



Prime Minister Stephen Harper is greeted by Oleksandr Turchynov, Acting President of Ukraine, upon his arrival at the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

PMO photo by Jason Ransom

Canada and Ukraine

Lessons for our multicultural country in an age of multilateralism

Drawing upon her background as an international journalist as well as her recent experience as part of Canada's election monitoring mission in Ukraine, Liberal MP Chrystia Freeland explores the nature and extent of Canada's influence in the world.

Chrystia Freeland

One of the biggest foreign policy challenges in the world today is Ukraine's struggle to become a rule-of-law democracy. This is an effort of consequence not just for Ukraine and its trading partners. It matters for the world, too, because Russian President Vladimir Putin has decided that the

Ukrainian struggle poses an existential threat to his regime, and he is prepared to break international law to stop the Ukrainians from succeeding.

We tend to be instinctively suspicious of foreign policy framed in monochromatic moral terms – and we should be. The

world is a complicated place, and no one has a monopoly on virtue. But the fight in Ukraine really is a clash of values.

Ukraine is where Russia, and countries that are watching it, will discover whether irredentism, and the violation of international borders and treaties in its pursuit, is permissible in the 21st century. Ukraine is where Europeans will learn whether their society and their political leadership are strong enough to defend the European idea. And, crucially, Ukraine is where the world will find out whether it is possible for a well-organized and highly-motivated civil society to stand up to kleptocratic authoritarianism.

This last battle is being watched most closely in Russia and will play an essential role in that country's political future. The success of democracy in Ukraine is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the success of democracy in Russia. That matters greatly.

For everyone who believes that Canada has an essential role to play in the world, the good news is that we are making an impact in Ukraine. There is cross-party support for Ukrainian democracy in Ottawa, and that is felt in Kyiv. On two trips to Ukraine this spring, I've been told repeatedly and gratefully that Canada was Ukraine's staunchest ally in the G-7.

When I've come back home, though, I've heard questions about Canada's role in Ukraine that are really questions about our wider role in the world:

- Can middle-power Canada really have a meaningful influence on world affairs?
- Is Canadian foreign policy in countries like Ukraine, which are connected to a large Canadian immigrant community, only about pandering for domestic votes?
- Is a broader national interest served by our policy in countries like Ukraine?

The answers are yes, no, and yes, and exploring why that is so for Canada in Ukraine could be the start of a wider conversation about how our diversity at home can help us in the 21st century to achieve the great Pearsonian mission of punching above our middle weight in the world.

Start with the question of impact. It is surely very Canadian that I heard much more doubt about the efficacy of Canada's voice back home than I did in Ukraine. Modesty is a virtue,

but self-doubt can be a fault. The good news I bring back from Ukraine is that Canada's position was widely known and universally acknowledged to be significant. Of course, Canada doesn't have the power of the United States or of Germany. But Canada still has moral authority in the world and through our membership of the G-7 and NATO. In Kyiv, it was clear this counts. We should be more self-confident about our power in the world, and more conscious of the responsibility that imposes.

Rather than being daunted by the reality that we are not our continent's giant, we should be strategic about leveraging our own welter-weight muscle. Sweden is a valuable example. Carl Bildt, the Swedish foreign minister, has been thoughtful about how his country of less than 10 million can have a voice in the world.

One of his answers has been to develop a deep expertise and strong networks in countries he judged to be strategic to Sweden, and thus to Europe, but which were too small to be at the top of the global foreign policy agenda. That group included

Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, countries to which Mr. Bildt sent his strongest diplomats, and where he himself has been very active. Mr. Bildt's thinking was that when the world's conversation turned to these countries, as he believed it inevitably would, Sweden's long-term investment would pay off in an enhanced role for Stockholm in Brussels and at the UN.

Today, Sweden is reaping the harvest of this long-term approach in Ukraine. Sweden, and Swedish diplomats, are playing a key role in a conflict at the centre of world affairs not because of their country's economic or military might, but thanks to its intellectual capital and long-term vision. Call it knowledge diplomacy.

The post-war world in which Lester Pearson developed his vision for Canada was a uniquely favourable environment for a middle-power which had not been razed by the Second World War. But the 21st century, especially post-2008, provides a lot of opportunity, too.

As Pearson taught us, multilateralism is a particular boon to middle-weight powers, whose global solos risk going on unheard, but whose voice can be magnified by singing in a choir. The good news, as US President Barack Obama argued in his West

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper and John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs, meet with Vadym Prystaiko, Ambassador of Ukraine to Canada, Milan Kollár, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Canada, and other European Ambassadors to discuss the situation in Ukraine. PMO photo by Jason Ransom

Point foreign policy speech this spring, is that, as Asia rises and the US and European middle classes feel economically squeezed, even the world's great powers are setting more store by multilateral institutions. We should, too.

An invaluable resource in that mission is our multiculturalism. Our national talent for living in diverse societies is itself a calling card and an expertise the world is keen for us to export. And the deep knowledge and networks of our diverse communities are a powerful tool, too.

There is sometimes a suspicion, particularly among foreign policy professionals, that politicians who make the connection between constituents at home and policy abroad are just pandering for votes. That can be true.

But, as a Ukrainian-Canadian, I also know that our diverse communities are a source of very rich expertise and connections, and that they can often have a more profound understanding of what is going on in the countries they or their parents come from than do the professors of our finest universities. (I learned this lesson

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at Harvard in the late 1980s, when my grandparents and their peers in northern Alberta were far better forecasters of the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union than my tenured teachers were.)

Multiculturalism at home can help us to understand the world better, and can give Canada an automatic entre and prestige abroad. We are entering a new age of multilateralism. If we are smart about it, multicultural, middle-weight

Canada can have another Pearson moment. ✨

Christia Freeland is the member of parliament for Toronto Centre. She was born in Alberta, and studied at Harvard and Oxford Universities. She began her journalism career as a Ukraine-based stringer for the Financial Times, Washington Post, and The Economist. She later served as managing editor of the Financial Times before moving to Canadian-owned Thomson Reuters as editor-at-large. She is the author of two books, including *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else* (2012).