



## **The Best of Both Worlds: Canada's Normative Transcendent Purpose and Its Decision to Stop Its Airstrikes in the Syrian Civil War**

**Kevin Ali Sesarianto**

Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences  
Universitas Diponegoro

Jalan Prof Soedarto, SH, Tembalang, Semarang, KodePos 1269

Website: <http://fisip.undip.ac.id/> Email: [fisip@undip.ac.id](mailto:fisip@undip.ac.id)

### **ABSTRACT**

*The Syrian Civil War is yet another war in a series thereof in the Arab Spring in which the United States and its allies are involved. However, an anomaly has occurred in the military coalition: Canada has significantly decreased the degree of its involvement by stopping its airstrikes within the Western coalition's campaign. Employing a dual-perspective of classical realism and constructivism, this thesis seeks to find the determining factors to the event using the concepts of transcendent purpose and of norm dynamics. To arrive at the conclusion, this thesis investigates norms projected by Canada in relation to its military alliances, including but not limited to NATO. This thesis finds that, on the one hand, Canada has historically always defended its image by joining military coalitions involving the United States; on the other hand, however, Canada is always reluctant to engage in wars which defy its transcendent purpose, hence the best of both worlds. This thesis concludes that Canada's foreign policy, in line with its transcendent purpose, constitutes of two factors: the Axworthy norms and legitimacy. In the Syrian Civil War, the United States-led coalition lacks both.*

**Keywords:** Canada, Syrian Civil War, transcendent purpose, norm dynamics, Axworthy norms, military alliance

### **Introduction**

The United States of America and its allies advanced towards the fight in 2014. On 10 September 2014, President Barack Obama authorized a direct attack against Syria, which was narrowed to a specific target which was ISIL (Aljazeera 2014). On the other hand, the United States had also been indirectly involved beforehand in the form of supplying non-lethal aid and later ammunitions and intelligence to the insurgent groups (Malone 2016). The joint forces of United States and its allies, including, but not limited to, Canada, was set up under the United States command, essentially making the United States the de facto leader in the operation.

Canada, among others, is a traditional ally of the United States. This is evident on post-Cold War military involvements, within or without NATO, on Canada's part when it is in relation to the United States. Never once has Canada failed to join military coalitions with the United States which span from Kosovo in 1999 (see Davidson 2011) and Afghanistan in 2001 (see Law 2009) to Syria, which is the main focus of this thesis. The term "allies" denotes a different meaning from that of "friends". Historically, as will be discussed in the latter parts of this thesis, Canada's intention to be within an alliance was to protect world peace which was at the beginning of the Cold War the cost of inability and stagnation of the Security Council (Pearson 1949, 371). To go in line with this course of logic, Canada's conception of "allies", therefore, is like-minded states who share the same concern over

world peace. This conception confers a burden to join force with those against the parties threatening peace, such as that in the Syrian Civil War. Moreover, Law (2009: 25) argues that the reason Canada was involved in Afghanistan was that it was to project “military solidarity” with the United States and also to “[pursue] development and reconstruction abroad”. Per the statement, there is hardly any legal obligation for Canada to join any military involvement; rather, it is a normative tendency.

However, anomalies soon appear within the Operation that aims to eliminate ISIL forces from the Syrian soil. Canada, who is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization apart from also being a traditional ally to the United States, withdrew its support to the bombing cause in 2015 due to unstated reason (Mullen 2015). Through Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada has withdrawn completely its fighter jets which, in effect, leaves it to a non-offensive and non-combative involvement (Murphy 2015). To this day, Canada remains involved in a strictly humanitarian capacity. The apparent deference on Canada’s part begs the question of why it did so in the first place. Hereby, the article asks the question: Why did Canada abandon its alliance by discontinuing its airstrikes in the Syrian Civil War?

This article uses a dual perspective of realist constructivism. Military power is, indeed, a form of power. The use of it has been proven effective in gaining dominance in the context of wars; however, following the end of the Cold War, war is a costly advance as stipulated by general norms. Classical realists, aware of and sensitive to norms, simply cannot analyse power based on the quantitative dimension alone, but it has come to incorporate the concept of “soft power”. This form of power is relevant to the inalienable definition of power according to classical realists, who stipulate that power must be bound to norms, as previously argued. Soft power is a “staple of daily democratic politics” which produces foreign policy outcomes which are “legitimate or having moral authority” (Nye 2008, 95). In other words, foreign policy, which aims to maximise power, is to be sensible to the legitimacy of itself.

To clarify the concept of “transcendent purpose”, it is imperative to observe other positivist arguments posited by Morgenthau. In *Politics among Nations* (Morgenthau and Thompson 1997), the realist perspective posited by Morgenthau is laden with ethics. Pin-Fat (2010, 39) argues that Morgenthau’s *Politics among Nations* does not only concern morality, but morality is “central and constitutive of his form of political realism”. International politics is “a moral struggle for the preservation or the extension or the victory of certain moral values” (Morgenthau in Cozette 2008, 671). This concept, therefore, concerns the relative morality embedded in the domestic factors of a state. What is perceived as ethically right in the domestic setting of a state must be extended to and implemented in its foreign policy (Cozette 2008, 671). In other words, foreign policy is the spearhead of a state’s projection of its domestic norms. However, as the proof of this transcendent purpose is difficult to find, it is here that constructivist concepts come to aid.

The incorporation of the concept of norms is a latent problematic in this thesis. As mentioned beforehand, constructivist concept of norms leans to a structural sense or, in other words, the embeddedness of norms in international structure. For example, the logic of appropriateness and the principle of contestedness, two of the most widely-accepted methodologies in the study of norms, only take into account norms as they are in the international structure, not individual states’ domestic norms. Norm dynamics, a principle core to this thesis, indeed, discusses how individual actors may contest existing structural norms, but the end product, yet again, is the status of the structural norms. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 892) argue that norms are embedded in regional bodies are subject to a “life cycle”, hence norm dynamics. It shows that norms are projected by individual states, but the end game is the structural norms, either reified or disrupted by norm challenges.

## Discussion

There are two most fundamental norms which determine Canada's foreign policy, especially in limited interventions to armed conflicts. The first one is legitimacy as mentioned in the last part of Chapter II. Legitimacy is the bedrock for Canada's soft power or, in this case, middle power. As Nye (2008, 96, emphasis added) argues, soft power is a "staple of democratic politics" based on "an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority". Canada's past involvements, as mentioned in Chapter II, have shown the inalienable need for legitimacy on its part; the soft power concept offered by Nye clarifies that such a need is for the purpose of likeability. In other words, it is true that Canada has interest in exporting its norms to, with, and against NATO, but if it lacks legitimacy, which is also a norm, the campaign will destroy itself.

Canada's high regard of legitimacy has been proven over time and it is not an exaggeration to say that this has become its determining domestic norm. One of the most prominent examples is the War in Afghanistan. The use of soft power as a foundation for foreign policy is evident on Canada's involvement in it. Fitzsimmons (2013, 310) argues that Canada chose to be more involved in a marginal capacity in Afghanistan to avoid being too involved in the Iraq War with the United States. In line with Stairs (1995, 13), Canada is always pursuing status, influence, position, and power in its capacity as a "middle" power, which also serves as its transcendent purpose. Following this course of logic, as a middle power, Canada aims to please its most important ally, the United States, while trying to avoid casting a bad light upon its identity as a "nice" state, guided by the set of norms as stated beforehand. As repeated throughout this research, the "middlepowerhood" obtained by Canada carefully guides its foreign policy regarding armed conflicts. Additionally, the term "middle" implies a strict position in which Canada must put itself without veering too much into the two areas of being too powerful and of being too weak. Keeping the identity of a middle power produces a norm with which Canada must comply: on the one hand, to pursue a leadership status through soft power, Canada must be consistent in its approach of peacekeeping and post-war reconstruction (Axworthy 1997, 192); on the other hand, Canada must not be tempted to venture into the affairs of high powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom with their hawkish and ambitious foreign policy, especially if it comes to armed conflicts.

Canada also repeatedly refuses to be actively engaged in military coalitions provided that legitimacy from the Security Council has not been secured. However, the Security Council, although an important source for legitimacy, is not the only one, at least for Canada. The 1999 Kosovo air war is a case similar to the Iraq War; both invasions were not sanctioned by the Security Council. However, the Kosovo air war was approved by the majority of the General Assembly and yet Canada still joined the coalition (Fitzsimmons 2013, 308). It affirms that Canada is not relying solely on the Security Council as a basis for legitimacy although the Council is the powerhouse of NATO influence as it is occupied by France, the United Kingdom, and the United States as permanent members. Interpreted further, Canada's desire for legitimacy is not always from the NATO or the Western world, but from the world in general, subject to NATO as well. The description above reaffirms that Canada's "middlepowerhood" is, indeed, synonymous with the concept of soft power.

Soft power, hence Canada's soft power, depends heavily on other states' perception. As discussed in Chapter I, to easily understand the concept of soft power, Gallarotti (2010, 142) determines that soft power is the quality of being liked by other states or, in other words, likeability. As such, Canada's engagement in seeking legitimacy not only from the Western world but also from the rest of the world through the General Assembly, among other means. Other states' acceptance towards Canada's foreign policy shapes a considerable deal for it.

The previous paragraph reaffirms the relation between Canada's soft power and its perception of middle power. To pursue its status as a middle power, which means to be powerful enough to be more significant than smaller states but less aggressive than great powers, Canada bears in mind the importance of legitimacy to join the ranks of great powers without upsetting the smaller states. However, this only explains the first norm which serves as soft power: legitimacy. The United Nations General Assembly through its resolution 72/191 has brought forward the situation of the humanitarian crisis Syria. The resolution is barely a legitimacy, but it has at least appealed to the second set of norms in Canada which also act as a transcendent purpose: the Axworthy norms.

The second fundamental norm in Canada's foreign policymaking is what this thesis terms the "Axworthy norms". In addition, this norm or, more appropriately, set of norms also act as Canada's transcendent purpose. Unlike soft power, which is a general conception, these Axworthy norms are embedded to Canada's most internal norm sources: its constitution, its foreign policy discourses, and its humanitarian concerns in armed conflicts as well. The name "Axworthy" comes from the second Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada Lloyd Axworthy in his journal article (see Axworthy 1997). Axworthy is the first to summarise Canadian internal norms which underlie its foreign policy and, therefore, is worthy of the honour.

The Constitution of Canada, parts of which are unwritten and uncodified, postulates a wide array of matters, from territorial division to human rights. One of the most important points in this thesis is the Charter of Rights and Freedom. The Charter of Rights and Freedom is arguably a latecomer in the sphere of constitutional politics relative to other states in the West. The Charter obliges Canadian government to, among other things, secure individuals against deprivations of their constitutional interests by third parties, ensure involvement in legislative decision-making, and provide individuals with certain socio-economic entitlements (MacDonnell 2013, 626). The Charter also stipulates an extent of national unity, especially regarding the different cultural facts of Quebec, most of whose population speaks French (Russell 1983, 31). This is relevant in latter parts of this thesis. However, in terms of norms, Russell (1983, 43–44) also argues that the Charter is concerned about the protection of rights and freedoms by imposing the minimum requirement of basic rights: political freedom, religious toleration, due process of law, and social equality. By codifying these values into a parliamentary act of norms, Canada has conferred upon itself a social standing among other Western states. This is true because other Western states who are democratic retain the aforesaid norms. Therefore, even though identity does not concern this chapter, it is true that the conservation of these democratic norms through the Charter of Rights and Freedoms puts Canada within the circle of the democratic states of the West. Consequently, Canada's foreign policies are aligned within those of the states within the circle.

At this point of this chapter, it is known that the Constitution of Canada, especially the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is extremely concerned with human rights. Interestingly, or, perhaps, curiously, Canada's uncodified and mostly unwritten constitution, with its almost insistent commitment to human rights protection, applies to everyone regardless of citizenship (Dauvergne 2012, 306). This discourse of constitutional duty is not translated to passive protection of human rights at home, but is also projected to active human rights protection abroad (Webster 2000, 87). Combined with the conjectures in the previous chapter, it is sufficient to argue that human rights protection in Canada's foreign policy and a perception that Canada must excel in international human rights are embedded within the constitution. This is a groundwork for further arguments in the next sub-chapters.

In addition, the Axworthy norms offer four basic tenets for Canada to reflect on with its foreign policy. Axworthy (1997, 185–191) in his journal article, argues that Canada is trying to advance in four specific aspects, namely (1) peacekeeping to peacebuilding, (2)

removal of anti-personnel landmines, (3) situation of children, and (4) international assistance. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada Lloyd Axworthy also mentions in his journal article that Canada needs to be a leader who exercises rigorous soft power (Axworthy 1997, 192). Furthermore, Axworthy (1997, 193–194) argues that Canada is laden with an exemplary set of values and norms to be promoted through foreign policy in global politics with the help of “like-minded” states. This set of norms reflects the four basic tenets of Canada’s foreign policy as described above. It is also noteworthy that Axworthy has mentioned the use of soft power; following the concept of soft power as described in length in previous chapters, the aforementioned set of norms serves as the anchor point to which Canada’s foreign policy refers in its pursuit of power. In other words, in order to be powerful, Canada must address the four tenets and achieve in accordance therewith. Therefore, even if Canada engages in wars, it will always be guided by the rigid margins which are those four norms.

In sum, Canada’s foreign policy in its involvements in armed conflicts is always guided by two levels of norms: (1) legitimacy, also synonymous to soft power and (2) transcendent purpose, which is explained in detail under the term of the Axworthy norms. The transcendent purpose, in line with Morgenthau’s definition of the term in Chapter I, is the driving force of Canada’s foreign policy in order to be purposeful. In other words, there are two overarching determinants of Canadian foreign policy and both are cumulated through norms. The first one is the soft power determinant, which is legitimacy. The second one is the transcendent purpose determinant, which is the Axworthy norms. This explanation is important for the next part of the chapter.

One of the main dynamics to be discussed is the goal of this invasion against Syria. When Assad came to dominance laden with his consistent killings of civilians using chemical weapons, the Western coalition’s first goal was to eliminate Assad (Uludag 2015, 5). The preliminary evidence of the existence of chemical weapons and the use thereof against civilians was enough for Canada to assemble its armed forces to stop the conduct alongside its allies, led by the United States. This is in line with the “Axworthy norms” of championing in global disarmament projects and international assistance, as it is mentioned in previous parts of this chapter. Additionally, it is worth noting the historical fact which marks Canada’s tenacious efforts to impose the “Canadian article” into the North Atlantic Treaty as discussed in Chapter II. Although NATO is not involved in the Syrian Civil War, Canada’s insistence still reflects its foreign policy priorities regarding wars and it has become, therefore, an inseparable norm which dictates Canada’s foreign policy. As the article is concerned about the humanitarian side of military conducts, the military action to remove Assad can be seen as Canada’s compliance with its own norms regarding humanitarianism, elimination of weapons of mass killings, and international assistance.

In terms of legitimacy, the campaign in Syria has been sanctioned by the United Nations under several United Nations Security Council resolutions. The first among many to be imposed on Syria is the Security Council resolution 2043 which created the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria. Its primary task was to supervise the conditions of the Syrian Civil War which was just brewing at that time. The Security Council resolutions 2118, 2209, 2314, and 2319 gave indication to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, although these resolutions are just observations in conduct and not condemnations. Draft resolutions to condemn and to take action against the use of chemical weapons in Syria have always been vetoed by mostly Russia, China, or both. There are also a number of resolutions which are concerned about the expedient and unhindered transportation of humanitarian aid to the casualties of the war, namely Security Council resolutions 2139, 2332, and 2336. However, the main instrument of legitimacy for Canada’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War is not the Security Council resolutions, but the United Nations General Assembly document 72/191.

The document in question is a resolution which brings forwards the current situations of the Syrian Civil War. The first and foremost to be brought to attention is the use of chemical weapons by the government of Syria and ISIL against civilians and their failure to comply with the Security Council resolutions mentioned beforehand. This is strongly in line with the Axworthy norms of Canada's persistent attempt to dismantle weapons of mass killings, including chemical weapons. Canada has also ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Canadian government claims that it is working closely with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons as mandated by the Convention (Government of Canada 2018b). As mentioned beforehand, Canada's modus operandi in attaining and retaining power, in many cases if not all soft power, is to be subject to international legitimacy and, consequently, to be committed to international treaties, especially regarding elimination of weapons of mass destruction. Canada's decision to join the Western coalition with the United States is, therefore, justified to contain the chemical weapons used by the Syrian government and ISIL as written in the United Nations resolution in question.

The next issue is the protection of children, which is also one of the Axworthy norms and, therefore, Canada's transcendent values. In the resolution, the General Assembly is "alarmed" that there were 3.8 million children as of the date who fled Syria and became refugees. It also notes the death of 17,000 children since the beginning of the peaceful protests which were the starting point of Arab Spring in Syria in March 2011. Ultimately, the General Assembly also condemns the use of sexual and gender-based violence in Syria. These concerns are also of paramount importance to Canada as described in Axworthy norms. Combined with international assistance, the Canadian norms dictate that the state must assist any actor, be it state or non-state, in aiding children in the Syrian Civil War and also in finding a solution to the gender-based violence and the forced emigration of women and children from the state. As the Axworthy norms are domestic by nature, it is worth noting that the protection of children is actually Canada's domestic norm which has been crystallised by historical tensions for post-war norms. As the sentiment of anti-colonialism was brewing in Canada's domestic discourse, a battle between "inclusionary and exclusionary impulses" ensued, which was ultimately won by the inclusionary, and, therefore, norms such as equal rights for women, indigenous people, and other minorities, and children's rights were imposed into Canada's domestic setting (Ibhawoh 2014, 617). These norms are also immortalised in the Constitution of Canada which serves as the most fundamental basis for norms operation, including in foreign policies.

The scopes of international assistance and peacebuilding are also of paramount importance to Canada's domestic setting. Axworthy (1997, 185) notes that the giving of Nobel Peace Prize to Prime Minister Lester Pearson of Canada for peacekeeping extrapolates the infusion of peacekeeping into Canada's domestic setting. It is also worth remembering that the contrast approaches of Canada and of the United Kingdom put the former at odds with the latter: Canada insisted that the situation be dealt in a diplomatic manner whereas the United Kingdom argued for the use of force (Eayrs 1957, 99). This is yet another evidence that Canada is ready to defy its closest allies in light of possible peaceful conflict resolutions. In conjunction with the Syrian Civil War, this description of events proves that one of the most important norms in Canada in terms of armed conflicts are those of peacebuilding and peacekeeping. The political meltdown in many areas in Syria and the violations of humanitarian laws in the Civil War act as a pavement for Canada to enter the conflict by, initially, joining the airstrikes along with other Western coalition partners.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has answered the question of why Canada left its alliance in the military coalition which is led by the United States by refusing to continue its airstrikes. This is evident on the need of the presence of two fundamental factors which determines Canada's foreign policy outcome. These two factors are its transcendent purpose, which is highlighted by the Axworthy norms, and its soft power, which is projected in the form of legitimacy. Based on previous engagements in military coalitions and their outcomes, the lack of either will contribute to Canada's reluctance in continuing its airstrikes.

## References

- Aljazeera. 2014. "Obama outlines plan to target IS fighters", 11 September. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/obama-strike-wherever-it-exists-2014910223935601193.html>. Accessed 21 September 2017.
- Axworthy, Lloyd. 1997. "Canada and Human Security: The Need for Leadership". *International Journal* 52(2): 183–196.
- Cozette, Murielle. 2008. "What Lies Ahead: Classical Realism on the Future of International Relations". *International Studies Review* 10(4): 667–679.
- Davidson, Jason W. 2011. *America's Allies and War: Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dauvergne, Catherine. 2012. "International Human Rights in Canadian Immigration Law—The Case of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada". *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 19(1): 305–326.
- Eayrs, James. 1957. "Canadian Policy and Opinion during the Suez Crisis". *International Journal* 12(2): 97–108.
- Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change". *International Organization* 52(4): 887–917.
- Fitzsimmons, Dan. 2013. "Canada, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan". *International Journal* 68(2): 305–313.
- Gallarotti, Giulio M. 2010. *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Government of Canada. 2018b. "Chemical Weapons". [http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/peace\\_security-paix\\_securite/chemical-chimique.aspx?lang=eng](http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/peace_security-paix_securite/chemical-chimique.aspx?lang=eng). Accessed 31 October 2018.
- Ibhawoh, Bonny. 2014. "Human rights for some: Universal human rights, sexual minorities, and the exclusionary impulse". *International Journal* 69(4): 612–622.
- Law, David M. 2009. "Canada in Afghanistan: Concepts, Policies, Actors, and Prospects". *Connections* 8(3): 25–52.
- MacDonnell, Vanessa A. 2013. "The Constitution as Framework for Governance". *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 63(4): 624–654.
- Malone, Paul. 2016. "Save us from today's Dr Strangeloves", The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 July. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/save-us-from-todays-dr-strangeloves-20160707-gq0d74.html>. Accessed 21 September 2017.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. and Kenneth W. Thompson. 1997. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mullen, Jethro. 2015. "Trudeau to Obama: Canada to pull out of bombing campaign against ISIS", CNN, 21 October 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/21/middleeast/syria-iraq-isis-fight/>. Accessed 21 September 2017.
- Murphy, Jessica. 2015. "Canada to end airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, new prime minister Trudeau says", The Guardian, 21 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/canada-end-airstrikes-syria-iraq-new-prime-minister-trudeau>. Accessed 15 December 2018.
- Nye, Joseph S. 2008. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power". *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616(1): 94–109.
- Pearson, Lester B. 1949. "Canada and the North Atlantic Alliance". *Foreign Affairs* 27(3): 369–378.
- Pin-Fat, Véronique. 2010. *Universality, Ethics and International Relations*. London: Routledge.



- Russell, Peter H. 1983. "The Political Purposes of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms". *Canadian Bar Review* 61(1): 30–54.
- Stairs, Denis. 1995. "Will and Circumstance and the Postwar Study of Canada's Foreign Policy". *International Journal* 50(1): 9–39.
- Uludag, Mekki. 2015. "Syrian Civil War Important Players and Key Implications—A Factsheet". *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7(7): 4–10.
- Webster, Craig. 2000. "Canada's Human Rights Policy and Its Impact on Foreign Assistance Allocation". *Peace Research* 32(4): 85–97.