**“**[**Justin Trudeau Is Putting the ‘Liberal’ Back in ‘Canadian Foreign Policy’**](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/21/justin-trudeau-liberal-canadian-foreign-policy-syria-climate-change/)**”**

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After nine years of Stephen Harper’s neocon act, a new, inexperienced prime minister is going to dial back Canada’s hard power ambitions on the world stage.

This story will feel familiar to Americans.

A young, idealistic, inexperienced liberal rides a wave of hope and change all the way up the polls and in to the halls of power. He seems genuinely embarrassed by the last guy’s conduct in office — at least in the realm of foreign affairs. Seeing his predecessor exercise hard power on the world stage, he ascribes to him not merely imprudence, but a disregard for the nation’s best traditions of global conduct. The credentials the new leader brings to the job are specious at best. But under the surface and in between the gaffes that emerging leaders are wont to make, is the outline of a new statesman, or at least the possibility of one.

Yes, nearly seven years after Obama came to power, Canada is following America’s liberal lead in foreign affairs. On Oct. 19, Canada’s center-left Liberal party, led by 43-year-old Justin Trudeau from Quebec, surged from the ruins of its disastrous 2011 election showing to earn a majority of Canada’s federal parliamentary seats in the nation’s [longest campaign](http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/two-down-76-to-go-the-longest-election-campaign-since-we-first-re-elected-john-a) since 1872. With an iron grip on the legislature and a clear mandate from Canadian voters, Trudeau, the eldest son of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau — whose liberal legacy still looms large in Canada — is on track to be appointed Canada’s 23rd prime minister and form a government. In doing so, he’ll pick up where the Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper left off after nearly a decade in office, departing from his predecessor in rhetorical nuance but building on the Conservative’s strong record on global affairs and economic management.

Under Harper, Canada’s foreign policy adopted a harsh tone, putting a greater emphasis on hard power over soft power and elevating [economic diplomacy](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/tories-new-foreign-affairs-vision-shifts-focus-to-economic-diplomacy/article15624653/) and free trade to the top of the agenda. At times, this was unpopular. But by and large, it was a success.

Canada’s economy arguably fared best among G7 nations during and after the great recession, due partially to Harper’s support for the nation’s huge energy sector. Under Conservative rule, Canada was deemed the [second-best country](http://business.financialpost.com/executive/canada-overtakes-u-s-as-second-best-place-in-the-world-to-do-business) in the world to do business owing in part to the Tories’ low-tax agenda. And in addition to maintaining one of the [strongest financial sectors](http://www.fin.gc.ca/n13/13-113-eng.asp) in the world, Harper enhanced Canada’s global economic engagement with a succession of [new trade deals](http://www.international.gc.ca/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/fta-ale.aspx?lang=eng). (Some of them — like the [Canada-European Union trade agreement](http://www.international.gc.ca/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/ceta-aecg/index.aspx?lang=eng) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership — are still in pre-implementation phases.) Though Harper has been the object of unusual animus [from his own country’s elites](http://www.torontosun.com/2015/09/20/why-the-elites-hate-harper) and his domestic political opponents for [“staining”](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/05/14/stephen-harper-canada-reputation_n_5326331.html) Canada’s international good name, in 2015 the Reputation Institute reported that Canada is the [most admired country](http://www.cbc.ca/news/trending/canada-has-the-worlds-best-reputation-global-survey-shows-1.3155500) in the world.

This might be why, despite some heated and substantive exchanges between Harper and Trudeau during an [election debate](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-munk-debates-foreign-policy-syria-refugees-1.3247665) focused on foreign affairs, there is actually significant overlap between the two leaders in terms of substance, if not style. Both advocate for strong bilateral ties with the United States and both believe the [Keystone XL pipeline](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/10/20/new-canadian-leader-brings-same-support-for-keystone-xl-pipeline/) should be part of that relationship. Both leaders are free traders — Trudeau all but came out in favor of the TPP as the Harper administration negotiated it. Both, in wildly different ways, believe humanitarian considerations should animate Canadian foreign policy, whether through Harper’s [maternal health initiatives](http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2015/02/25/pm-harper-and-bill-gates-renew-call-advance-global-maternal-newborn-and-child-health) or, for Trudeau, [through enhanced development goals](https://www.liberal.ca/liberal-party-of-canada-statement-on-international-development-week/).

Where Trudeau and Harper have most differed is in the use of military force, or hard power, in pursuit of Canada’s interests and values. In particular, the two leaders squared off on Canada’s role in the fight against the Islamic State.

On March 30, the Conservative government used its majority in the House to approve an expanded Canadian combat mission against the Islamic State, as part of the U.S.-led coalition effort. Soon after, Royal Canadian Air Force fighter jets were authorized to attack the terrorists not only in Iraq, but also in Syria, to prevent the latter from becoming a “safe haven” for terror, according to Harper.

Trudeau’s parliamentary address before the mission extension vote was credible and balanced in its tone. While his comments are not always so mature — he’s stumbled by jokingly [praising](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/justin-trudeau-s-foolish-china-remarks-spark-anger-1.2421351) China’s authoritarianism and [accusing](http://www.torontosun.com/2014/10/02/its-not-about-whipping-out-our-cf-18s-to-show-how-big-they-are-trudeau) Harper of chronically “whipping out our CF-18s [fighter jets] to show how big they are” — his parliamentary comments on the Iraq-Syria mission expansion conveyed a serious, if perhaps idealistic, view of international law and global affairs. He laid out the conditions under which the Liberals would support military missions. (As of last night, according to Agence France-Presse, Trudeau has already notified President Obama that he’s [withdrawing Canadian air power](https://twitter.com/AFP/status/656592867079684096) from the fight in Iraq and Syria, though Canadian trainers will [likely remain](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/canada-end-airstrikes-syria-iraq-new-prime-minister-trudeau) in northern Iraq.)

Trudeau’s four “core principles” on military deployments should provide some insight into his approach once he fully takes the reins of power.

Per [his statement](https://www.liberal.ca/statement-by-justin-trudeau-regarding-the-extended-mission-in-iraq-and-syria/) on the vote:

–One, Canada has a role to play in confronting humanitarian crises in the world.

–Two, when a government considers deploying our men and women in uniform, there must be a clear mission and a clear role for Canada.

–Three, that the case for deploying [Canadian] forces must be made openly and transparently, based on clear and reliable, dispassionately presented facts.

–Four, Canada’s role must reflect the broad scope of Canadian capabilities and how best we can help.

Placing humanitarian considerations at the top of the decision tree is notable — Trudeau has [relentlessly slammed Harper](http://www.torontosun.com/2015/09/03/trudeau-wants-to-accept-25000-refugees) on his predecessor’s management of the Syrian refugee crisis, calling for a much more ambitious Canadian response than the tentative, security-focused measures [Harper authorized](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-chris-alexander-refugees-1.3235415). Trudeau is justified in including mission clarity and reliable intelligence among his party’s conditions, since those factors should be table stakes for any discussion of military action anyway. The final factor, that Canadian missions need to best reflect the resources at the nation’s disposal, is the most politically fraught for a leader who has consistently taken a softer line on security issues than his predecessor. To advocates of a foreign policy rooted in hard power, it will look like an escape clause to potentially undermine any military action under any circumstances. After all, determining how “best we can help” will never be a merely utilitarian judgment in practice, but a political one. Until Trudeau grows into the role of prime minister and builds fluency in military affairs, he will need to remain on guard against that potential criticism from Conservatives.

To establish early credibility and his own foreign policy bona fides with Canadians and his global peers, though, Trudeau may choose not to play to the Conservatives’ strength on military issues. The decision to quit the airstrike campaign suggests as much. If the rookie PM can seize two upcoming diplomatic opportunities in particular, he could make serious progress tilting Canada back toward the peaceful, multilateralist power [of his vision](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/justin-trudeau/canada-united-nations_b_8204844.html).

As fellow Canadian Geoff Dembicki [argued in Foreign Policy](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/15/canada-election-decide-fate-of-the-world-climate-change-paris-australia/) earlier this month, Canada has an opportunity to shift the global dialogue on climate policy at December’s Paris summit. Politically, ushering in global policy progress at the summit could be a big, quick win for the new leader. The logic goes that Canada, as an advanced industrial economy with capacity for more ambitious climate action than it’s shown to date, is giving fossil fuel-dependent emerging economies an excuse to lag on climate control policies. By bringing [Trudeau’s progressive environmental views](http://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/justin-trudeau-man-of-substance/) to bear at the Paris summit, Canada could affect a tectonic shift in global climate politics.

Second, the United States recently achieved a [diplomatic breakthrough](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/27/un-peacekeeping-obama-countries-pledge-troops-counterterror) to put peacekeeping back on the global agenda. Through intense lobbying, the Obama administration secured broad-based international support to enhance U.N. member states’ support for peacekeeping efforts by providing more troops and materiel. That’s music to Trudeau’s ears.

Canada is one of the principal architects of peacekeeping. Trudeau’s father, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, took over as prime minister from Nobel Peace Prize winner Lester B. Pearson, who helped [broker a solution](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/qc/stlaurent/natcul/natcul2/natcul2f.aspx) to the Suez Crisis in 1956. From then on, Canada’s global brand — and the Liberal party’s conception of Canada’s role in the world — became deeply intertwined with the concept of peacekeeping. This new U.S.-led effort could give Canada a high profile international role that, in Trudeau’s view, “must reflect the broad scope of Canadian capabilities and how best we can help.”

By picking up the mantle of global leadership on these issues, while also building on his predecessor’s achievements on free trade, Trudeau could get a fast start on foreign affairs and fashion a global role for himself and for Canada that fits with his values and his party’s historic strengths.

And he wouldn’t even have to whip out his CF-18s.