In the period since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, some of Canada’s politicians and best-known commentators on international affairs have called on this country to make a choice. Canada, we are told, can no longer walk its historic “middle line” between the United States and the rest of the world. Standing apart from the US, and focusing on the societies and institutions that populate broader international community, is a luxury we can no longer afford. Henceforth, our foreign policy must be based on what former Canadian Ambassador to the United States Allan Gotlieb calls “the paramountcy of Canada-US relations,” and all initiatives examined within that framework.

This view rests on two premises: first, that Canada will not be able to contribute significantly to international peace and greater justice without being able to influence the United States; and second, that our influence with countries and organizations beyond North America is directly correlated with how much we have the ear of Washington. This approach — what I call “Foreign Policy as Canada-US Relations” — is also based on a hardheaded calculation of financial flows. According to former international trade official Michael Hart, Canada’s heavy dependence on foreign trade for its national prosperity means that foreign policy should effectively be about trade relations. Given that the US is by far Canada’s largest trading partner, it logically follows that our foreign policy can be reduced to our relationship with the United States.

For analysts like Gotlieb and Hart, the key issue that will determine the Canada-US agenda going forward is security. In a post 9/11 world, Canada must prove that it poses no threat to the safety of Americans by making its territory secure from terrorists who could make their way across the border. The immediate aftermath of September 11, when the border was closed, demonstrated just how vulnerable Canada is to the disruption of commercial traffic. The 49th parallel runs right through the middle of a “just in time” assembly line, making the ability of businesses to move goods and people across the border easily a key factor for investment decisions involving Canada. If the risk of disruption to that flow becomes too high, risk-averse investors might choose to go elsewhere (most notably south of the border). Canada needs to move aggressively to address US concerns, so the argument goes, but also to ward off potential closures.
If the US is the main object of our external relations, and security their main subject, does Canada even need a foreign policy at all? This isn’t a rhetorical question. Given the limited room for manoeuvre in a US-dominated world, and the pressure on our public funds to sustain important social programs like health care and education, it demands an answer.

We could, for example, be Switzerland — a country that places emphasis on being a great place to live, rather than engaging in international activism. Though it recently joined the United Nations, the Swiss have a reputation for neutrality and opting out of arrangements for interstate cooperation, most notably the common European currency. Swiss military expenditures are a third of Switzerland’s (US$ 2.55 billion compared with US$ 7.86 billion). After all, governing is all about making choices and Switzerland’s choices have focused on a social safety net that is broad and deep. Canada could also choose to focus its efforts on maintaining and improving its domestic model.

But as appealing as the Swiss approach may seem, there are five factors that require Canada to be and do more. The first and very basic one is geography. Because of its location and massive coastline, Canada is both isolated and exposed. When you combine these facts with the existence of only one and very powerful neighbour, you have an argument for developing a wide set of international relationships. The second factor relates to the size and nature of our economy. Canada’s GDP is four times that of Switzerland’s, and our impressive rates of growth and budget surpluses during these first years of the 21st century have made us a valued member of the G8 and an obvious place to look for financial leadership on issues like global poverty and infectious disease. As the old saying goes: To whom much is given, much is expected.

In short, Canada does not exist only to buy and sell goods and services with other countries. Its national purpose is not all about getting rich. If that were so, we would have become the 51st state a long time ago. Indeed, the very existence of Canada, as a political entity that runs east-west, defies the cool rationality of the economists. It stands as a testament to a broader set of political and social objectives. And a Canadian foreign policy must continue to reflect those.

Thus, a third factor pushing Canada to have a robust foreign policy is the nature of our 21st century world. Focusing only on the United States might have made some sense during the 1990s, when the West had won the Cold War and was enjoying an unprecedented level of security. But the post-Cold War era presents a host of new threats to international peace and security (such as transnational organized crime, poverty, environmental degradation, and terrorism), and to the safety and prosperity of Canadians. According to the recent report of the UN’s high level panel on collective security, today’s threats know no boundaries and must be addressed at the global and regional levels — not only at the national and international level. Canadian foreign policy must actively address these threats, in collaboration with other actors on the international stage. We must contribute to the reform of existing institutions, and to the creation of new rules and structures to manage global problems. We must also build capacity in other members of the international community so that they too can contribute — economically and politically.

In so doing, Canadian policy-makers must dare to entertain the notion that the United States will not be the world’s only superpower forever. This is not to invite decline or ruin for the US. Rather, it is to do some prudent long-term planning. Canada’s interests are best served if future superpowers are firmly embedded in international institutions and have been “socialized” to cooperate with others in the management of common problems. This will require us to remain engaged in the world beyond North America’s shores and to monitor the development and policy direction of other rising powers.

There are two more significant reasons that Canada has aspired — and should continue to aspire — to act beyond the North American continent. Our immigration and refugee policy, combined with our changing ethnic make-up, constitutes one of these key drivers. Canada has quite literally opened itself to the world, and many parts of the world live within our borders. Hence, Canada’s net migration rate is 6.0 migrants per 1,000 population, compared with 1.37 migrants per 1,000 population for Switzerland. A gap also exists between Canada’s rate and that of the US (3.5 migrants/1,000 population). Thus, while 10 percent of the US population is foreign born, that figure is 18 percent for Canada.

The final factor is our history and national identity. Though the story of Canada’s presence as an independent
actor on the international stage is relatively short, it is a compelling tale of contribution. Vimy Ridge stands as a testament to Canadian sacrifice in World War I. Only decades later, we “invaded” the United Kingdom with almost half a million of our young men to train and prepare for the military campaign to hold back Hitler's advance. But Canada's experience on the international stage hasn’t been limited to warfighting. It also includes the creation of NATO and the GATT, the development of UN peacekeeping, and the establishment of the International Criminal Court. In short, we were a global “player,” and Canadians continue to believe that we should be.

Public opinion research reveals that Canada is a country deeply interested in foreign policy, whose citizens are strongly oriented toward taking an active role on the world stage and willing to commit Canadian troops in a wide array of scenarios.

As a consequence, Canadians — to a greater degree than Americans — want more spending on overseas development assistance, more engagement with the UN, and more involvement in trade agreements. The problem, however, is that Canadians are rarely asked to make difficult trade-offs in spending: if more money is to be given to these externally focused policy areas, what are we willing to spend less on? An additional problem is that the degree of support demonstrated for internationalism is way out of proportion with the facts on the ground. “While Canada slept” — to borrow the title of Andrew Cohen’s recent book — Canada's military capability has deteriorated rapidly (its ranks near the bottom of the NATO roster in terms of percentage of GDP devoted to defence), its policy leadership on key issues like the environment has evaporated, and its international aid budget has dwindled from a high of 0.53 percent of GDP in 1975 to 0.28 percent today. Even Canada's much-heralded reputation as the world’s peacekeeper has been damaged by its traumatic experience in Somalia and prolonged under-investment in the armed forces.

This suggests that we may need to rethink the very nature of foreign policy, and diplomacy, in the 21st century. Professional diplomacy — the institution that once acted as the valued intermediary for states and societies separated by law, culture, and language — now competes with a host of other organizations and individuals that must, and can, interact on the global stage without
such intermediation. Ironically, it is Western governments themselves who were the architects of their own decline. Globalization isn’t something that happened to us. Rather, as our Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter Harder explains, it is “something we did to ourselves, as a matter of explicit national policy.” And so today, when we speak of Canada’s relationship with other countries, especially the US, we are using a convenient form of shorthand. The vast majority of the transactions that make up those relationships occur with no reference to government at all.

To put it another way, we need to conceive of our country not just as Canada with a capital “C” — the corporate entity represented by the flag or government officials — but also as Canadians. Canada is ultimately a network of people and values, which extends beyond the geographical hub north of the 49th parallel. While it may be true, as Andrew Cohen has argued, that Canada’s influence in the world is declining in terms of the traditional categories of federal spending on defence, diplomacy and development, this does not necessarily mean that Canadians are staying at home. In fact, Canadians are doing fantastic things in the world. Many of us are aware of the more high profile examples: Kofi Annan’s Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS Stephen Lewis; UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, or the former president of Médecins Sans Frontières, James Orbinski. But other “ordinary” Canadians, especially from a new generation, are building upon the Canadian legacy for global engagement and taking it even one step further. All of their activities are part of what Canada does in the world.

Some lament this as “brain drain.” How do we get these talented Canadians back home? But they are missing the point. In a globalized world, with mobile citizens and problems and opportunities that transcend frontiers, this isn’t brain drain. Instead, as the non-governmental organization Canada25 has argued, it is more like “brain circulation.” Expatriates should be viewed as an asset, rather than a problem of the puzzle. What I am suggesting is that foreign policy is not something others do “out there.” It is the responsibility of all of us, as part of the global commons.

But as appealing as the Swiss approach may seem, there are five factors that require Canada to be and do more. The first and very basic one is geography. Because of its location and massive coastline, Canada is both isolated and exposed. When you combine these facts with the existence of only one and very powerful neighbour, you have an argument for developing a wide set of international relationships. The second factor relates to the size and nature of our economy. Canada’s GDP is four times that of Switzerland’s, and our impressive rates of growth and budget surpluses during these first years of the 21st century have made us a valued member of the G8 and an obvious place to look for financial leadership on issues like global poverty and infectious disease.

In sum, while many Canadians are content to delegate foreign policy to the diplomatic arm of government, there is a large segment of the population that believes it can and should take part in defining and implementing the country’s international agenda. More importantly, a new generation of Canadians sees itself as part of a networked world, where activity “beyond the border” isn’t viewed as foreign at all, but part of everyday life.

According to Canada25, its members “thrive in this new networked structure, not only because it rewards creative and engaged individuals, but because successful participation requires many of the skills Canadians possess as members of a multicultural society.” Indeed, that growing confidence about who we are has led some to wonder aloud about whether “Canadians are the new Americans.”

But this raises a question: Does it matter whether the Canadians making a difference in the global arena are positively identified as Canadian? My hunch is no. If we really believe in a networked world, and global citizenship, it shouldn’t matter who is doing the work — only that the work gets done.

Jennifer M. Welsh, who holds a doctorate in international relations from Oxford University and lectures in her specialty there, is the author of At Home in the World: Canada’s Global Vision for the 21st Century. Formerly a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, she is a fellow of Somerville College. Previously, in the private sector, she was a consultant with McKinsey & Co.
Canada's multilateral tradition reflects Canada's domestic interests and global ideals, and as Keating has argued, is Canada's "best option" for pursuing national and international interests (Keating 2002). It has also led to the judgment that Canada's foreign policy is dependent, responsive to the wishes and interests of major allies, and devoid of any emphasis on and independent of "national interest." Â “Fulfilling Canada's Global Promise.” Policy Options. 26 (February). Whitaker, Reg (2005). International Journal, 55 (2), 574-578; review of Welsh, Jennifer (2004). At Home in the World: Canada's Global Vision for the 21st Century, Toronto: HarperCollins Canada. United States (1776). The Declaration of Independence. We define, shape and advance Canada's interests and values in a complex global environment. We manage diplomatic relations, promote international trade and provide consular support to Canadians internationally. We lead Canada's international development, humanitarian, and peace and security efforts. Â Global Affairs Canada. We define, shape and advance Canada’s interests and values in a complex global environment. We manage diplomatic relations, promote international trade and provide consular support. We lead international development, humanitarian, and peace and security assistance efforts. Canada's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Â Global Affairs Canada 125 Sussex Drive Ottawa, ON K1A 0G2 Canada Telephone: 1-800-268-8376 (toll-free in Canada) 613-944-4000 (in the National Capital Region and outside Canada) Website: www.international.gc.ca Email: info@international.gc.ca Â© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2018 Catalogue number: FR5-146/2018E-PDF.