



“Promises Made, Promises Kept? A Mid-term Trudeau Foreign Policy Report Card,” in *Canada Among Nations 2017: Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy*, eds. Norman Hillmer and Philippe Lagassé (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 31–53, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-73860-4_3 (Page turns indicated thus: [32])

Election promises in Western democracies are notorious for their evanescence. Parties and candidates seeking office invariably try to attract votes by making promises that they believe will resonate with the electorate. Frequently, however, those promises are embraced without a careful consideration of what would happen if the candidate making the promises actually won the election and took power. For that reason, election campaigns cast a long shadow, often shaping (and sometimes mis-shaping) policy once the party that had made the promises comes to power.

The Liberal government of Justin Trudeau came to power in 2015 having spent the election campaign making not only a number of specific foreign policy promises, but also a generalized promise to pursue a very different kind of foreign policy than the Conservative government under Stephen Harper had pursued between 2006 and 2015. Two years on, and halfway through its term, has that promise of change been met? The purpose of this chapter is to provide a mid-term assessment of the Trudeau government’s international policy based on the promises that the Liberals made while in opposition or during the election campaign.

[32]At mid-term, it can be argued that in its first two years in office the Trudeau government was indeed able to forge a different path in global affairs than the Conservatives, but it is a difference primarily of tone. In many areas of policy, inertial forces imposed themselves — not at all surprisingly, given the broader economic and geostrategic structural determinants of Canada’s location in global affairs. Taken as a whole, the specific international policy promises made by the Liberals during the 2015 campaign did not cast a negative shadow. And one election promise that will come back to haunt a future government, Trudeau’s insistence that a Liberal government would not acquire the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II as a possible replacement for Canada’s fleet of CF-18 Hornet jet fighters, was likely put off sufficiently into the future that it will not be an issue in the 2019 election.

Ironically, it is clear that at the Trudeau government’s mid-term that the foreign policy promises that it made during the 2015 election have been almost entirely eclipsed by a phenomenon that was only dimly taking shape in the fall of 2015: the rise of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States. It can also be argued that at mid-term, the defining feature of the Trudeau government’s foreign policy has been its management of the challenges posed by Trump.

The Electoral Context

The foreign policy promises made by the Liberals during the 2015 election campaign cannot be understood unless they are placed in the context of the party’s standing at the outset of the campaign. At dissolution, the Liberals held just 36 of the 308 seats in the 41st Parliament. On 2 August, when the writs were issued for the election on 19 October, the Liberals were in third place in the polls, and well behind not only the official opposition, the New Democratic Party (NDP) under Tom Mulcair, which spent the first half of the campaign in first place, but also the Conservatives under Stephen Harper.

Moreover, Trudeau’s foreign affairs record in the two years that he had been leader of the Liberal Party did not look promising. In particular, two thoughtless off-the-cuff comments about international affairs dogged him. Six months into his leadership, at what was described as a “ladies night” fundraiser,¹ Trudeau was asked which nation he admired most besides Canada. He responded: “There’s a level of

admiration I actually have for China. Their basic dictatorship is actually allowing them to turn [33] their economy around on a dime.”² The comment was widely derided. The NDP, the official opposition, likened him to Sarah Palin, the Republican vice-presidential candidate in 2008 who had a well-established reputation for foolish gaffes. For their part, the Conservatives claimed that the comment showed that Trudeau was “in over his head.”³

The second gaffe came in October 2014. In a “fireside chat” with journalist Don Newman at a Canada 2020 conference, Trudeau was asked about his party’s policy on Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Islamic State in Iraq and al-Shām, or Daesh, its Arabic acronym). Trudeau responded by noting that the Liberals supported the provision of humanitarian aid, but opposed military involvement. But he went on to wonder why the Harper Conservatives refused to focus on humanitarian assistance “rather than ... trying to whip out our CF-18s and show them how big they are.”⁴ Again, he was widely criticized, with Conservative and NDP critics deriding his “childish” and “juvenile” locker-room humour.⁵

Not surprisingly, the Conservatives used the lack of experience revealed by these gaffes as a central theme of their campaign in 2015. The series of attack ads that began airing three months before the writs were issued stressed Trudeau’s lack of experience. They featured a group of interviewers assessing Trudeau’s resume, and wondering if he had the experience to become prime minister. The general conclusion, written in red on his resume by one of the interviewers, was that he was “just not ready” to be prime minister, with another interviewer adding, mockingly, “Nice hair, though.”⁶ While the longer-term impact of these ads on the electors continues to be debated,⁷ the “just not ready” theme appeared to resonate with voters in the first part of the campaign.⁸

However, the 2015 campaign was a long one, at 78 days the longest since 1872, and far longer than the average length of the previous ten campaigns — 45.8 days. By most accounts,⁹ Harper called the election six weeks early in a cynical bid to give the Conservative Party a major advantage over the NDP and the Liberals, since newly revised electoral spending rules favoured the Conservatives, who had raised much more money than the other parties. Indeed, Conservative officials admitted that the long campaign was explicitly designed to “exhaust the other parties’ finances.”¹⁰

But it is clear in retrospect that the longevity of the campaign worked against the Conservatives. Had the election been held forty-five days after the writs were issued — in other words, in the middle of September — polls suggest that there would have been a minority parliament, since Conservatives, [34] Liberals, and the NDP were all polling around 30 percent each at that point. But in the additional 30 days, there was a major reversal of fortune. By voting day, the Liberals had surged to 39.5 percent, the NDP had plunged to 19.7 percent, while the Conservatives had remained at 31.9 per cent.¹¹ The Liberals ended up winning 184 of the 338 seats in the expanded House of Commons, giving the party a commanding majority in the 42nd Parliament.

Promises, Promises

The various foreign policy promises of the Liberal Party during the 2015 campaign can best be gleaned from the formal Liberal platform as well as the statements made at events like the Munk Debate on Foreign Policy, which organized a leaders’ foreign policy debate on 28 September.¹² The published platform devoted just ten pages of their 88-page platform to international policy. While there were promises on immigration, development assistance, trade promotion, and national defence, there was no foreign policy section per se. The closest was a short statement on Canada’s role in global politics. At just 149 words, the Liberal statement on foreign policy was even shorter than the brief 171 words on foreign policy that the Conservative Party had written for the 2005–2006 campaign.¹³ It can thus readily be cited in full:

Canada has a proud tradition of international leadership, from helping to create the United Nations after the Second World War, to the campaign against South African apartheid, to the international treaty to ban landmines.

Unfortunately, under Stephen Harper, our influence and presence on the world stage has steadily diminished. Instead of working with other countries constructively at the United Nations, the

Harper Conservatives have turned their backs on the UN and other multilateral institutions, while also weakening Canada's military, our diplomatic service, and our development programs.

Whether confronting climate change, terrorism and radicalization, or international conflicts, the need for effective Canadian diplomacy has never been greater than it is today.

Our plan will restore Canada as a leader in the world. Not only to provide greater security and economic growth for Canadians, but because Canada can make a real and valuable contribution to a more peaceful and prosperous world.¹⁴

[35] This general promise to restore Canadian leadership in the world was accompanied by a range of other promises. On peace and security, the platform committed a Liberal government to renew Canada's commitment to peacekeeping operations and to allocate resources to the United Nations (UN), particularly on civilian police training and peace operations. On defence, the Liberals committed to maintain current spending levels and to launch a review of defence policy. The platform did, however, embrace three very specific promises. One focused on the replacement for the fleet of CF-18 Hornet jet fighters: "We will not buy the F-35 stealth fighter-bomber." Instead, a Liberal government would "immediately launch an open and transparent competition" to replace the existing CF-18 fleet, but would not allow Lockheed Martin to compete (How it was possible to run an "open" competition while refusing to allow one of the primary competitors to compete was not addressed). The second specific promise related to the Canadian operations in Iraq and Syria against ISIL: a Liberal government would end the combat mission, "refocus Canada's military contribution in the region on the training of local forces, while providing more humanitarian support," and admit 25,000 Syrian refugees immediately. Third, the platform promised to remain "fully committed" to the existing military contributions to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assurance measures in Central and Eastern Europe.

To a consideration of these peace and security promises, and how they fared under the new Liberal government at mid-term, we now turn.

"Canada Is Back"

"To this country's friends all around the world," Justin Trudeau told a Liberal victory rally the day after the election, "many of you have worried that Canada has lost its compassionate and constructive voice in the world over the past ten years. Well, I have a simple message for you: on behalf of 35 million Canadians: We're back."¹⁵ The "Canada is back" meme quickly became the hallmark of the new government's approach to global politics.

The declaration that Canada was "back" in global affairs was a pithy, but loaded, phrase. While only a few remembered that Stephen Harper and the Conservatives had used precisely the same catchphrase when they came to power in 2006,¹⁶ it was designed to signal that the Trudeau government was promising to change course in a number of key foreign policy areas. It signalled an end to Canada's antipathy towards the UN, so much in evidence between 2006 and 2015; there would be no more [36] disparaging it as a "gabfest for dictators."¹⁷ No longer would the government in Ottawa conduct foreign policy by insult: no longer would it "lecture and leave," in former foreign minister Joe Clark's memorable phrase.¹⁸ It signalled an end to what Jeffrey Simpson of the *Globe and Mail* so accurately called "bullhorn diplomacy."¹⁹ Finally, the phrase was intended to signal an end to the relentless cynicism in foreign policy that was so much a mark of the Harper Conservatives, reflected in the efforts to politicize almost every foreign policy issue in an undisguised and unapologetic attempt to maximize their electoral support — and to maximize the skewering of the opposition parties.²⁰

After the election, there was indeed a marked change in tone. Trudeau's approach to participation in the UN climate change Twenty-First Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris in November 2015 was indicative. During the Harper years, the opposition would be routinely excluded from Canadian delegations to global climate change conferences; but then, just to rub it in, the Conservative front bench would take particular delight in criticizing the opposition for not attending these conferences. As prime minister, however, Trudeau chose not to play tit-for-tat with the Conservative opposition. Instead, he invited the opposition parties to join him as part of the delegation to Paris, and even tweeted a picture of

himself surrounded by premiers and three opposition MPs: Ed Fast, the Conservative environment critic, Tom Mulcair, the NDP leader, and Elizabeth May, the leader of the Green Party. The message accompanying the picture would have been unthinkable before 19 October 2015: “To fight climate change, we’re all in this together.”²¹ The same non-partisanship was evident some days later at Toronto airport, when the prime minister welcomed the first planeload of Syrian refugees to Canada. Once again, he invited the opposition to join him, for this was intended to be a *Canadian* welcome, not a partisan affair from which the opposition would be excluded so that the governing party could capture maximum political credit.²²

But the change in tone was accompanied by some changes in policy as the new government moved to implement its election promises.

Canada as Internationalist Peacekeeper

The Liberals had a clear purpose in putting the recommitment to peacekeeping operations at the forefront of its election campaign. They were playing to the strong public support for the idea that Canada is a peacekeeping country, an idea that the Harper Conservative government had [37] supposedly abandoned.²³ Indeed, in 2014, Roland Paris, a professor of international relations at the University of Ottawa, published a widely-cited article that showed conclusively that, despite the efforts of the Harper Conservatives to alter the “Canada as peacekeeper” narrative, “there remains an important reservoir of public support for liberal internationalism.”²⁴ (After the election, Trudeau appointed Paris to serve as his foreign policy adviser for six months.)

To underscore the return to internationalism, Trudeau focused on one of the key markers of Canadian international engagement — a non-permanent UN Security Council seat. Canada had been elected to the Security Council once a decade between the late 1940s and the late 1990s, and had only lost an election twice: in the election for the very first Security Council in January 1946, and in October 2010. The 2010 defeat was in part the result of mismanagement: the Harper government had at first decided not to run, and then changed its mind part way through the long campaign. It was also in part a consequence of the sneering attitude of the Conservatives towards the UN.²⁵ Trudeau wasted little time in seeking a symbolic reset of Canadian policy towards the UN: in March 2016, he announced that Canada would be a candidate for the 2021–22 session of the Security Council.²⁶

Moreover, once in power, the Trudeau government moved to make good its promise to restore Canada as a peacekeeping nation. In August 2016, Harjit Sajjan, the minister of national defence, travelled to five African countries to find an appropriate UN peacekeeping mission to join. The intention was to be able to announce the Canadian decision in September, when a UN Summit on Peacekeeping was taking place in London.²⁷ Mali was the favoured location for the new deployment. But the new deployment never materialized, partly because of the rise of Donald Trump, discussed below, and partly because of another promise that the Liberals had made during the election campaign: a promise to maintain Canada’s commitment to reassurance missions in Eastern Europe.

Central and Eastern Europe

The Liberal platform had promised that “We will remain fully committed to Canada’s existing military contributions in Central and Eastern Europe.”²⁸ Little had been made of this promise during the campaign itself. Canada’s contribution to NATO’s reassurance and deterrence efforts in Central and Eastern Europe had been agreed to by the [38] Conservative government in early 2014 as relations between the Russian Federation and NATO countries deteriorated following the Euromaidan protest movement in Ukraine in late 2013. When the Russian Federation seized Crimea from Ukraine in February 2014 and subsequently incorporated it into the Russian Federation and then launched a military intervention in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, relations deteriorated even further. The nadir came in July 2014, when a Russian SA-11 Buk surface-to-air missile fired from rebel-held territory in the Donbass destroyed a Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777, killing all 298 passengers and crew.

The reaction of Western countries to the events in Ukraine in 2014 included both sanctions, including expelling Russia from the Group of 8 (G8), and military measures. A number of Western states, including Canada, sought to contribute to Ukrainian efforts at self-defence. Under Operation UNIFIER, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) shipped non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine, and in December

2014 signed an agreement for joint military training with the Ukrainian armed forces; the training mission started in September 2015.

Ukraine is not a NATO ally, but the deterioration in relations with Russia spilled into other parts of Central and Eastern Europe, which did affect NATO allies. In April 2014, NATO embraced a series of measures designed to provide reassurance to those members of the alliance, to deter Russia from destabilizing NATO allies in Central and Eastern Europe, and to de-escalate the mounting tensions with Moscow. Over the course of 2014 and 2015, Canada contributed air, naval, and land forces to this reassurance mission. Operation REASSURANCE involved an air task force deployed to the Baltics and Romania; a maritime task force deployed to the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, and the eastern Atlantic Ocean; and a land task force that deployed in exercises across Central and Eastern Europe.

When the Trudeau government took office in November 2015, the Conservative policy was continued. In March 2017, the government extended its military training commitment to Ukraine for a further two years. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Trudeau government decided to ramp up its commitment to the reassurance mission, announcing in July 2016 that Canada would lead a multinational battlegroup in Latvia.²⁹ In June 2017, Enhanced Forward Battlegroup Latvia was stood up, with 450 Canadian forces joined by forces from Albania, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain.

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The Counter-ISIL Promise

When ISIL emerged in Syria and western Iraq in 2013 and launched an offensive in 2014 that resulted in the declaration of a caliphate, the Conservative government joined the US-led multinational Global Coalition against ISIL. In October 2014, the CAF launched Operation IMPACT, which deployed two CF-18s, a CP-140 Aurora, and a CC-150T Polaris air refueller to Kuwait for integration into the Global Coalition's air strikes against ISIL targets. In March 2015, the Harper government not only extended the Canadian mission for a year, but expanded combat operations into Syria. As leader of the Liberal Party, Trudeau had opposed a combat role for Canada in the Counter-ISIL Coalition, arguing that Canada should limit itself to humanitarian contributions only. Although his position attracted considerable opposition within his own party, Trudeau began promising that, if a Liberal government were elected in the October 2015 elections, it would end the CF-18 bombing strikes against ISIL, and would focus on training for what he argued was a "civil war" in Iraq. During the election campaign, he repeated his promise, prompting a pithy response from Harper: "If your policy is humanitarian assistance without military support, all you're doing is dropping aid on dead people."³⁰

Once in power, however, the Trudeau government was faced with considerable pressure to reverse its campaign pledge, particularly after the jihadist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 that killed 130 people. Although ministers tried to assure Canadians that Canada's friends and allies were comfortable with the decision to pull the CF-18s, it was clear that not everyone was happy. Two days after the election, the Kurdish *peshmerga* claimed publicly that the promise was "bad news for us."³¹ And Canada was pointedly excluded from a meeting of allied defence ministers held in Paris on 20 January to discuss the campaign against ISIL.³² There was also considerable domestic opposition, with numerous voices criticizing the government for refusing to back down.³³ Even the normally sympathetic *Toronto Star* pressed Trudeau to be clearer about his anti-ISIL policies, arguing in an editorial on 20 December that "It's time to dispel the fog."

Following the jihadist attacks in Ouagadougou and Jakarta in January 2016 that killed seven Canadians, relatives of two of the victims, Maude Carrier and Yves Carrier, openly criticized Trudeau for his policies on ISIL. Camille Carrier, the mother of Maude and ex-wife of Yves, told [40] media that she was "revolted," "ashamed," and "outraged" that Trudeau was abandoning the fight against ISIL by withdrawing the CF-18s. "Cet homme-là se promène avec une belle petite coupe de cheveux et a toujours des formules vides et convenues," she told TVA, "Il condamne les choses, mais il n'est même pas capable d'aller se battre avec les autres qui appuient les Français" ("He walks around with his nice little haircut and always has empty pat phrases. He condemns things, but he isn't even capable of going to fight with others who are supporting the French").³⁴ And when Trudeau phoned Yves Richard, Maude's husband, to offer condolences, Richard reported to the media that "je lui ai demandé d'arrêter son bla-bla politique"

(“I asked him to stop his political blah-blah-blah”), and then rudely hung up on Trudeau for offering him nothing more than canned platitudes (“une formule tout à fait cassette”).³⁵

Despite the criticism, Trudeau remained unmoved. On 8 February 2016, he held a press conference to announce the withdrawal of the CF-18s. However, the other aircraft were left in place as part of the Counter-ISIL Coalition’s military operations. The number of personnel deployed to the training mission in Iraq was tripled and, in addition, the government committed to participate in a NATO-led training mission in Jordan.³⁶ It should be noted that neither the prime minister nor any other member of his government offered a coherent rationale for withdrawing the CF-18s, either before or after taking office. On the contrary: Trudeau simply avoided the question. For example, Terry Milewski of the CBC’s *Power and Politics* asked Trudeau in June 2015 under what circumstances he would support airstrikes: “If you don’t want to bomb a group as ghastly as ISIS, when would you ever support real military action?” Trudeau quickly dismissed him with the retort: “Terry, that’s a nonsensical question; you know that very well.”³⁷ After the election, in an interview at the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2016, Fareed Zakaria bluntly asked him on CNN about the CF-18 withdrawal: “Why? What’s the logic behind this?” Trudeau chose not to address the question at all; instead he talked at length about Canada’s putative “comparative advantage” in military training.³⁸ (As David Akin, the parliamentary bureau chief for Sun Media, tweeted after the interview, “Trudeau gives Zakaria same logic-free answer on CF-18s he’s given journos and Parliament for weeks.”³⁹) Not even when the withdrawal was formally announced on 8 February was this “logic-free” approach abandoned: the new policy was just announced, with Trudeau making no effort to explain why it was necessary to withdraw the CF-18s.

[41] However, despite the range of opposition, the promise to withdraw from the counter-ISIL combat mission was implemented without any longer-term political damage to the government. By the mid-term, the issue was no longer on the agenda.

Syrian Refugees

The promise to admit twenty-five thousand refugees was central to the Liberal campaign, and the promise appeared in two separate locations in the 2015 platform, as part of the promises on immigration and refugees, and as part of the Liberal policy on countering ISIL.

The refugee crisis had emerged from the uprisings of early 2011 that had blossomed into civil war by early 2012, and had intensified with the rise of ISIL in 2014. By the summer of 2015, the civil war had produced over four million registered refugees, and⁴⁰ the Canadian response under the Conservative government had been limited. In July 2013, the minister of immigration, Jason Kenney, had promised to admit thirteen hundred Syrian refugees by the end of 2014. In January 2015, Kenney’s successor, Chris Alexander, promised that Canada would accept 10,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2017. By the summer of 2015, however, only 2300 hundred refugees had been settled.⁴¹

The Syrian refugee crisis of 2015 was initially not an issue in the Canadian election campaign. On 2 September, however, news outlets around the world published a photograph of the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian boy, drowned on a Turkish beach. The Kurdi family had been trying to flee to Greece from the Syrian civil war when their overloaded inflatable boat capsized; Alan, his mother and his brother drowned. While that powerful image of Alan Kurdi had a transformative impact on the refugee crisis globally, it had particular resonance in Canada when it was discovered that the Kurdis were eventually trying to join Alan’s aunt in Coquitlam, British Columbia.

While the fate of the Kurdi family’s refugee application to Canada became a brief issue, the image of Alan Kurdi had a lasting impact on the campaign. In response to the publication of the photograph, the question of how many Syrian refugees Canada would admit assumed greater salience. Tom Mulcair promised that an NDP government would admit 10,000 refugees. For his part, Harper promised that his government “had plans to do more” for Syrian refugees, though he cautioned that “we can’t lose sight of the fact that refugee resettlement alone cannot, in any part of [42] the world, solve this problem.” He claimed that military action against ISIL, who were causing the refugee crisis, was necessary.⁴²

The Liberals were able to mark themselves off from the other parties on this issue. Since at least 2013, Trudeau had been on the record as supporting a much more open and generous policy towards Syrian refugees,⁴³ and the Liberals had incorporated a promise to admit 25,000 Syrian refugees into their

election platform.⁴⁴ The sudden emergence of this issue allowed the Trudeau campaign to underscore the Liberal commitment to a generous Canadian approach to refugees — and to call out the Conservatives for trying to tweak their Syrian refugee policy in the wake of Alan Kurdi’s death. As Trudeau put it, “you don’t get to suddenly discover compassion in the middle of an election campaign.”⁴⁵ It can be argued that Trudeau’s Syrian refugee promise played an important part in transforming the trajectory of opinion in the last 30 days of the election campaign.

The campaign shifted in the middle of September, when a court ruled that women had the right to wear a niqab while taking the oath of citizenship. This prompted the Conservatives to double down on their antipathy to the niqab, which was accompanied by a promise to introduce a “barbaric cultural practices” snitch line.⁴⁶ Trudeau and NDP Leader Mulcair spoke out against the Conservative tactics. Trudeau criticized Harper for “playing very reckless and dangerous games, pitting Canadians against one another for a narrow political goal.”⁴⁷ Mulcair, for his part, called for tolerance.⁴⁸ It was after this that NDP support drifted downward, particularly in Québec, where Mulcair’s position on the niqab was highly unpopular, while Liberal support rose, not only in Québec, but in Ontario as well. The Syrian promise cemented the Liberals as the tolerant alternative to the Conservatives.

The promise to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees was fulfilled, even if the process of moving so many people to Canada took longer than the Liberals had originally promised, and even if the number was well below what European countries were accepting. For all of the difficulties in meeting the target, this promise was widely considered to be a success.

The F-35 Promise

On 20 September 2015, in the middle of the campaign, Trudeau promised that a Liberal government would not buy the Lockheed Martin F-35 joint strike fighter as a replacement for Canada’s existing fleet of CF-18 Hornets, even though Canada is one of the nine nations involved in the [43] multinational Joint Strike Fighter program. Instead, Trudeau promised to run an “open” competition, although Lockheed Martin would not be allowed to compete in this competition. Canada would buy from “one of the many, lower-priced options that better match Canada’s defence needs,” as the Liberal platform put it.⁴⁹ Moreover, the substantial savings putatively generated by not buying the F-35 would be reallocated to the Royal Canadian Navy.

This promise was embraced for purely electoral reasons; there was no strategic or military rationale. The claim that it would save huge amounts of money was, in a word, false. But the F-35 was deeply connected to the Conservative government, which had badly mismanaged the procurement and politicized the F-35 selection. And partly encouraged by the politicization of the F-35 by the Conservatives, the Liberals had been playing political games with the F-35 procurement well before Trudeau took over the leadership of the party in 2013.⁵⁰

Because Liberal gamesmanship with the F-35 had been so successful in attacking the Conservatives between 2010 and 2012, it was not surprising that Trudeau decided to continue what his predecessors had started. Indeed, he decided to take a leaf directly from the playbook of an earlier Liberal leader. In the middle of the 1993 election campaign, Jean Chrétien, then the leader of the opposition, had promised that a Liberal government would cancel a contract that the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney had signed for a fleet of EH101 maritime and search and rescue helicopters to replace the Sea Kings and Labrador helicopters that had entered service in the early 1960s.

Chrétien was as good as his word: the new Liberal government cancelled the EH101 contract, in a stroke throwing away \$478 million in cancellation fees and paid-for work. The Chrétien government then spent the next decade grappling with the awkward consequences of what had been a casual promise designed to attract votes, spending considerably more on new helicopters than if the original contract had been allowed to stand.⁵¹ However, as a political ploy, it was successful: Chrétien and the Liberals never suffered any political consequences as a result.

When Trudeau was elected in 2015, he moved to make good his F-35 promise. One key part of that promise — not allowing the F-35 to compete in any competition — had to be abandoned after the new cabinet was told that barring the F-35 not only broke a number of Canadian laws, but would expose the government to massive lawsuits. But the other part of the promise — not buying the F-35 — remained in play. So Trudeau tried to [44] do to the F-35 what the Chrétien government had done to the EH101

after 1993: it found numerous ways to torque the selection process to ensure that some other jet fighter — any other jet fighter — would be selected. The prime minister openly disparaged the F-35, telling Parliament that the F-35 “does not work and is a long way from ever working.”⁵²

Over the course of 2016, Minister of National Defence Sajjan, who had been directed by the prime minister to find a way to ensure that the F-35 was not acquired, found just what was needed. In a clever bit of legerdemain, Sajjan determined that the existing fleet of 76 CF-18 Hornets left Canada with what he called a “capability gap” — in other words, there would be too few fighters in the event that Canada were for some reason called on to undertake a range of missions at the same time. Although this “gap” was news to the Royal Canadian Air Force, which was long on the record as requiring only 65 aircraft to fulfill all of Canada’s air missions, the Trudeau government announced in November 2016 that it was going to procure 18 Boeing Super Hornets on a sole-source basis to fly alongside the “legacy” CF-18 Hornets and postpone the replacement decision for the CF-18 fleet for five years.⁵³ However, this plan quickly fell apart when Boeing Co., the manufacturer of the Super Hornet, launched a trade complaint against Bombardier Inc., claiming that Bombardier had dumped its C-series airliner in the U.S. market. In September 2017, Trudeau walked back the Super Hornet plan, promising that Canada “won’t do business with a company that’s busy trying to sue us and put our aerospace workers out of business.”⁵⁴

The mess that Trudeau created with his rash promise in September 2015 will have long-term costs. Just as the Chrétien decision in 1993 increased costs and reduced capability, the Trudeau decision in 2015 will have huge costs for Canadians into the 2020s. If Canada does not acquire the F-35, all those Canadian firms anticipating participation in Lockheed Martin’s global supply chains will be excluded. Finally, Canadian interoperability with the United States and numerous other allies that have chosen the F-35 will be affected.

Trudeau and the Rise of Trump

Any mid-term assessment of Trudeau’s foreign policy must recognize that the long shadow of the 2015 election campaign was in essence eclipsed by the rise of a phenomenon that was only dimly anticipated in Canada in the fall of 2015: the rise of Donald J. Trump. When Trudeau and the Liberals [45] took office in November 2015, Trump had been a formal candidate for four months, and his campaign was already marked by the kind of radical rhetoric and equally radical policy ideas that would in 2016 sweep away 16 other candidates for the Republican presidential nomination and then secure him the presidency of the United States.

There is little doubt that Trump’s election presented the Trudeau government with a major dilemma. For the new US president came to office openly opposing two of the core elements of Canadian foreign policy, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and virtually all of his known positions on a wide range of policy issues promised to negatively affect Canadian interests. Moreover, Trump’s highly idiosyncratic and unpredictable personality posed an unprecedented challenge for all leaders of other states who had to deal with him.

In the event, the third-place leader in 2015 who was widely mocked as being “just not ready” proved more than ready to deal with the challenges of a Trump presidency. For Trudeau moved expeditiously to ensure that Canadian interests were as protected as possible given the unpredictable nature of the new administration in Washington.

First, eschewing the off-the-cuff tendencies that had marked his time in opposition, Trudeau was highly disciplined in his statements about Trump. Even before it was clear that Trump would emerge victorious, Trudeau was cautious. When he was asked in March 2016 about a possible Trump victory, the prime minister responded: “The reality is we will work alongside our neighbors and allies regardless of the political choices that they make. We have too much of our economy that is wrapped up in the United States, too much that we depend on each other for.”⁵⁵ By the time Trump was in the White House, Trudeau had developed a mantra from which he never deviated. Whenever he was asked to criticize Trump, his response was a variant of his response to a question posed to him at a news conference in Calgary in January 2017 about whether he thought that Trump was a misogynist. After a brief pause, Trudeau responded: “It is not the job of a Canadian prime minister to opine on the American electoral process. It is the job of the Canadian prime minister to have a constructive working relationship with the president of the United States and that is exactly what I intend to do.”⁵⁶ He also imposed the same tight

discipline on his caucus, ensuring that he did not have to deal with the kind of anti-American sentiments that so marked the Liberal caucuses of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.⁵⁷

[46] Second, just before the inauguration in Washington, Trudeau shuffled his cabinet. Stéphane Dion, who had been given the foreign affairs portfolio in November 2015, was moved out of the portfolio, and offered an ambassadorship in Europe. In his place, Trudeau appointed the minister of international trade, Chrystia Freeland. There were a number of reasons for the shuffle. Dion, described as an “unlikely diplomat,” was seen by some as not having the “people skills” necessary to deal with the new administration, particularly given Trump’s tendency to take offence.⁵⁸ Chrystia Freeland, by contrast, not only had a good grasp of the trade portfolio that promised to be front and centre in Canadian-American relations under Trump, but had a considerable network of contacts in the United States from her time as a journalist and editor at Reuters and the *Financial Times* in New York City.

Third, Trudeau adopted a broadly strategic approach to the Canada-United States relationship. He brought policy-makers with knowledge and experience, such as Brian Mulroney, into the process. His government deployed Canada’s diplomatic and political assets widely across the American political system, embracing not only Congress, but state and municipal governments in what one observer called the “doughnut strategy” — in other words, working around the “hole” that was the Trump White House.⁵⁹ Trudeau even reached out to Ivanka Trump, the president’s daughter, in what was described as “daughter diplomacy” (prompting John Higginbotham, who was the minister in the Canadian embassy in Washington from 1994 to 2000, to observe, “It is just so *Game of Thrones*”).⁶⁰

Finally, the Trudeau government moved to recalibrate its foreign and defence policies: within months of Trump’s inauguration, the government had put out new policy statements. In early June, Freeland delivered a major address that reaffirmed Canada’s commitment to the liberal international order, and committing Canada to working to uphold that order despite the obvious reluctance of some in the United States to maintain it.⁶¹ Two days later Defence Minister Sajjan released a new defence policy that featured promises of a significant increase in Canadian defence spending.⁶² Sajjan had launched a defence policy review in April 2016, with a new policy statement anticipated by the end of the year. However, the emergence of Trump prompted a major reset in defence policy. Not only was Canada’s search for a new African peacekeeping mission slowed to a complete crawl (and then a standstill), but the new defence review was rewritten to take account of Trump’s highly critical attitudes towards America’s allies.

[47]

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to look at how the Trudeau government managed the key peace and security promises made during the election campaign of 2015. Coming to power with a different tone and approach, the Trudeau government established an important distance from the Harper Conservatives, even if in some cases, such as the assurance missions in Central and Eastern Europe, it just continued the Conservative government’s policies. At least one of its election promises was a major success: the Syrian refugee initiative was popular in Canada and redounded to Canada’s credit internationally. One of its promises that looked problematic at the time, the promise to withdraw from the combat role in Iraq, proved to be quite unproblematic politically and simply dropped from the agenda. And in the one case where a promise will have negative implications in the future — the F-35 promise — the Trudeau government can count itself fortunate that it kicked the CF-18 replacement can sufficiently far down the road that it will not face any significant blowback in the 2019 election. Whatever financial or operational difficulties created by Trudeau’s promise in 2015 will instead haunt whichever party forms government in the early 2020s.

Mid-term assessments are intended to provide a guide for the remainder of the term. But in the case of Trudeau’s foreign policy, any assessment will necessarily be eclipsed by what happens in the remaining two years of the Liberal mandate. Although the government has put in place both the mechanism and the strategic elements for dealing with an unusual presidency, the Trudeau Liberals will likely be judged on how they actually manage the Trump era rather than on how they managed their first

two years in power. As journalist John Ibbitson noted in his own mid-term report card, success or failure on the Canadian-American relationship could well define the Trudeau government.⁶³

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