"NO BETTER FRIEND"

ASSESSING THE 'SPECIAL' NATURE OF THE CANADA-UKRAINE RELATIONSHIP

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In 2014, as the war against Russian-backed insurgents thundered on in eastern Ukraine, the newly elected Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, during a state visit, praised Canada for its support, declaring that Ukraine had "no better friend." The statement gave credence to the widely held view that Canada-Ukraine relations were tight and even exceptional. How could it not be so? The Canada-Ukraine Special Partnership Declaration issued in 1994 – the only diplomatic agreement of its kind between Canada and any other country – served as a lasting foundation for the solid bond between the two.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the friendship was somewhat puzzling. With the conflict in full swing, he asked how was it that Canada demonstrated such interest given the physical distance between the two countries and Ukraine's problematic politics. Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, attributed this interest to the influence of the "rabid" Ukrainian-Canadian diaspora, estimated at 1.2 million strong. Others ascribed it to the electoral clout of Ukrainian Canadians and, more cynically, to the "pandering" of prime ministers in search of ethnic votes. The Ukrainian-Canadian community, of course, is not monolithic but politically pluralist, and the evidence that electoral advantage can be

obtained by catering to ethnic interests is weak. Moreover, Canadian governments, historically, have been skeptical and largely unwilling to invite ethnic participation in the decision-making process for fear of blowback and because of the need to safeguard the prerogatives of state.

That said, the Ukrainian-Canadian community has played a role in strengthening Canada-Ukraine relations. It has served as an important interlocutor, helping to make the case for Ukraine. But that is because the community's interests and the national interest have meshed. This underscores for us the importance of assessing the Canada-Ukraine relationship on its own merits; namely, determining the relationship's significance for Canada in terms of strategic and national interests as well as through the lens of political leadership. No less important is how all these factors combine.

UKRAINE, CANADA, AND GEOPOLITICS

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the resulting shift in global power relations increased the level of insecurity in the international system. It required a response from the global community, and especially the West, on how best to mitigate the potential for disaster and chaos. In the midst of this uncertainty, Canada chose to recognize Ukraine's independence and sovereignty – the first Western country to do so. Effectively, Canada broke with its allies, making it something of an anomaly. The decision was seen as premature in certain circles. Others welcomed it, viewing the decision as part of a wider geopolitical achievement – the end of the Cold War. Either way, the decision established Canada as an important ally of an independent Ukraine.

Without the global shift in power, the Canada-Ukraine relationship could not have been consummated. At the time, however, there was still concern and caution. The government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, for example, sought to frame Ukraine's recognition within the context of Russia's continuing interests. Ukraine's independence, in fact, was

promoted within a regional framework, and Canada fully expected Ukraine to work with Russia in resolving outstanding bilateral issues. Russia continued to exercise influence, and it behooved the Western alliance, including Canada, to tread carefully. The expectation, nonetheless, was that Russia would accept and conform to international norms. The geopolitical change that had occurred was one of historic proportions and there was no turning back. Accordingly, efforts were undertaken to consolidate the power shift by integrating the former Soviet republics within international structures as responsible, sovereign states.

This transformation necessarily meant also that any attempts to reverse the gains would be resisted. In this regard, Ukraine emerged as a keystone in the security and political architecture of Eastern Europe. An independent Ukraine pre-empted the possibility of a revanchist revival and invited the prospect of regional stability and peace. As such, and given the close historical-cultural ties, Canada would provide extensive aid and assistance to strengthen Ukraine's sovereignty. It was also inclined to defend Ukraine's independence as a matter of course in the liberal global order. This would become especially germane in the new millennium, as Russia under Vladimir Putin looked to reassert its regional hegemony and control.

Strategic considerations – the need to advance and defend the liberal international order – compelled Canada to recognize and then assist Ukraine, especially a Ukraine under pressure. However, this does not entirely explain the robustness of Canada's support. Certainly there were strategic chokepoints and political setbacks elsewhere that also obligated Canada to support its friends and allies. Yet, Canada did not act as determinedly in those cases. What was it about Ukraine, then, that made it such a priority, and even a national interest?

VALUES AS A CANADIAN NATIONAL INTEREST

In 2007, reminiscing on his government's 1991 decision to recognize Ukraine's independence, Mulroney spoke of it as part of history's "march to freedom." The Cold War had been a historic struggle. But its end, according to Mulroney, was more than the defeat of an adversary. Rather, the strength of liberal ideas and values, which included the self-determination of nations, had made its end inevitable. A triumphalist account, his description was an expression of the West's ambitions for that part of the world. Even more deeply, it was a statement about Canada's political culture at work.

Promoting the rule of law, pluralism, freedoms, and rights has been a mainstay of Canada's post-Second World War foreign policy. Today these values have become something of a mantra: the "World Needs More Canada." Now as then, they have shaped the content of Canadian foreign policy and even allowed for cross-party consensus to emerge regarding the country's foreign policy goals. Indeed, expanding the zone of democracy, and defending it, have been singular priorities for each and every one of Canada's governments. As values, these too represent a national interest.

This emphasis on promoting values as national interest has placed Canada squarely behind the liberal project in Ukraine. Moreover, because the historical-cultural linkages between them are close, Ukraine has served as a litmus test. How would Canada stand with Ukraine on its path to freedom and democratic renewal, especially when the latter was under threat? At crucial points in Ukraine's transition, Canada has made its position clear. It has pushed and cajoled Ukraine to embrace reforms, especially where these have stalled. It has also come to the defence of Ukraine's independence. But more importantly, Canada has defended Ukraine's democracy in moments of need. During the 2004–05 Orange Revolution, for example, the government of Prime Minister Paul Martin vociferously opposed fraudulent elections in Ukraine and insisted that Russia abandon its efforts at intimidation and manipulation. Years later, Prime Minister Stephen Harper would be

equally unequivocal in his support for the Euromaidan as a civic movement while also demanding that Russia end its occupation of Crimea and aggression in the Donbas.

Whenever Ukraine's security and stability have been at risk, Canada has been a stalwart supporter. More to the point, however, and in keeping with its political culture and values-based foreign policy, Canada has come assertively to the defence of Ukraine's democracy. From independence to the Euromaidan, the motivation has been the same: defending liberal ideas and values. When the stakes for freedom and democracy have been highest, Canada's commitment has increased. Ukraine, in the end, is where Canada's values-based foreign policy has been tested and its interests challenged. It is also here that Canada has invested so much politically and thereby demonstrated its resolve.

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES ON UKRAINE

Of course, support for Ukraine by Canadian governments has differed both in kind and degree. Such differences in part reflect leadership preferences, priorities, and challenges. For the Mulroney government, the issue was how to achieve support for Ukrainian self-determination with the spectre of Quebec secession looming large. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's neoliberal approach would translate into routine albeit vital aid and assistance for Ukraine's state-building efforts and market economy. Paul Martin looked to Canada's initiatives in Ukraine to complement his progressive foreign and domestic policy agendas. Meanwhile, Stephen Harper's commitment was filtered through a populist ideological lens. Each leader's particular focus has helped to define the character of Canada-Ukraine relations in different ways over the years of Ukraine's difficult transition. Nevertheless, all were similarly committed to ensuring that Ukraine would be a fixture in Canada's foreign policy planning and priorities.

As each approach was brought to bear on the Canada-Ukraine relationship, the specific differences in foreign policy engagement were both real and notable, accounting for the

bumps and undulations encountered along the way. Yet the wider environment in which foreign policy was conducted helped moderate these differences. Strategic and underlying political-cultural considerations were especially influential in qualifying and informing the decisions of each leader. These considerations also ensured that the goals set out for the Canada-Ukraine relationship remained consistent and would translate into foreign policy continuity between governments.

This, of course, suggests that although agency matters, leadership operates within limits. It highlights for us the intertwined nature of geopolitics, national interest, and leadership. But it also means that during crises, Canada's leaders would apply a strategic outlook and a values-based foreign policy when framing their responses. This would explain the forceful reaction of Stephen Harper's government to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Harper's admonishment of Putin at the G20 Brisbane conference – "You need to get out of Ukraine" – was personal. His statement, however, was also political, being informed by a strong commitment to both an alliance system and a foreign policy invested in defending freedom and democracy – "batting," as he put it, "for the right side of history." Harper's focus on the global role of US leadership and his understanding of the historical lessons of the Second World War complemented his moral vision and conviction to stand alongside those who defended liberty. In his view, this was not only necessary, but right and just. Demonstrative in this regard was Harper's appearance before a makeshift memorial in Kyiv, just a few short months after the Euromaidan, to honour those who had died defending freedom.

These sacrifices vindicated Canada's commitment to counter Russia's intimidation and aggression. Moreover, the conflict's escalation moved Canada to do even more. While calling on its alliance partners to stand firm, Canada would furnish concrete political and diplomatic support, take the lead on economic sanctions, underwrite observer missions, participate in preparatory multinational military exercises and operations, and provide

substantial non-lethal military assistance and combat training for Ukraine's armed forces. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian-Canadian community would do its bit, privately assisting where it could: purchasing field ambulances and medical equipment, organizing Canadian volunteer physicians and their support staff, while providing humanitarian relief to those fleeing the conflict zones.

Critics of the prime minister derided Harper for abandoning Canada's traditional role as a peacemaker and undermining its reputation as an "honest broker." Such criticisms were misplaced, however, as they disregarded the geopolitical and security dynamics of the crisis while ignoring Canada's role as a champion of democracy. Liberal principles and values had long informed Canada's foreign policy, as did its participation in a Western alliance committed to defending the global liberal order established after 1945. Canada's support for Ukraine fell within this tradition. Accordingly, the Harper government's response differed from those of earlier governments more by degree than by kind.

UNDERSTANDING THE "SPECIAL" IN CANADA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH UKRAINE

Canada's relationship with Ukraine has been described as "special." In many ways it is. The two countries' historical-cultural connections have drawn them closer, and the Ukrainian-Canadian community has interceded with Canada's government and people to ensure that Ukraine is not forgotten. But this has happened only because the community has articulated its interests in terms of values that reverberate with the country's political ethos. To the degree that the community's argument for supporting Ukraine has been accepted over these many years, it is because the issue resonates with Canadians, whose understanding and appreciation arise out of similar, shared values.

Yet, to realize bilateral relations, conditions must be right. Canada is part of an alliance that has sought to advance and defend liberal democracy around the globe. In the contest between liberal and illiberal ideas, Ukraine has stood out as a battleground. Its success as

a democracy also holds within it the promise of change for Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. It is why Canada has expended so much effort to support a range of economic, political, and social reforms in Ukraine despite the miasma and corruption present there. It is also why, out of all countries, defending democracy in Ukraine has been a priority. In this respect, Canada has done much to ensure that Ukraine succeeds. But it also has made plain that without reciprocation on Ukraine's part, there are limits to what Canada is able, and ready, to do.

In keeping with Canada's strategic goals and national interests, and responding to Ukraine's needs, Canada's prime ministers have focused much attention on this country. They have done so in different ways and to different degrees. The response of Stephen Harper, for instance, was exceptional – although this had as much to do with the acuteness of the crisis as with his particular worldview. Still, all of Canada's prime ministers have demonstrated remarkable consistency in their support for Ukraine. This is because strategic considerations – defence of the liberal order – and liberal values – a cornerstone of Canada's foreign policy – together have shaped leadership perspectives, ensuring that Canada's relationship with Ukraine remains strong. This will endure so long as Canada continues to be part of the liberal alliance and Canadians continue to value a liberal peace.

For more on this subject, see:

Bohdan S. Kordan, *Strategic Friends: Canada-Ukraine Relations from Independence to the Euromaidan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).
https://www.mqup.ca/strategic-friends-products-9780773555211.php?page_id=106444&

Bohdan S. Kordan and Mitchell C. G. Dowie, *Canada and the Ukrainian Crisis* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).
https://www.mqup.ca/canada-and-the-ukrainian-crisis-products-9780228001355.php?page_id=106444&