

Canadian Strategy in a Changing World

Middle-Power Statecraft amid Geopolitical and Technological Uncertainty

OCTOBER 2026

By Branka Marijan and Julian King



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Authors: Branka Marijan and Julian King

Designer: Lisa Umholtz

First published: October 2026

With funding from the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program of the Canadian Department of National Defence

Project Ploughshares
140 Westmount Road North
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6
Canada
Telephone: 519-888-6541
Email: plough@ploughshares.ca

Acknowledgements

This report synthesizes findings from a review of academic, policy and institutional literature, expert input, and an expert roundtable convened in Ottawa in November 2025 as part of the MINDS-funded project on emerging technologies and Canada's role as a reliable partner and ally.

The authors would like to thank the experts who provided input on the draft document and to those who attended the Ottawa workshop. Special thanks to Jessica Stewart and Kianna Low-A-Chee for research assistance.

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“Middle-power status needs to be earned day by day. It is not something that flows entirely, automatically, and naturally from a country’s resources.”

—An unnamed participant at a University of Waterloo roundtable, October 1993, quoted in Geoffrey Hayes (1993—94, 13), as cited in Chapnick (2000, 200)

Executive Summary

Canada's ability to influence international affairs depends increasingly on how it responds to the convergence of geopolitical competition, technological development, and economic security. Emerging technologies are reshaping military capabilities while creating dependencies through digital infrastructure, supply chains, and access to privately controlled systems. A less predictable relationship with the United States and growing pressure on multilateral institutions further complicate Canada's choices. These changes require more than increased defence spending or an appeal to Canada's historical "middle power" status can deliver. They demand a clearer account of what Canada seeks to achieve and how it will mobilize its capabilities and relationships to do so.

Drawing on academic and policy literature, expert consultations, and a November 2025 workshop, this report examines how Canada can adapt to this changing environment. It connects debates about Canada's international role with the strategic implications of artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, cyber competition, and their effects on security and stability. Experiences from the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Sweden, and Japan illustrate different approaches to capability development, technological dependence, and international cooperation.

The report argues that "middle power" is a practice to be sustained, not a status to be assumed. Canada's historical reputation, scientific expertise, and institutional relationships remain valuable, but they do not automatically translate into influence. Their strategic value depends on clear priorities, credible contributions, and sustained investment. Influence also depends on recognizing emerging opportunities and connecting research expertise with diplomatic initiative to shape agendas and practical governance measures.

Technological interdependence places important limits on what Canada can achieve independently. Comprehensive technological self-sufficiency is neither a realistic nor necessarily desirable objective. Instead, Canada must identify which dependencies create unacceptable vulnerabilities, where reliable access can be secured through partnerships, and where domestic capacity provides resilience or leverage. Strategically valuable capabilities can increase Canada's room for manoeuvre, but they cannot eliminate the pressures arising from unequal power relationships.

Cooperation is essential to this approach. But in practice, middle powers are unlikely, to form a single, coherent bloc. Their interests, security arrangements, and technological dependencies differ. Canada therefore needs an issue-specific approach to partnerships: working closely with established allies, developing complementary capabilities with selected partners, and sustaining broader multilateral engagement. Flexible coalitions and multilateral institutions serve different but mutually reinforcing purposes. Diplomacy, arms control, development, and peacebuilding require sustained investment because they address sources of insecurity that military capabilities cannot resolve. A coherent strategy must explain how these efforts contribute to Canadian security and international stability, while making choices about resources and priorities explicit.

The report identifies five pathways for Canadian policy:

1. **Define national priorities and credible contributions.** Establish the interests Canada seeks to advance and the functions it has the capacity to perform.
2. **Integrate defence, diplomacy, technology, and economic policy.** Coordinate decisions across these domains and resource the institutions needed to implement them.
3. **Manage critical technological dependencies.** Combine assured access, diversification, contingency planning, and selective domestic capability development.
4. **Concentrate investment where Canada can create strategic value.** Connect scientific strengths with operational needs, industrial capacity, and international governance.
5. **Build complementary partnerships and shape international rules.** Use alliances, issue-specific coalitions, and multilateral institutions to reduce vulnerability, manage risks, and amplify influence.

Together, these pathways offer a practical approach to Canadian agency under conditions of constraint. The objective is not autonomy in every domain, nor influence for its own sake. It is to protect Canada's security and capacity to make consequential choices while helping sustain the rules, institutions, and cooperation needed to reduce conflict and manage technological change.

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Introduction

Few speeches by a Canadian prime minister have resonated as widely, domestically and internationally, or attracted the level of scrutiny accorded to Mark Carney's address at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 20 January 2026. In a speech that quickly circulated beyond policy circles, Carney articulated a diagnosis long advanced by analysts, but until that point not widely acknowledged in the mainstream: that the multilateral order is under strain and that an emergent global configuration is taking shape in which great powers exhibit diminishing regard for the rules, norms, and institutions underpinning the post-war settlement. As economist Branko Milanović observed, while such assessments are far from new, "it does make a difference when the PM of one of [the] G7 countries acknowledges it" (Milanović 2026).

Carney's intervention was a call to action. He did not advocate retrenchment or passive accommodation to shifting power dynamics, but rather asserted that "middle powers must act together because if you are not at the table, you are on the menu." The speech invoked the term "middle powers" repeatedly—a concept that has played a central role in the development and conception of Canadian foreign policy and national identity in the post-war period (Chapnick 2005; Gecelovsky 2009). Middle powers have often been broadly understood as countries with limited hard power but an ability to exercise influence through international institutions and norms, often due to resources and geographic position.

Despite the enduring influence of the middle power concept on Canadian thought, however, scholars have long grappled with its precise meaning and implications. This struggle for clarity is mirrored in the expansive body of literature, which has made many attempts to delineate the characteristics that distinguish so-called middle powers (Chapnick 1999; Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993; Robertson 2017). Some scholars recently have gone so far as to call for the 'historization' of the middle power concept, arguing that it is no longer a useful or accurate label in contemporary global affairs (Robertson and Carr 2023). Nonetheless, the concept of a middle power has demonstrated remarkable staying power: policymakers, leaders, scholars and strategists continue to invoke it across a range of contexts.

In the months following Carney's Davos speech, references to middle powers have seen a surge, further muddying the conceptual waters. In policy circles across Europe, Asia and other regions, small and medium sized states have found Carney's call for middle power solidarity both timely and inspiring. For his part, Carney has since further explained his view to note that the Davos speech was not indicative of a new spontaneous international forum of middle powers — an "M20" of sorts. Rather, he notes that it is about "variable geometry." This is described frequently, although vaguely, as "different partnerships with different groups of countries for different issues" (Blanchfield, Heath and Ross 2026). These interest-based groupings of middle-sized economies

and countries are posited as possible counterweights to the shifting geopolitical order and the competition among the great powers, namely the United States and China. In a joint essay for *The Economist* (2026), Carney and Finland's President Alexander Stubb described a "world of ad-hoc coalitions," and offered a rallying call for the "middle powers of the world [to] unite." Their argument reflects the anxieties felt amongst small and medium sized states as they navigate an increasingly fragmented international order. Against this backdrop, the shortcomings of recent efforts at middle-power cooperation (Meyer 2026) have led some analysts to call for a dedicated middle-power institution that could translate these appeals for unity into sustained collective action (Webb 2026).

For Canada, this evolving understanding of its middle power status is particularly notable given the broader geopolitical shifts and the emergence of what has been termed "geotechnomics" (Policy Horizons 2023). That is, the enmeshment of geopolitics, technology and economics. Dual-use technologies — those technologies developed commercially but with military and disruptive applications — are collapsing economic and security concerns. In response, discussions have shifted towards strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, as small and medium sized states look to reduce their dependencies on the great powers.

In a shift from previous years, in the case of Canada and like-minded countries, the focus has been on decreasing dependence on the United States and American firms alongside the longer standing concerns about Chinese technology. Still, there is also a recognition of continued interdependence in the geotechnomic order, particularly in relation to a key technology at the core of the competition, artificial intelligence (AI). As a Brookings report notes, "full-stack AI sovereignty is structurally infeasible for almost any country because AI is a transnational stack with concentrated choke points across minerals, energy, compute hardware, networks, digital infrastructure, data assets, models, applications, and the crosscutting enablers of talent and governance" (Tanner et al. 2026). Interdependence is evident across multiple layers of the technology ecosystem, making it increasingly difficult for middle powers to balance traditional alliances with the perceived, and often real, need for greater sovereign control over critical technologies. These dependencies are further complicated by geopolitical conflicts that can disrupt different layers of the technology ecosystem, as illustrated by the conflict in Iran. This tension has led analysts to identify a category of "AI middle powers": states "which have substantial state capacity and economic resources but lack the scale, capital, energy, and computing power to build frontier AI systems on their own" (Winter-Levy and Leicht 2026). The concept of AI middle powers broadly overlaps with the more traditional understanding of middle power status, but draws particular attention to technological dependencies, notably reliance on China and the United States for critical components of the AI ecosystem, including computing capacity.

Yet technological dependence and vulnerability are not confined to middle powers. Even for the United States, experts such as Paul Scharre (2026) argue that emerging technologies are narrowing some of the technological advantages traditionally enjoyed by great powers. Recognizing this interdependence for Canada's defence is critical. As a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, a permanent member in key multilateral bodies, an Arctic nation, and a found-

For middle powers, statecraft can no longer be compartmentalized; it requires a genuinely whole-of-government approach.

ing member of the liberal international order, Canada is well-positioned to play a meaningful role in shaping international responses to technological disruption and geopolitical shifts. Yet Canada's strategic vision, though evolving quickly under the Carney government, remains too fragmented. Canada's last comprehensive foreign policy review was conducted in 2005, more than two decades ago (Rigby and Hillmer 2025). Although the government has promised a new review, it has yet to materialize and there has thus far not been an extensive consultation process. While foreign policy review exercises have been criticized as exercises in "self-deception and self-congratulation" (Gotlieb 2005), the scale and complexity of today's strategic challenges make such a review necessary.

Meanwhile, Canada's diplomatic capacity is contracting (McKercher 2026). This gestures towards an overcorrection: increases in defence spending are widely seen as necessary, but should complement, rather than supplant diplomacy. To be sure, Canada needs to have the capabilities necessary to defend its borders and its population, but there is also a need to consider the importance of diplomatic capacity and foreign policy foresight to shape the innovation environment. The development of robust defence capabilities and the means to deploy them must be complemented by standard-setting and coalition building. This broader approach is necessary because as outlined above contemporary security challenges are not confined to conventional military threats. In the current 'geotechnomic' moment, defence policy and diplomacy cannot be considered in isolation.

This need is particularly acute in what has been described as an era of "unpeace" (Kello 2017; Leonard 2021). Emerging technologies continue to fundamentally alter the contemporary security environment, encouraging the continuous use of grey-zone tactics. Strategic competition now unfolds continuously below the threshold of armed conflict, producing cumulative political, economic, and security effects over time. The boundaries between peace and war, cooperation and competition, and connectivity and vulnerability have become increasingly blurred. Influence operations, cyber campaigns, economic coercion, and information manipulation allow states to undermine political stability, erode public trust, and exert strategic pressure without crossing territorial borders or triggering conventional military responses (Haras 2025). As these capabilities become more widely accessible, a growing number of states, and non-state actors, can employ them. This environment demands far closer alignment between diplomacy, defence, intelligence, economic policy, and technological governance. For middle powers, statecraft can no longer be compartmentalized; it requires a genuinely whole-of-government approach.

Rather than retreating from multilateralism, Canada needs a dual-track strategy: addressing specific security and technology concerns through smaller groupings of middle-power states while sustaining the wider multilateral institutions that underpin its security and defence (Manulak 2026). This logic appears to inform the Partners for Multilateralism (P4M) initiative, launched by the European Union alongside co-sponsors Australia, Barbados, Brazil, Canada, India and Kenya. Seen as having been catalyzed by Prime Minister Carney, the initiative's practical contribution remains uncertain. Journalist Daniel Flitton (2026) cautions that groupings such as P4M can create the appearance of progress without delivering meaningful outcomes. Flitton (2026) argues that "After the fanfare of a launch, these groupings quickly descend into busy-work, the impression of action by scheduling, deciding hosting rights, crafting communiques and setting agendas for working groups. Outcomes drift." As Flitton notes, the United Nations already provides a venue for cooperation. Although working through it is difficult in the current geopolitical climate, negotiating compromises with reluctant states may yield greater results than creating additional groupings. Efforts to renew multilateralism should therefore strengthen existing institutions while establishing a clear purpose for any new arrangements.

For Canada, a systems-thinking approach could help connect these institutional choices to a broader strategy. This would involve understanding how external shocks and technological transformations interact to shape Canadian interests, then developing interconnected responses at domestic and international levels. Ad hoc coalitions may form part of this approach, but their value depends on clear objectives and an understanding of how they fit within the wider security and defence relationships that shape Canada's room for manoeuvre. The central question is how each arrangement contributes to a coherent strategy and advances identifiable Canadian interests.

Within this broader strategy, the relationship with the United States will remain critical for Canada and many of its allies. Canada must therefore strengthen cooperation with other partners while navigating both the benefits and constraints of its closest bilateral relationship. The guiding principle of Canadian statecraft should be to "collaborate when possible but resist when necessary" (Rigby and Hillmer 2025).

This report identifies possible pathways for Canada to navigate the defence and diplomatic challenges associated with its role as a middle power given technological transformation. It begins by examining how Canada's evolving traditions of middle-power statecraft can inform the development of a more coherent foreign policy and strategic approach for the contemporary geopolitical and technological environment. The report then assesses key technologies reshaping defence and security before turning to lessons from like-minded countries. Taken together, these insights highlight gaps in Canada's current approach and identify opportunities to strengthen its response to emerging defence challenges amid a changing geopolitical order and rapid technological development. Ultimately, Canada has an opportunity to develop a strategic approach that aims to align its defence, foreign, technology, and industrial policies while reinforcing the multilateral institutions on which it has long relied. The need for such an approach is increasingly urgent. Rapid technological change, intensifying geopolitical competition, and

a less predictable relationship with the United States are reshaping the assumptions that have underpinned Canadian defence and foreign policy for decades. Decisions made in the coming years will influence Canada's strategic position and international role for a generation.

02

Canada as a 'Middle Power' Amid Global Transformation

Canada is often understood as the quintessential middle power. It feels natural, then, that Canada would step forward to lead the emerging “middle power moment” (Blanchfield et al. 2026; Patrick 2026). But what actually constitutes a middle power, or “middlepowerhood?” Any clear-eyed analysis of Canada’s global affairs in the 21st century demands interrogation of the middle power concept itself, which has remained deeply influential in Canadian foreign policy discourse since the second World War.

Over the years, the middle power has been described as a statistical category, a style of behavior, an ideational framework, a changing role, a type of statecraft, and even a strategically constructed myth (Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal 1993; Chapnick 2000; Cox 1989; Gecelovsky 2009; Neack 1992, Ping 2005). Across these definitional efforts, at least three distinct middle power definitional “models” have emerged. These are the hierarchical, functional, and behavioral models (Chapnick 1999). Yet no definition has been able to garner consensus, each being criticised on grounds of accuracy, consistency and utility.

The hierarchical model defines middle powers according to combinations of quantitative attributes, such as Gross National Product, Gross Domestic Product, military expenditure per capita, and population size (Neack 1992). However, deciding which objective criteria to factor into middle power analysis is a subjective practice. Consequently, attempts to define middle powers statistically have tended to yield inconsistent classifications around which states fit the category (Chapnick 1999; Nossal 2026).

The functional model positions middle powers as those states who play certain functional roles in the international system (Chapnick 1999; Robertson 2017). The functional approach to middlepowerhood is derived from Canada’s own “functional principle”, first articulated during the Second World War and further advocated for in the post-War period (Glazebrook 1947). It argues that involvement by non-great power states in international affairs should be based upon functional criteria: prior stake in the issue at hand, national interests, and ability to contribute meaningfully to the situation in question (Chapnick 1999, 74). It has been argued that the functional principle represents the “first independently derived Canadian position in international politics” (Miller 1980, 309). Though not immediately synonymous with middlepowerhood, the two ideas were eventually fused, and the notion of functionalism has since remained a persistently influential principle underlying Canada’s approach to global governance (Chapnick 2017; Gecelovsky 2009).

The functional principle contains a latent ambiguity which has in turn allowed states — namely Canada and Australia — to decide when and where they desired a say in international affairs. By selectively invoking the functional principle, they could advocate for elevated international status (de Bhal 2023; Chapnick 2002). In defining middle powers functionally, therefore, it is not clear for whom the role is functional — the individual states, or the international system? In practice, the case has been that national and international interests sometimes converged, opening room for functional roles that benefited the interests of the performing state and the international system. These opportunities came to form the pillars of the middle power idea, with peacekeeping as the prototype (Neack 1995). In this view, however, what differentiates a functional power from a middle power appears to be merely a combination of circumstance, opportunity, and self-promotion. Through the functional principle, any small power can temporarily be a middle power, and the middle power status can just as easily be lost (Chapnick 1999, 74-75).

Finally, the behavioural model identifies middle powers by the distinct types of diplomatic preferences and strategies common amongst a class of states. Namely, the pursuit of multilateral solutions to international problems, compromise positions in international disputes, and an embrace of ‘good international citizenship’ (Cooper, Higgot and Nossal 1993, 19-20). In practice, middle powers adapt particular strategies best suited to achieving their foreign policy objectives. These include entrepreneurial and/or technical and intellectual leadership, coalition building with like-minded states, and the practice of “niche diplomacy.” Through niche diplomacy, states concentrate resources in specific areas “best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field” (Evans and Grant 1991, 323). The behavioural definition of middle powers has found the most popularity in mainstream discourse. However, critics have pointed out that the behavioural approach is fundamentally tautological. That is, it works backwards, identifying the behavior of middle powers by observing the tendencies of states already considered to be middle powers (Chapnick 1999, 76). Moreover, small states can exhibit the behavioural tendencies of “middle powers” making it harder to establish a delimited group of states that fit the label.

Lessons from Myth: Middle Power as Practice

For policymakers, the morass of middle power debates is increasingly difficult to navigate. With the world order in flux, what practical use is there for a concept around which “confusion reigns supreme” (Robertson 2017)? As the debates above show, the existence of an objective category of middle power states remains tenuous. Moreover, such categorical attempts can be counterproductive if the middle-power identity is too rigidly internalized, encouraging outdated expectations for state conduct and the dynamics of cooperation. For instance, growing calls for middle power coalitions often implicitly rely on a circular reasoning that middle powers should cooperate, because cooperation is what middle powers do. This is not a sound justification, especially as great powers leverage economic and security integration to coerce smaller states into bilateral accommodations over multilateral solidarity (Beckley 2026; Nagy 2025). Appeals toward middle-power solidarity are attractive, but ultimately tend to gloss over material and structural realities.

Rather than striving to determine exactly what makes a middle power and who qualifies, policymakers are better served focusing their attention on the strategic lessons observable through the

conduct of Canada and allies. How have medium-sized states with relatively limited resources, like Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, ROK, Sweden and Japan been able to advance national interests? What principles can be transferred or adapted to help navigate the disorderly international system of today? This type of inquiry renders the hierarchical model less useful, since it emphasizes objective attributes and material capacities over foreign policy choices. The functional and behavioural models, while problematic as categorical definitions (Chapnick 1999, 74-76), do well to capture the “modes of statecraft” through which non-great power states have been able to exert international influence (Cooper 1997, 21). These are useful findings for practitioners today.

But states aspiring to a middle power future should be aware of their middle power past, and specifically the decisions that led to their current moment.

In a volatile and uncertain world, “middle power” offers far more utility as an adjective rather than a noun. Treating the middle power as an objective category to which a state belongs serves only to constrain the possibilities for adaptation, especially in a disorderly international system dominated by great power competition. To be sure, great power attitudes regarding the equality of small states have shifted in a decidedly realist direction, and multilateral institutions are under immense strain (Cooper, Dal and Dipama 2025; Paris 2020). This does not, however, render traditional middle power states such as Canada without options.

A more flexible view treats the middle power concept as a fluid role. Rather than a fixed identity or set of inherent preferences, “middle power theory and practice are intimately related to the structures of the international system in which they developed” (Cox 1984; Nossal 2026, 14). States with rich middle power histories, such as Canada and Australia, can look to their own past for guidance towards meeting the demands of a changing international order. Certainly, as the Prime Minister declared, “nostalgia is not a strategy” (Carney 2026). But states aspiring to a middle power future should be aware of their middle power past, and specifically the decisions that led to their current moment. There is a fine line between mourning the past and learning from it — Canada now must walk this line carefully. How has Canada’s middle power role and identity evolved since the Second World War?

After the War: Searching for Status

Over the course of the Second World War, Canada fielded over one million personnel from a population of 11 million, finishing with the third-largest navy and fourth-largest air force in the

world. Despite having demonstrated the ability to effectively mobilize resources for force projection, Canada saw little interest in maintaining such a large force in peacetime, quickly reducing the size of its army (Tremblay and Bentley 2015, 12). However, Canada's substantial contributions to the war effort produced a strengthened sense of national identity, and motivated Ottawa to seek a distinct position for Canada between great powers and all the rest. Canada wanted to ensure it was not indiscriminately "lumped in with the riffraff" of all other non-great power states (Fraser 1966, 7).

The desire for recognition underpinned Canada's navigation of the post-war environment, and the functional principle offered a strategically coherent but modest framework for differentiating among states. On matters of international affairs, Canada would push for representation in the areas it was best suited to make valuable and relevant contributions (Chapnick 2017). By focusing on issue-specific strengths and skills, Canada could "marshal its time and energy" efficiently and effectively, making maximum use of its limited resources (Cooper 1997a, 37).

This version of functionalism also required the use of institutions and regimes within which states would be willing to cooperate and defer to smaller states. Through multilateralism and channels for functional participation, intermediate states like Canada could ostensibly play key roles in the processes of international organization, boosting their own status while also improving the overall functionality of the international system. Canada's long multilateralist tradition, its tendency towards internationalism, and the concept of functionalism all work in concert. In this sense, for Canada, multilateralism has been a functional means of achieving national policy objectives (Keating 2013; MacLean 2008, 256).

Saving the World for a Seat at the Table: Middle Power Peacekeeping

Canada's central role in resolving the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis effectively validated the middle power idea, thus becoming the "defining episode of post-1945 Canadian diplomacy" (Cooper 1997, 39). Lester B. Pearson's diplomatic intervention via the proposal of a UN peacekeeping force helped to de-escalate a tense and precarious situation that threatened to erupt into a catastrophic Cold War confrontation. One thousand Canadian soldiers were sent to the Sinai as first major UN emergency force, and Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for, in the words of the awarding committee, "saving the world" (Hayes 1997). This triumph entrenched peacekeeping as a pillar of Canadian foreign policy, and effectively legitimized the concept of middle power diplomacy (Nossal 2000). It demonstrated that by combining capability with willingness, non-great power states could make necessary and appreciated contributions to the international system. Peacekeeping henceforth became the primary Canadian niche activity, embraced by both policymakers and the general public (Henrikson 2005).

Between 1948 and 1988, Canada participated in every UN mission, contributing more than 10 per cent of the total UN peacekeeping forces, deploying in parts of the Middle East, Africa, South East Asia, and Cyprus (Rudderham, 2008). Throughout the Cold War, Canadian peacekeeping was key to the maintenance of international peace and stability, helping to curtail the possibility of smaller conflicts spiraling into a disastrous nuclear showdown (Tremblay and Bentley 2015, 13). Peacekeeping was also instrumentalized for more narrow strategic purposes in service of the Ca-

nadian national interest. Lacking in the financial resources of its larger allies, peacekeeping acted as “a cheap supplement to Canada’s allied obligations and a manifestation of Canada’s overall commitment to Western collective defense while also showing support for broader collective security through the United Nations” (Leuprecht and Sokolsky 2015, 548). In short, peacekeeping was a cost-efficient means for Canada to secure a ‘seat at the table.’

In 1993, Canadian peacekeeping hit a high point, with 3,336 uniformed personnel deployed under the UN flag in Yugoslavia, Cyprus, the Golan Heights, Somalia and Cambodia (Dorn 2007). However, these peacekeeping missions made painfully clear the emerging limitations of traditional peacekeeping in a changing world (Corroll 2016, 171). While peacekeeping throughout the Cold War had functioned to primarily to prevent a disastrous nuclear war, mainly by monitoring and enforcing ceasefires, the peacekeeping missions of the 1990s saw Canadian troops deployed in complex ethnic conflicts taking place across fragile or “failed” states, where traditional peacekeeping efforts struggled to prevent bloodshed.

Beginning in 1997, Canada began a gradual retreat from UN peacekeeping, going from a top-ten position to a 30th–35th position in the early 2000s, and even further to 59th by 2007 — fielding only 141 uniformed peacekeepers (Dorn 2007). By 2015, this was down to 116, and 27 as of today.¹ However, Canada’s self-identification with the middle power label has persisted beyond the functional peacekeeping role. As peacekeeping became more costly, more controversial, and less certain to generate valuable returns, a reassessment of the national interest was undertaken (Carroll 2016).

Peacekeepers No More? Diplomat Activism and NATO Operations

Canadian multilateralism in the 1990s was marked by a degree of uncertainty (Kelly 2022, 26). A newly unipolar world demanded a recalibration of diplomatic and strategic posture. This uncertainty, however, did not lead to an erosion of international standing for Canada. In fact, the decade between the Cold War and the War on Terror has been referred to as “the heyday of middle power activism”, with Canada leading the charge in many ways (Haynal 2024). With the fall of the Soviet Union, Canada’s neighbor and closest ally became the undisputed global superpower. The rapidly expanding liberal international order, underwritten by unmatched American military and economic dominance, demanded less in the way of military capabilities for allied states. Canada took advantage and cashed in on its “peace dividend,” withdrawing forces from Europe and slashing defence budgets (Leuprecht and Sokolsky 2015). With less attention on necessary hard power instruments, Canada looked elsewhere to allocate its resources for influence. Here, diplomatic activism around values-based initiatives became an appealing niche.

Concurrently, the US seemed willing to act as a “permissive hegemon”, allowing states like Canada to pursue such activist diplomacy, sometimes even going against certain American preferences. For instance, with the creation of the International Criminal Court, though the US refused to ratify the Rome Statute, it did not prevent other states from doing so (Bayoumi 2026). Towards

¹ Data drawn from UN website: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>

the latter half of the 90s, Canada turned towards the concept of “human security” as an anchor for its foreign policy. Championed by Lloyd Axworthy, it emphasized human security as distinct from state security. Canada was heavily involved across a series of values-based initiatives, disarmament efforts and institution building, such as the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines (Jockel and Sokolsky 2001). Axworthy was also a leading voice in the development of the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine, which was eventually adopted at the UN in 2005.

Despite the emphasis on diplomatic activism and the leveraging of soft power, Canada was still willing and able to commit its limited hard power resources towards advancing the human security agenda — and its own policy objectives — where it was deemed necessary and worthwhile. Canada played a significant role in the 1999 bombing campaign in Yugoslavia under a NATO-led operation. This was part of a broader shift in Canadian military allocation from UN missions to NATO-led operations, which pursued a more modest agenda of “peace support” rather than peacekeeping (Dorn 2007).

The September 11 attacks marked another inflection point, fundamentally changing the international environment yet again. The US, having spent the past decade as an unchallenged and permissive hegemon, began to adopt a more ‘with us or against us’ approach in its War on Terrorism. The Bush Doctrine exhibited a preference to act with unilateral force, and outside UN channels if necessary (Jervis 2013). For instance, the US bypassed the UN and invaded Iraq alongside a coalition of the willing. Though Canada declined to join the US in invading Iraq (citing the lack of a UN mandate as justification), it was an active participant in Afghanistan, dedicating thousands of soldiers to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

21st Century Struggles: Bipartisan Strategic Confusion

Canadian foreign policy throughout the Cold War and first post-Cold War decade, though no doubt lamented by its contemporaries, showed an impressive combination of ambition and adaptability. By recognizing the opportunities, obligations and constraints that defined the international system of the day, and acting accordingly, Canada was able to maintain its international status as a middle power through both a rigid bipolar international system, and an expanding unipolar liberal order. By the early 2000s, however, diverging views on the role for Canada in the world began to foster a sense of inconsistency and a lack of strategic clarity in Canadian foreign policy.

Stephen Harper’s Conservatives (2006-2015) turned away from the traditional peacekeeping legacy, instead framing the notion of Canada as a “courageous warrior” (Correll 2016, 168). Harper’s government pursued more selective, ‘narrow’ multilateralism, extending Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan under NATO, and making limited contributions to NATO’s air campaign against Libya. Simultaneously, Harper expressed growing skepticism towards the UN, often “disparaging global structures” (Gillies and Narine 2020, 259). When Canada lost its bid for a temporary UN Security Council (UNSC) seat in 2010, Harper lamented what he saw as the

unjust need to “please every dictator with a vote at the UN” (Chase 2011).

At the beginning of Justin Trudeau’s tenure, he famously declared Canada to be “back” on the world stage (Copeland 2021). This assertion did not manifest in UN peacekeeping commitments, which saw 26 uniformed personnel deployed at the end of Trudeau’s tenure in 2024. With regards to Canada’s global posture, the newly Liberal government represented primarily a change of tone rather than policy (Coulon 2019, 7; Gillies and Narine 2020; Robertson and Carr 2023, 388). The Trudeau government’s more enthusiastic internationalism did not necessarily translate to tangible gains in influence, as Canada yet again failed to win a 2020 election for a UNSC temporary seat.

Despite differences in partisan rhetoric, both leaders oversaw steady cuts to defense spending as well as foreign affairs and development. Across both administrations, concerns about Canada’s failure to meet NATO spending thresholds remained a recurring issue. Ultimately, the result of conflicting foreign policy messaging paired with relatively consistent policy outcomes produced an outcome that is “the worst of both worlds: a failure to project an image of reliability to other countries and a failure to adapt to novel international circumstances” (Paikin 2021). The world today, meanwhile, is more competitive and less cooperative than any other time in the post-Cold War period. Canada needs to find its footing quickly.

A New International Order: Connectivity and “Unpeace”

The international environment Canada faces today is one of disorder. Over the past decade, the post-Cold War liberal international order has eroded. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the War in Gaza, and most recently, the second Trump administration, have laid bare the failings of rules-based multilateralism, economic integration and international law (Shin, Alden and Higgot 2026). Meanwhile, intensifying great power rivalry between China and the US is further accelerating the fragmentation of global order, as geopolitical competition diffuses across economic, security and technological domains (Schindler et al. 2024). These conditions raise questions about the place of small and medium sized states. Particularly, whether there is still room for middle powers to exercise agency and pursue independent foreign policy agendas amidst sharpening great power competition (Brimmer 2025; Greminger 2026).

For years, some scholars and policymakers have heralded a coming multipolar world, with China, Russia, the EU, and possibly even India considered as great powers (Ashford 2025). However, rather than multipolar balance of power emerging, the US and China clearly remain the two most dominant global forces, with a large gap between these top two powers and the rest of the field (Beckley 2026). Others describe a return to bipolarity — a “new Cold War” between the US and China (Brands and Gaddis 2021; Buzan 2024). Although the US and China are currently engaged in a process of “decoupling,” the process of globalization has resulted in a substantial degree of interdependence. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have expanded such that economies, people, and infrastructure are deeply interconnected across borders.

The current system is therefore not bipolar in the same way as the Cold War system, which was divided into rigidly aligned blocs with limited economic, cultural and political interaction between the respective sides. The system today can be better understood as an era of “fuzzy bifurcation.” This refers to more indistinct and fluid dynamics of alignment, where “traditional categories such as partner, rival, competitor, ally and adversary [are] contingent and contextual” (Higgot and Reich 2022, 634-635). A chronic state of “unpeace” (Leonard 2021) encourages more porous and diffuse boundaries, as states must contend with blurring lines between conflict and cooperation. This could, in theory, provide room for middle powers to maneuver between the dominant powers. But as commentators have noted, the US and China also appear to be tightening their grip on allies, demanding alignment and displaying less openness to middle power activism (Job 2022). Canada, in particular, has felt the pressures of navigating great power rivalry and an increasingly “America First” Southern neighbor (The White House 2025).

Sleeping With an Elephant: Canada’s Predicament

Canada's proximity to the United States has remains both its greatest asset and most glaring vulnerability. In 1969, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once famously told President Richard Nixon, “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” In keeping with this metaphor, Carney noted in his Davos address, Canada was “amongst the first to hear the wake-up call” signaling the predatory turn of American foreign policy. The elephant is waking up, and Canada will feel the consequences sooner and more acutely than most.

Consulted experts consistently returned to the tension between the depth of Canada-US economic and security integration, and the threats to sovereignty that can arise from strategic overdependence. As Prime Minister Carney articulated in his Davos speech, “You cannot live within the lie of mutual benefit through integration, when integration becomes the source of your subordination.” Canada has undoubtedly derived immense benefits from its proximity and relationship to the US. Moreover, the hard realities of geography mean North American cooperation on both economic and security issues will remain imperative. But the nature of the Canada-US relationship, and the relationship between the US and its allies across the globe, has fundamentally shifted.

The US is no longer eager to provide the leadership needed to maintain global stability and collective security. It has transitioned from a once permissive hegemon to a predatory one, using American power to “extract concessions, tribute, and displays of deference from both allies and adversaries, pursuing short-term gains in what it sees as a purely zero-sum world” (Walt 2026). Diplomatic activism that is perceived to go against core American interests is deemed unacceptable. The US political leadership now responds harshly to actions perceived as undermining its authority, among allies and adversaries alike.

Crucially, experts noted that so-called “Trumpism”, as a political and strategic orientation, is

Canada cannot plan its security and foreign policy around the expectation of a return to pre-2016 US reliability.

expected to persist beyond the current administration, reflective of deeper structural shifts in American domestic politics and the international system (Cooley and Nexon 2020). This means that Canada cannot plan its security and foreign policy around the expectation of a return to pre-2016 US reliability. The need to diversify Canada's partnerships and deepen ties beyond the United States is therefore increasingly pressing. This requires Canada to reassess how the practices that have historically supported its influence can be adapted to a less predictable and more constrained international environment.

Conclusion

Canada's middle power status has generally been sustained by a pragmatic but opportunistic approach to statecraft. Canadian diplomats and strategists have continuously evaluated the state and direction of the international system, with the aim of positioning Canada accordingly. The tenets of Canada's middle power posture— functionalism, internationalism and multilateralism — were chiefly informed by “a very hardheaded calculation of national interest” (Gecelovsky 2009; Holmes 1984, 369). These pillars have manifested through and across UN peacekeeping operations, diplomatic activism, and NATO peacemaking operations. Different priorities have been awarded greater focus and resources based on the relevant opportunities and constraints.

This is not to say that Canada's middle power contributions were not beneficial to the international community. Rather, they were not driven purely by altruism or ‘do-goodism’, as has sometimes been implied. Instead, Canada's basic foreign policy objectives have been consistently self-interested (Maclean 2008). Yet that self-interest has often aligned with broader international objectives, including fostering dialogue and diplomacy, reducing tensions, and supporting a more stable global order. As long-standing multilateral institutions fragment and isolationist tendencies gain ground in capitals around the world, it is increasingly important to identify where national and international interests might align. Securing a key role in these strategic niches is essential to middle power statecraft.

Canada's middle power status depends on relevant contributions, sustained capacity, and the ability to adapt to changing international conditions. Diplomacy, institution-building, and

efforts to reduce conflict have offered ways to advance Canadian interests while contributing to wider international stability. These opportunities, however, have depended on the capabilities Canada could bring, the partners it could work with, and the space afforded by the international system. The task today is therefore to draw on these practices while identifying where they can be effective: concentrating resources on credible contributions, building partnerships around compatible interests, and recognizing the constraints created by shifting power relationships. This provides a practical starting point for examining how emerging technologies are reshaping both Canada's vulnerabilities and its opportunities for influence.

03

Emerging Technologies in Global Security

The growing centrality of technology to contemporary state power is reshaping the opportunities and constraints facing Canada and other middle powers (Sullivan 2026). Technological competition among great powers is changing the international security environment, making access to critical technologies, infrastructure, and supply chains increasingly consequential for states' ability to advance their interests and exercise influence. Russia, China, and the United States are investing in a range of emerging military technologies and capabilities, including artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, quantum computing, anti-satellite systems, and cyber capabilities. These developments can disrupt existing security arrangements, while their interaction creates risks that existing governance frameworks may struggle to address. Middle powers must therefore respond both to the grey-zone tactics and conditions of "unpeace" enabled or intensified by technological change, and to great-power competition that shapes their access to critical technologies and their opportunities to exercise influence.

Analyst Javier Borràs (2026) argues that some middle powers, particularly in Asia, including the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, derive strategic influence from their positions within critical technology supply chains, particularly semiconductors and the advanced manufacturing capabilities that underpin artificial intelligence. Their role in these industries enables them not only to resist coercion but also to advance their own strategic interests. According to Borràs (2026), middle powers can exercise influence through three mechanisms: (a) control of chokepoints; (b) diversification capacity; and (c) the development of disruptive technologies. Chokepoints are niche but indispensable nodes within global supply chains. States that control these critical components or production capabilities can increase their resilience to external coercion while also exerting leverage over great powers.

The limits of this influence, however, are illustrated by the case of the Netherlands. Despite hosting ASML, the world's leading manufacturer of advanced lithography systems essential for semiconductor fabrication, the Dutch government ultimately aligned its export controls with U.S. policy following sustained American pressure (Amaro and Kharpal 2023). This demonstrates that

while control over critical technologies can enhance the strategic autonomy of middle powers, it does not eliminate broader geopolitical constraints.

Diversification capacity provides a different source of influence. Middle powers can strengthen their position by becoming attractive alternative locations for investment, production, or technological development, thereby reducing dependence on dominant suppliers or markets. Borràs highlights Singapore as an example, noting its emergence as an alternative financial hub for Chinese firms seeking access to international capital and a more predictable regulatory environment. Singapore itself is an interesting example of a smaller states that has leveraged influence that merits its consideration as a middle power. The third option of developing disruptive technologies themselves has become prominent in discussions in middle power countries aiming for sovereign control of technologies. Part of the challenge is that when it comes to computing power necessary for AI for example, the United States and China control some 90 percent of computing power and employ some 70 percent of the world's leading machine researchers (Winter-Levy and Leicht 2026). Identifying where the middle powers have a niche or where in the supply chain, they can exert more control will become more important as the technologies develop.

Artificial Intelligence as a Hinge Technology

Of all the technologies reshaping global security, artificial intelligence occupies a distinctive position. Workshop experts described AI as a 'hinge technology' — one whose development and deployment shapes the nature of interactions across the entire emerging technology landscape. AI accelerates the development of other technologies, enables new forms of autonomy in weapons systems, transforms cyber capabilities, and introduces novel risks of automated escalation.

The United States has recognized AI's strategic centrality, implementing export controls designed to prevent China and Russia from accessing advanced American AI technology. Taiwan sits at the nexus of this competition as the world's leading producer of advanced semiconductors, the physical infrastructure on which AI supremacy depends. The stakes of this competition are therefore not merely technological but geopolitical, with the semiconductor supply chain functioning as a key instrument of great power rivalry.

In relation to the impact of AI on middle powers, researchers Sean Mullin and Jaxson Khan (2026, 8) highlighted the paradoxical position that Canada finds itself in as a “classic middle power: a rules-follower, a multilateralist, an open economy” and a country that has contributed to this technologies development as the “birthplace of AI”. Yet, “we control neither the major firms that dominate its deployment nor the key infrastructure that powers AI” (Mullin and Khan 2026, 8). Mullin and Khan (2026, 5) recognize that “sovereignty in the AI era means freedom from coercion, not digital isolationism or technological self-sufficiency.” Indeed, Mullin and Khan highlight that no country, not the US or China are self-sufficient in AI. Technological

interdependence then exists across various technological sectors and for all countries, notably important for middle power and smaller powers with less lever to pull than the Great Powers.

Middle powers are therefore faced with a dual challenge: regaining sufficient autonomy to reduce critical dependencies while using national and international governance frameworks to preserve access to the technologies they cannot realistically develop or control independently. Speaking at the Seoul AI Policy Conference on June 16, 2026, Gregory C. Allen outlined three possible models for pursuing AI sovereignty: (1) AI self-sufficiency, (2) reducing dependence on the United States, and (3) assured access. The first model, AI self-sufficiency, most closely resembles China's approach. For most countries, however, and particularly for smaller and middle powers, Allen argued that pursuing full self-sufficiency would be a poor strategy. Attempting to reproduce the entire AI technology stack domestically would make it difficult to remain competitive. The second model focuses more narrowly on reducing dependence on the United States, given its central role in AI development, advanced computing, and the broader technology ecosystem. This approach is closer to European efforts to achieve greater strategic autonomy.

Yet this model also reveals some of the contradictions surrounding the concept of AI sovereignty. Allen noted, somewhat humorously, that one of its most enthusiastic proponents is Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang. The underlying message could be summarized as: if countries want locally trained models and domestic AI infrastructure, Nvidia is ready to sell them the data centres required to build them. Somewhat ironically, another advocate is Michael Kratsios, science and technology advisor in the Trump administration, whose position might similarly be characterized as: "AI sovereignty? You can buy it in America." The larger point is that possessing domestic models or infrastructure does not necessarily eliminate underlying technological dependencies. For Allen, a more realistic model for the Republic of Korea, and potentially for many other middle powers, is assured access. Under this approach, the objective is not technological independence but resilience: ensuring that critical AI capabilities cannot easily be withdrawn and that viable alternatives exist if access is disrupted. This reframes sovereignty away from self-sufficiency and toward the ability to manage dependencies. Allen also identified a complementary objective for ROK: becoming strategically indispensable. ROK already occupies such a position in parts of the semiconductor supply chain. Taiwan dominates advanced logic semiconductor manufacturing, making any major disruption there consequential for the global economy, while ROK plays a similarly important role in memory chips. The strategic task, then, is to identify areas in which a country can develop world-leading capabilities and make itself essential to global technology supply chains.

Even this leverage has limitations as Alonso Muñoz Sanchez (2026) notes in his examination of Taiwan's role in the semiconductor supply chain. Muñoz Sanchez uses Taiwan's central role in the semiconductor supply chain to demonstrate that leverage does not equal independence and that great powers can exert pressure. Instead, Muñoz Sanchez suggests that "States that develop complementary capabilities across structural domains are better positioned to manage asymmetric dependence and resist coercive pressure from either direction" (2026, 6). Rather

than simply focusing on a single domain, expanding across the domain is likely to allow for greater leverage. This provides a useful strategy for middle powers seeking greater room for manoeuvre, but it does not resolve the underlying asymmetry of power. Strategic indispensability may increase the costs of coercion and provide middle powers with additional leverage, yet great powers retain considerable capacity to exert pressure through market access, technology controls, security relationships, and other forms of structural power.

The objective for middle powers, therefore, may be less about overcoming asymmetry than about managing it. This will involve diversifying dependencies, securing alternative sources of access, developing strategically valuable capabilities, and using alliances and institutions to increase the political and economic costs of coercion. This is also why multilateralism should not be abandoned by middle powers, even as traditional multilateral institutions come under strain. Multilateral institutions and arrangements provide another means of organizing collective responses, building coalitions, establishing rules and norms, and increasing the leverage available to states that would have considerably less influence acting alone.

The objective for middle powers, therefore, may be less about overcoming asymmetry than about managing it.

Quantum Computing

Quantum computing represents the second major pillar of technological competition, though its near-term military impacts remain uncertain. Despite unclear timelines for when applications will be ready, the international race for quantum supremacy is already underway (Momani and Mosca 2026). The United States currently leads in quantum development, with China not far behind. Bilateral cooperation between the US and Japan since 2019 and the inclusion of quantum technologies as the second pillar of the AUKUS agreement, the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, reflect the strategic significance accorded to this technology by major Western partners (Vucetic 2023).

Researchers and analysts highlight that when quantum computing reaches operational maturity, its impacts on communications, cryptography, and intelligence gathering could be transformative. Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems could be fundamentally affected. Analysts warn that countries that fail to develop

quantum-resistant cryptography in advance of this transition risk significant vulnerabilities in their communications infrastructure.

Canada has particularly decided to prioritize investment in quantum computing. Michael Murphy and Claire Parsons (2024) point to several quantum strategies released by the Department of National Defence/Canadian Armed Forces as centering quantum technologies to Canada's future defence and prosperity. Notably, Murphy and Parsons (2024, 265) highlight that one of the key propositions underpinning Canada's quantum strategies is the belief that "Canada has an opportunity to capitalize on existing domestic expertise to take a leading role in the development of quantum science and technology, beyond its middle power status." Interestingly, Murphy and Parsons find that Canada's quantum strategies have become increasingly securitized, with greater attention to the threats posed by quantum technologies than to wider political, ethical, and societal questions. This emphasis, alongside ambitions to leverage Canada's existing technological strengths, suggests a growing focus on building domestic capacity and reducing strategic dependence in quantum technologies.

At the same time, as Kirsten Csenkey (2026) notes, Canada has largely promoted a "ties over tensions" approach to middle-power cooperation on quantum technologies. Csenkey argues that Canada frames such cooperation in terms of mutually beneficial economic prosperity, while enabling participating states to use their capabilities and networks to shape narratives around emerging technologies and offer alternatives to those dominated by great powers. She further argues that Canadian middle-power leadership should not preclude cooperation with smaller states. The simultaneous pursuit of greater technological autonomy and deeper cooperation then points to an important tension in middle-power strategies. Cooperation can help states diversify dependencies and reduce their vulnerability to great-power pressure, but participating states are also seeking to strengthen their own technological capabilities and strategic positions. These objectives may be complementary in some areas but competitive in others. The challenge for these states then will be to determine whether their respective interests and capabilities are sufficiently complementary to make cooperation durable and where national ambitions are likely to place limits on it.

Cyber Competition and Grey Zone Conflict

Cyber competition illustrates how technological change is reshaping the conditions under which middle powers pursue security and exercise influence. Strategic competition increasingly unfolds through persistent activities below the threshold of armed conflict (Harknett and Smeets 2022). When combined with AI capabilities, cyber-attacks pose challenges to societies that extend well beyond traditional military domains, with the potential to impact critical infrastructure, early-warning systems, and command-and-control networks. Advances in quantum computing have raised concerns about potential breaking of cryptography and broader security of digital infrastructure and cloud computing (Baseri, Chouhan and Ghorbani 2026).

Cyberspace has been described as a shifting domain where triadic competition, between democracies, authoritarian regimes and big tech companies (Komiya 2025). The role of tech companies is akin to that of AI technologies where the commercial actors are key players in the development of technology as well as control of the infrastructure. The low cost of cyber operations relative to conventional military capabilities has a democratising effect on conflict: smaller states and non-state actors can act as disruptors at a fraction of the cost of conventional military power. This dynamic expands the scope of what constitutes 'grey zone' conflict — the space between peace and declared war where most strategic competition now occurs — and increases the risk of escalation through miscalculation (Belo 2019). For Canada, responding to these conditions of “unpeace” requires attention to two connected dimensions of global cybersecurity: diplomatic efforts to establish shared expectations for responsible state behaviour, and national and allied capabilities to prevent, disrupt, and respond to threats.

The diplomatic dimension centres on developing and implementing a framework for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. The United Nations Open-Ended Working Group process and the subsequent Global Mechanism on ICTs in the Context of International Security provide a foundation for sustained international engagement. For Canada and other middle powers, priorities include advancing understandings of how international law applies to cyber activities, supporting confidence-building measures, and strengthening the capacity of states to protect their digital systems. These efforts also create opportunities for dialogue beyond established alliances, including with states whose security interests and interpretations of acceptable behaviour differ. The operational dimension concerns how states protect their systems and counter threats in practice. Canada's Communications Security Establishment conducts defensive and active cyber operations, including actions to disrupt foreign threat capabilities. The Canadian Armed Forces Cyber Command leads military cyber operations and contributes to international exercises, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building with partners. These activities connect domestic security requirements with cooperation through NATO, Five Eyes, and other defence relationships.

Debates about forward and active defence reflect an emphasis on addressing threats before they produce harm, potentially through action beyond a state's own networks. These terms should not be treated as interchangeable doctrines or as substitutes for the specific mandates governing Canadian operations. They nevertheless raise a common strategic question: how can states disrupt malicious activity while managing the risks of misinterpretation, unintended effects, and escalation? For Canada, operational effectiveness must be considered alongside the implications for diplomatic relationships and the standards of behaviour it advocates internationally.

Coordinated public attribution provides one connection between these diplomatic and operational approaches (Baram 2026). Canada and its partners have jointly identified actors responsible for malicious cyber campaigns, drawing on technical assessments to support public statements and coordinated responses. Such actions can expose behaviour and signal shared expectations, although their deterrent effect should not be assumed. Their credibility depends on

the strength of the assessment and the consistency of the response.

For middle powers, the challenge is to connect these approaches coherently. Diplomatic commitments need practical implementation, while operational choices should remain consistent with the international rules and norms states seek to uphold. Canada's technological dependencies add another consideration: allied cooperation can expand access to intelligence and capabilities while creating reliance on partners' infrastructure, assessments, and priorities. A credible cyber strategy therefore requires domestic resilience, the capacity to assess threats and choose responses, and sustained engagement in both alliance operations and broader international diplomacy.

Nuclear Crisis Management in a New Technological Environment

The interaction between emerging technologies and nuclear weapons presents a different but related challenge. AI, cyber capabilities, and advances in missile and sensing technologies can affect how states assess threats, communicate intentions, and make decisions during crises. For middle powers, the concern extends beyond acquiring or accessing these technologies, a consideration that has emerged in several states including Germany and Canada, to managing security consequences arising from decisions over which they may have limited influence.

Several potential pathways deserve attention. Cyber interference with early-warning or communications systems could undermine confidence in the information available to decision-makers. Faster or less predictable delivery systems could complicate threat assessment and place additional pressure on decision timelines. AI-enabled analysis and decision support may help process information, but could also introduce errors, obscure uncertainty, or encourage unwarranted confidence in recommendations. These developments do not make escalation inevitable. Their effects depend on doctrine, organizational practices, system reliability, and the opportunities available for human assessment and intervention.

The governance challenge is therefore partly one of preserving judgment under pressure. During a crisis, decision-makers must be able to question information, consider alternative explanations, and communicate in ways that reduce the risk of miscalculation. Technological systems should be assessed for how they support these functions, including under degraded or unexpected conditions. Claims of greater speed or precision alone are insufficient grounds for assuming an improvement in strategic stability. Consider, for example, that automated systems can operate at speeds that exceed human decision-making capacity. In crisis scenarios, this creates a genuine risk that escalation could occur faster than humans can assess developments and intervene to reverse course. Research by Joshua Schwartz and Michael Horowitz (2026) adds another concerning dimension: they find that nuclear threats implemented through automation were perceived as more credible and made respondents more willing to back down. This potential coercive advantage could itself create dangerous incentives. As Schwartz and Horowitz warn, "states may be tempted to create automated nuclear launch systems to more effectively coerce

adversaries.” Wargaming exercises have demonstrated that AI systems are less skilled at de-escalation than human decision-makers, and that their reliance on training data creates risks of both bias and catastrophic misinterpretation of novel situations. Without meaningful human control mechanisms, the consequences could be severe.

For Canada, these issues connect emerging technologies, long-standing security challenges and alliance participation with a broader interest in nuclear risk reduction. Engagement with allies provides opportunities to raise questions about the integration of emerging technologies into military systems and the implications for escalation. Diplomatic initiatives, research cooperation, and confidence-building measures can also support dialogue among states with differing security interests. Cooperation solely among like-minded partners has limits when reducing risk requires communication with potential adversaries. The implications for middle-power statecraft are significant. Canada cannot independently determine the technological choices or nuclear doctrines of great powers, but it can contribute expertise, support risk-reduction initiatives, and work through alliances and multilateral institutions to advance practical safeguards. As with cyber competition, security depends on both national preparedness and efforts to manage the wider international environment. These challenges reinforce the need to connect technological development and defence planning with sustained diplomacy.

04

Comparative Insights from Like-minded States

Canada as discussed above is hardly alone as a middle power in navigating the technological and geopolitical shifts. As such, an overview of emerging technology strategies adopted by like-minded middle powers is useful for both comparison and potential lessons that can be learned. The Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, Australia, Sweden, and Japan are useful comparative cases as these countries offer differences in geography, industrial capacity, institutional access, and threat perception. While each faces a distinct strategic context, several common patterns, and instructive divergences, emerge that carry direct implications for Canadian strategy. The following cases examine how these states combine domestic capability development, international partnerships, and technology governance, and what the resulting opportunities and constraints suggest for Canada.

The Netherlands: Diplomatic Initiative and Technological Expertise

The Netherlands illustrates how a middle power can create opportunities for influence by connecting technological expertise with diplomatic initiative. Alongside investment in emerging capabilities, it has sought to shape international discussions about their development and use. Its engagement on military AI is particularly instructive. Through the Responsible AI in the Military Domain (REAIM) process, pursued alongside the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands has invested

in bringing states, researchers, industry, and civil society together around an emerging security and governance challenge.

An important feature of this approach is the involvement of universities and researchers in discussions on military AI and AI more broadly. Their participation connects technical expertise and research on political, legal, and ethical implications with diplomatic and military perspectives. These relationships provide a foundation for engagement across national policy discussions, international forums, and research networks. The Dutch approach demonstrates an ability to recognize emerging opportunities and mobilize expertise and diplomatic resources around them.

At the same time, as noted earlier, the Netherlands' position in the semiconductor supply chain illustrates both the importance and the limits of middle power leverage. Through ASML's advanced lithography systems, the country occupies a strategically important position in a technology ecosystem central to great-power competition. Yet the Dutch government's alignment with US semiconductor export restrictions following American pressure demonstrates that such a position does not insulate a state from wider geopolitical constraints (Amaro and Kharpal 2023). Technological importance can strengthen a country's bargaining position, significantly in this case, without allowing it to fully determine outcomes independently.

These constraints do not diminish the value of developing technological strengths or investing in diplomacy. They clarify what such a strategy can reasonably achieve: greater opportunities to shape agendas, build partnerships, and influence decisions within an unequal international system. The Dutch experience also suggests the value of cultivating several sources of influence, combining industrial capabilities with research expertise and sustained diplomatic engagement. The Netherlands' 2024 National Technology Strategy also illustrates a selective approach to building technological capacity. It identifies ten priority technologies based on existing capabilities and areas of specialization, with a roadmap developed for each (Shivakumar et al. 2025).

For Canada, the lesson is the Netherlands' agility in recognizing the wider strategic potential of emerging technologies and organizing its institutions to pursue it. Canada possesses relevant scientific strengths and international relationships, but converting these into influence requires timely initiative, meaningful involvement of researchers and practitioners, and sustained diplomatic capacity. The objective is to expand Canada's options and ability to contribute while remaining attentive to the dependencies and power relationships that constrain its choices.

The Republic of Korea: Technological Capacity and Strategic Adaptation

The Republic of Korea demonstrates how technological strengths, security pressures, and governance ambitions can produce both opportunities and challenges for middle power strategy. Its 2024 cybersecurity strategy marked a shift toward a more proactive posture, emphasizing the detection and disruption of threats, public attribution, and cooperation with partners. However, Pytlak, Go, and Kim (2026) describe an evolving policy environment in which the continuation

of this approach must be considered alongside growing attention to domestic resilience, data protection, and corporate accountability. The case therefore illustrates the need to adapt security policy to changing threats and political priorities. This shift also reflects the elevated threat environment on the Korean Peninsula and ROK's deepening alignment with the United States, and its role as a “strategic hub for Indo-Pacific security” (Bae and Kim 2025).

The central issue is how to reconcile these objectives across institutions while responding to technological and geopolitical change.

The ROK has also pursued diplomatic engagement on emerging technologies. Its leadership alongside the Netherlands in the REAIM summit process illustrates how a technologically capable state can contribute to international discussions about the conditions governing military innovation. Its companies' position in semiconductor supply chains provides a further source of strategic significance, although industrial importance and diplomatic influence should not be assumed to translate automatically into one another. On wider AI use, the ROK has implemented a policy model that allows industry to lead innovation while the public sector focuses on safety frameworks (Bae and Kim 2025). The relationship between innovation, safety, and national security remains a challenge. Studies of ROK's AI governance identify tensions among policy objectives and overlapping approaches to regulation and industrial development (Park, Cho, and Lim 2024). Bae and Kim (2025) similarly identify challenges in connecting AI policy with national security requirements. The central issue is how to reconcile these objectives across institutions while responding to technological and geopolitical change.

For Canada, ROK offers lessons in both the opportunities created by technological capacity and the coordination required to use it effectively. Industrial strengths and participation in international governance can reinforce one another, but they require deliberate connections across domestic policy, security planning, and diplomacy. The need for strategic adaptation also cautions against treating any announced policy as a settled or complete national model.

Australia: Alliance Integration and Strategic Dependence

Australia's strategic calculus is shaped by its position in the Indo-Pacific and concerns about US—China competition. The AUKUS partnership, encompassing nuclear-powered submarine capability and a second pillar focused on advanced technologies including AI and quantum

computing, represents a decision to deepen integration with American and British defence capabilities in response to China's growing regional power.

Sam Roggeveen (2025), however, argues that AUKUS marks a shift away from self-reliance towards greater dependence on the United States. In his assessment, this integration risks narrowing Australia's ability to develop an independent response to changing strategic conditions. Closer alignment could also increase Australia's exposure to conflict with China, raising questions about whether the arrangement strengthens Australian security or draws the country more deeply into US—China rivalry.

Australia's approach is not directly transferable to Canada, given their different geographic and security contexts. It nevertheless highlights a consequential dilemma for middle powers: deeper alliance integration can provide access to advanced capabilities while constraining the choices available about their development and use. For Canada, the lesson is to assess partnerships against both the capabilities they provide and the dependencies, obligations, and risks they create. These arrangements should support Canadian-defined security objectives and preserve the ability to assess when allied priorities align with national interests, and when they diverge.

Sweden and Japan: Adapting Security Relationships

Sweden and Japan provide further illustrations of how states adapt their security relationships and use cooperation and alliances to support national objectives. Sweden's accession to NATO in 2024 represents a significant reassessment of the institutional arrangements through which it pursues security. As Aggestam and Hyde-Price (2025) argue, external pressures created an opening for change, but the decision also depended on shifts in Sweden's understanding of its international role and strategic culture, alongside political leadership during a crisis. Sweden's experience illustrates how strategic adaptation depends on both changing international conditions and the domestic capacity to reconsider established approaches.

For Canada, this experience underscores the importance of examining how assumptions about its international role shape responses to a changing security environment. In emerging technology policy, adaptation involves connecting national expertise and capability development to allied planning, interoperability, and shared requirements, while assessing where Canadian priorities require additional partnerships or domestic investment. Alliance membership provides opportunities for cooperation, but technological readiness and influence depend on the capabilities and expertise a country can contribute.

Japan illustrates how bilateral technology cooperation can form part of a broader network of international engagement (Komiyama 2025). Its cooperation with the United States in cyber, AI and quantum research sits alongside participation in regional and multilateral institutions. These relationships provide different channels for accessing technology, developing capabilities, and contributing to discussions about technology and security.

For Canada, Japan's approach suggests that deep cooperation with a principal ally can coexist with efforts to develop a wider network of partnerships. The strategic value of these relationships depends on what they enable Canada to do: address capability gaps, reduce particular vulnerabilities, or participate more effectively in shaping shared priorities and rules. Additional partnerships expand Canada's options when they provide complementary capabilities, viable alternatives, or opportunities to influence decisions. Their value depends on a clear purpose and the capacity to sustain meaningful cooperation.

Common thread: Taken together, these cases illustrate different combinations of domestic capability development, alliance integration, and international governance engagement. They suggest that technological strengths can expand a state's options, but their strategic value depends on the partnerships and institutional arrangements through which they are deployed. Cooperation can improve access and resilience while also creating dependencies and constraints. For Canada, the lesson is to identify which combination of capabilities and relationships best serves its objectives, assess the trade-offs involved, and sustain the resources needed to make those choices credible. The cases provide possible pathways rather than evidence of a single model of successful middle power strategy.

05

Recommendations

Canada needs a strategic approach that connects its international ambitions with the capabilities, institutions, and partnerships required to pursue them. The following five pathways address the report's core policy questions concerning middle-power influence, international engagement, resource constraints, emerging technology strategy, and regulation. They are mutually reinforcing: investments in technology will yield limited strategic benefit without diplomatic capacity, while international leadership requires credible domestic capabilities and governance.

1. Define national priorities and credible contributions

Canada should articulate a national interest framework that establishes what it seeks to protect, where it intends to contribute internationally, and which capabilities those contributions require. Maintaining important relationships remains essential, but relationship management alone cannot determine Canada's strategic direction. The framework should guide choices among competing priorities rather than produce another expansive list of ambitions. It should identify where Canadian interests are most exposed, where Canada possesses relevant strengths, and where sustained action could make a meaningful difference.

Priority actions include:

- Identify a limited set of strategic objectives linking Canadian security and prosperity with international stability and cooperation.
- Assess proposed leadership roles against national interests, available capabilities, partner needs, and the resources required for sustained engagement.
- Establish periodic reviews so that priorities can adapt to technological developments, changing dependencies, and geopolitical shifts.

2. Integrate defence, diplomacy, technology, and economic policy

Canada should develop an integrated emerging technology strategy connecting domestic capability development with defence requirements, economic resilience, and international governance. This requires coordination across DND, CAF, Global Affairs Canada, and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, with clear responsibility for implementation. The strategy should recognize that contemporary security challenges extend beyond conventional military threats. Cyber operations, information manipulation, economic coercion, and disruptions to technological access cannot be addressed through defence capability alone. Diplomatic and regulatory capacity must develop alongside military and industrial investment.

Priority actions include:

- Establish shared objectives, departmental responsibilities, and resourcing commitments across defence, foreign, technology, and industrial policy.
- Strengthen strategic foresight and scenario analysis to examine how developments in one domain could create vulnerabilities or opportunities in others.
- Resource diplomatic and technical expertise needed to negotiate technology arrangements, participate in standard-setting, and sustain international partnerships.

3. Manage critical technological dependencies

Canada should approach technological sovereignty as the capacity to maintain essential functions and make consequential choices under external pressure. The goal should be to manage dependence, not to reproduce every part of the technology ecosystem domestically. Different dependencies require different responses. Some may justify domestic capability development; others are better addressed through diversified suppliers, trusted partnerships, or

arrangements that improve continuity of access. Domestic ownership or location should not, by itself, be treated as proof that a capability is free from external dependencies.

Priority actions include:

- Map critical dependencies in digital infrastructure, computing, communications, and technology supply chains, assessing the consequences of disrupted access.
- Pursue assured-access arrangements and alternative sources of supply with partners, supported by contingency plans for critical service disruptions.
- Invest selectively in domestic capabilities where disruption would carry unacceptable consequences and viable alternatives are insufficient.

4. Concentrate investment where Canada can create strategic value

Canada should focus resources where its scientific expertise, industrial potential, and security needs intersect. Strength in research is an important starting point, but influence depends on the ability to translate that strength into usable capabilities, durable partnerships, and informed participation in governance. The report's comparative cases illustrate different ways to create such value, rather than a single model Canada should replicate. Canada should assess where it can contribute capabilities that partners need, strengthen its own resilience, and sustain expertise over time. Strategic value may arise from specialized contributions rather than leadership across an entire technological field.

Priority actions include:

- Select priority areas within AI, quantum, cyber, and related technologies based on demonstrated strengths, operational relevance, and opportunities for complementary cooperation.
- Improve connections among research institutions, industry, government, and defence procurement so that promising technologies can be evaluated, adapted, and deployed responsibly.
- Support bounded experimentation with clear evaluation criteria, allowing unsuccessful initiatives to inform subsequent decisions without weakening safety or accountability requirements.

5. Build complementary partnerships and shape international rules

Canada should pursue flexible, issue-specific partnerships while maintaining investment in broader multilateral institutions. Cooperation among middle powers can expand options, but shared status does not guarantee compatible interests. Partnerships should be selected according to their purpose, the capabilities participants bring, and the constraints created by existing security and technological relationships. Technology governance should be treated as a practical component of security policy. Rules, standards, and confidence-building measures can help manage uncertainty, reduce escalation risks, and support cooperation. Canada's credibility in advancing these measures will depend partly on the consistency of its domestic policies and practices.

Priority actions include:

- Develop targeted partnerships with countries such as the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Sweden, and Australia around complementary capabilities, research, resilience, and governance.
- Use NATO, bilateral relationships, and smaller coalitions for practical cooperation while sustaining UN engagement and dialogue with a wider range of states.
- Advance responsible military AI governance, including meaningful human control over AI-enabled weapons systems and measures to improve transparency and reduce misunderstanding.
- Connect international advocacy with domestic implementation so that Canada can contribute practical experience as well as diplomatic proposals.

Progress should be assessed by whether these pathways reduce critical vulnerabilities, produce capabilities Canada and its partners can use, and strengthen Canada's ability to shape decisions affecting its security. The measure of success is not recognition as a middle power, but a demonstrated capacity to act effectively within—and help improve—a constrained international environment.

06

Conclusion

Emerging technologies are reshaping Canada's security, its dependencies, and its opportunities for influence. Decisions about their development, use, and governance are being made through national policies, alliance cooperation, international negotiations, and state practice. Canada has an opportunity to shape these decisions, but doing so requires clearer priorities and sustained

investment in the capabilities and relationships that make its contributions credible.

This report points to relevant Canadian strengths: scientific expertise, extensive international networks, and experience in arms control and multilateral diplomacy. The challenge is to connect these assets more deliberately across defence, diplomacy, technology, and economic policy. The comparative cases illustrate several pathways, including technological specialization, diplomatic initiative, and cooperation that links national capabilities to shared priorities. They also demonstrate the constraints: expertise does not eliminate dependence, alliance integration brings obligations, and partnerships require resources and sustained attention.

As Gotlieb (2005) observed, Canadian foreign policy has long navigated tensions between advancing national interests and pursuing a wider international role. Today's conditions require a practical understanding of how these objectives can reinforce one another. Credible defence capabilities, efforts to reduce technological vulnerabilities, and investment in diplomacy all contribute to Canadian security. As Regehr and Roche (2025) emphasize there is also a need to invest in diplomacy, development, and peacebuilding as foundations of durable security. Cooperation on rules and institutions can help manage escalation and preserve space for collective action, including where interests diverge.

The task is to identify where Canada can make consequential contributions, sustain the capacity to deliver them, and work with partners whose capabilities and interests support those objectives. This includes the ability to address disagreements with established allies and assess the dependencies that new partnerships may create. Influence will remain uneven and constrained, but purposeful engagement can expand Canada's options and help shape the conditions under which it pursues its interests.

Canada's middle power role will be defined by these choices. Connecting technological strengths with diplomatic capacity and credible security contributions offers a practical basis for protecting Canadian interests while supporting a more stable and just international order.

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Appendix A: Summary of Workshop Findings

The expert roundtable hosted in Ottawa in November 2025 generated a rich body of analysis that contributed to the findings from the literature review and expert consultations. The following summarizes the key themes, trends, and challenges identified by workshop participants.

Key Themes

The ambiguity of middle power status was a recurrent theme. Participants reinforced that middle power today is better defined by behaviour and role than category, and that Canada's behaviour has not kept pace with its ambitions. Several participants made the pointed observation that Canada is accepted at allied tables based on past performance rather than current contributions. This gap between reputation and reality is not merely symbolic; it translates into diminishing influence in the forums that matter most.

The liberal international order was characterized as a historical anomaly, a carefully constructed architecture that required decades of active effort to build and that is not self-sustaining. Unilateralism and transactional power politics are historically more common, and Canada's foreign policy assumptions must be updated to reflect this reality. Canada's current approach is reactive, oriented toward risk management rather than opportunity creation. Participants argued that Canada must be willing to invest in strategic failure, to try things that do not work, as the price of genuine innovation. The Borealis AI initiative was cited as one example of Canada attempting to leverage its scientific base, though whether it translates into durable strategic advantage remains to be seen.

Key Trends

- Multilateral rules-based institutions are weakening, and no comparable architecture is emerging to replace them. This is not a temporary disruption but a structural shift.
- Alignment is no longer ideological. Countries practice multi-alignment opportunism, choosing partners issue by issue based on pragmatic interest calculations. Different issues produce different coalitions, layering complexity for middle power strategy.
- Defence budgets are increasing across NATO allies while foreign affairs capacity, including Global Affairs Canada faces cuts. This creates a structural mismatch: growing hard power commitments with diminishing soft power capacity to manage their political context.
- AI is functioning as a hinge technology, shaping the character and pace of development across the entire emerging technology landscape. Its governance implications are correspondingly broad.

- Trumpism as a strategic orientation is expected to outlast the current administration, reflecting deeper structural shifts in American domestic politics. Canada's strategic planning must account for sustained US unpredictability as a baseline condition rather than an aberration.

Key Challenges

- The integration of technology giants into multilateral governance frameworks remains unresolved. Private firms wield unprecedented power over the technologies that are reshaping global security, yet existing governance mechanisms have no effective way of incorporating them.
- Without adequate laws and governance frameworks, the risk of deploying emerging technologies without sufficient ethical safeguards is real and growing. The absence of governance is itself a strategic risk.
- The intersection of technology and defence procurement is a persistent weak point in Canada's defence innovation ecosystem. Structural barriers between industry, government, and military procurement processes slow Canada's ability to field and adapt emerging capabilities.
- Investing in diplomacy and foreign affairs capacity, including adequate resourcing of GAC, lacks domestic political salience. Experts noted that there is little political gain for parliamentarians in advocating for increased foreign affairs spending, creating a structural bias toward under-investment in the very tools that underpin Canadian middle power influence.



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