contact Group that had the purpose of strengthening the power of the UNPROFOR in bringing the Yugoslavian conflict to an end. The group included five country members: the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia. It was ironic that even though Canada initiated the UNPROFOR back in 1991, Ottawa was completely ignored during the establishment of the Contact Group, as the major powers began to rely heavily on a coercive rather than multilateral approach in bringing the crisis to an end.[44] The decision by the major powers to disregard the role of Canada in the Contact Group was an indicator which demonstrated that the international community perhaps no longer considered Canada as an indispensable player in peacekeeping.

Nancy Gordon and Bernard Wood argued in 1992: "Canada's capacity to influence the current re-shaping of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions is going to be much less direct and forceful than was its role in their creation in the 1940s. The family of nations is so much larger and more diverse and the present stratum of major powers unequivocally includes those weakened by the war in 1945, pushing Canada back to the margins of this group, one of the first among an expanded and still growing group of middle powers."[45] The Canadian position on the international stage was much different in the 1990s than that of 1956, for instance, when Lester Pearson resolved the Suez Crisis. Back then, France and Great Britain were still experiencing the negative consequences of the Second World War, a condition which rendered them vulnerable and dependent on foreign resources, especially finance. This was a part of the reason as to why Great Britain, for instance, was willing to make concessions and end its invasion of Egypt when the United States and several other countries put financial pressure on London. In 1991, however, the United Kingdom and France were in completely different situations: the two possessed much more diplomatic, economic, and financial leverage—factors that tremendously improved the two's overall position in the international scene. Canada had to recognize, therefore, that, in 1991, it was only one of the many important decision makers in the global stage whose voice then was much less loud than it had been during the early-Cold War period.

In addition to the Canadian fiasco, the international community also failed in the former Yugoslavia. It is not difficult for one to measure the success rate of peacekeeping interventions today: a "minimum standard for success is that the intervention produces a settlement that sustains peace between the parties for at least three years. Higher standards for success might encompass a settlement's perceived equity, its contribution to prosperous development, and its calming effect on other local conflicts." [46] None of these requirements, however, are present in the case of UNPROFOR. In 1993 only, about 17,000 people were killed in the former Yugoslavia, other 100,000 were missing, while further 1.7 million became refugees. [47] The cities of Sarajevo and Srebrenica turned into main arenas of ferocious bloodsheds, while the latter even witnessed a genocide in 1995. Additional atrocities that took place in Yugoslavia ranged from wide-spread rape to ethnic cleansing against Bosnian Muslims. [48] All these negative aspects ultimately speak to the failure of the United Nations which then learned that Chapter VI intervention was no longer working in delicate and fragile situations. [49]

Canada, on the other hand, learned that it faced limitations that were beyond the control of policymakers in Ottawa. In terms of legality, Canada had to comply with the ethics of intervention of the 1990s, according to which human rights concerns took a back seat to the notion of state sovereignty. If a crisis similar to the one in Yugoslavia occurred today, Canada would much more easily invoke international law in regards to breaches of state sovereignty for

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humanitarian purposes. In 2005, the United Nations member states endorsed the Responsibility to Protect principle, according to which, "[t]he international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity."[50]

In the early-1991s, however, the international legal system and political environment were much different. The proposed Canadian policies toward Yugoslavia encountered increasing resistance from the major powers in the international community. In addition, the Canadian insistence on a more compelling intervention in 1991 was in a disagreement with the predominant international legal norms of the period. Canada, therefore, learned that its reputation and role as the world's indispensable player in peacekeeping were no longer enough for achieving success in the dynamic and perplexed post-Cold War period. As Leigh Sarty points out, "Canadian diplomacy can flourish after the Cold War provided the country recognizes its limitations and works to understand and adapt to further change rather than assuming that the erosion of bipolarity will play to Canada's intrinsic strengths."[51]

Conclusion

The preceding pages demonstrated that the Canadian incapability to improve the performance of the UNPROFOR in the former Yugoslavia was due to two main reasons. The first one pertains to the Canadian inconsistent foreign policy approach toward the UNPROFOR. This approach was characterized by two completely distinct doctrines on the part of the two prime ministers of the time, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chrétien. While the former strongly advocated for an armed intervention in Yugoslavia in 1991, the latter wanted to extricate Canada from the Yugoslavian conflict. Consequently, the inconsistency of Canadian foreign policy contributed negatively to Ottawa's attempts to shape the decisions of the United Nations between 1992 and 1995.

The second reason refers to the unique nature of the international system in the early post-Cold War period. In 1991, the Canadian position in the international stage was less influential than it had been several decades before. For instance, when the Suez Crisis was resolved, some of the major powers were economically exhausted by the consequences of the Second World War, which allowed Canada to exert its then considerable influence, thus to resolve the conflict by peaceful means. In 1991, however, Canada found itself in an expanded group of powers that then included the countries exhausted by the war in 1945, which ultimately restricted the Canadian ability to exert its influence forcefully and effectively.

The changes in the post-Cold War international order have been coming too fast for Canada. Given the shift of the international balance of power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ottawa would need to find new opportunities to play a critical role in international affairs. The most powerful instrument that Canada possesses in this regard is its experience and expertise in peacekeeping. Despite the end of the Cold War, the demand for peacekeeping in the twenty-first century is expected to increase. Canada, therefore, should work assiduously to find ways for improving the performance of the United Nations in providing more effective and novel mechanisms for protecting and maintaining peace in every region and part of the world.[52]

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