**Can Justin Trudeau Use the U.N. to Rebrand Canadian Foreign Policy?**

By **Reid Standish**, [foreignpolicy.com](https://getpocket.com/redirect?url=http%3A%2F%2Fforeignpolicy.com%2F2016%2F09%2F20%2Fcan-justin-trudeau-use-the-u-n-to-rebrand-canadian-foreign-policy-unga-obama%2F&formCheck=d44a68847387bb218fd2bdd7973df266)

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Since his [election](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/20/how-a-liberal-red-wave-swept-canada-last-night/) in October 2015, Justin Trudeau, Canada’s [panda-cuddling](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/twin-panda-cubs-names-revealed-1.3478751), [*Vogue* magazine](http://www.vogue.com/13377163/justin-trudeau-prime-minister-canada/) centerfold prime minister known for his [generous](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/10/welcome-to-canada-where-the-prime-minister-meets-refugees-at-the-airport/) refugee policy and [shirtless](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/14/justin-trudeaus-topless-body-politic/)photographs, has grabbed international headlines and become a [household name](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/15/canada-loves-justin-trudeau-pandas). But in his maiden speech to the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday, Trudeau used the opportunity to remake his government’s foreign policy as a progressive global leader on open borders, free trade, and gender equality.

Speaking before world leaders at the annual diplomatic conference, the Canadian prime minister, like President Barack Obama before him, called for greater global engagement and for governments to speak out against the rising xenophobia and protectionism that is currently playing a prominent role in American and European politics.

“We need to focus on what brings us together, not on what divides us,” Trudeau said. “We believe we should confront anxiety with a clear plan to deal with its root causes.”

Trudeau championed multilateral institutions like the United Nations and defended the economic benefits of globalization while calling for a renewed global focus on climate change, the refugee crisis, and greater support for peacekeeping efforts around the world. Trudeau’s Liberal government has already accepted 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada and has promised to accept at least 10,000 more. In August, Ottawa also [pledged](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-peacekeeping-announcement-1.3736593)600 troops and $450 million for U.N. peacekeeping.

A big part of Trudeau’s globalizing mission is to contrast his government’s policies with those of his Conservative predecessor Stephen Harper, who was prime minister from 2006 to 2015.

Under Harper’s leadership, Ottawa was hesitant and at times even [critical](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/john-baird-s-decade-in-federal-politics-13-quotes-to-remember-1.2943299) about the U.N. and its overall effectiveness on the world stage, with then-Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird [calling](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/re-engage-with-the-united-nations-harper-urged-1.1864618) it a “debating club for dictators.”

The Conservative government set itself apart from traditional Canadian foreign policy dogma by placing a greater emphasis on military power over diplomacy and membership in multilateral organizations. At times, this new direction made Harper unpopular with other world leaders, even straining relations with U.S. President Barack Obama, Canada’s most important ally.

Trudeau’s new approach is seen most clearly in Ottawa’s bid for a rotating seat on the U.N. Security Council, which it  [announced](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-united-nations-security-council-1.3491917) in March it would seek beginning in 2021.

“The Trudeau government actively went out and decided to compete in an election that is contested,” Adam Chapnick, a professor at the Canadian Forces College, told Foreign Policy, adding that Ottawa will vie for the seat against Ireland and Norway, two countries with strong credentials on the U.N. council.

Canada has not held a seat on the Security Council since 2000 and the Harper government suffered a decisive and embarrassing loss in 2010, the l[ast time](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-won-t-try-again-for-security-council-seat-1.1123224) Ottawa ran for a council seat.

“One of the currencies of international politics at the leadership level is garnering support. Trudeau is very popular at home and that translates into legitimacy elsewhere,” said Chapnick. “If the Trudeau government runs the campaign properly, all of Canadian foreign policy over the next four years can be viewed through the lens of trying to win the Security Council election.”

Evidence of this strategy is already starting to play out, as Ottawa has sought to re-engage the U.N. on peacekeeping, once a [hallmark](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/qc/stlaurent/natcul/natcul2/natcul2f.aspx) of Canadian foreign policy, which the country has shied away since missions in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s.

On trade policy, Trudeau’s has [refrained](http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/john-ivison-with-one-eye-on-the-u-s-position-liberals-edge-toward-public-endorsement-of-tpp-deal) from denouncing the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, even though both U.S. presidential candidates have beat it up, and is [close](http://www.wsj.com/articles/germanys-social-democrats-give-support-to-canada-trade-deal-1474306303) to finalizing a free trade deal with the European Union. This economic approach, as well as Ottawa’s willingness to run a deficit at home in order to invest in social programs, recently earned high praise from Christine Lagarde, the chief of the International Monetary Fund, who said she wished other countries would follow Trudeau’s lead.

Elsewhere, despite no longer participating in the [airstrikes](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/justin-trudeau-canada-isis-fight-announcement-1.3438279) against the Islamic State in Iraq, Ottawa also recently [announced](https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/09/17/canadian-led-military-force-in-latvia-taking-shape.html) that it will lead a NATO brigade in Latvia meant to counter Russia.

“Canadians don’t vote on foreign policy,” Bessma Momani, a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and a professor at the University of Waterloo, told FP. “So, Trudeau wouldn’t be doing this kind of investment unless it had a foreign policy value in and of itself.”

According to Momani, Trudeau is counting on his image as a reliable peace broker to preserve Canada’s interests abroad, something she argues will go further on the international stage compared to Harper’s more stringent strategy.

“So far Trudeau has been a [public relations] win for Canada and many Canadians relish in that,” said Momani. “He will elevate the Canadian brand.”