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Branding as Soft Power: How Canada's International Image Renders Hard Borders Pliable

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Abstract: Being neither a hegemonic force nor a developing nation, Canada's classification as a "middle power" requires its cooperation with other state actors as it otherwise lacks the necessary means to care for itself in isolation (Bickerton and Gagnon 2014). For Canada, producing and maintaining a successful international brand is paramount to operating effectively within the ambit of soft power. Delving deeper into Canada's soft-power strategies, this article analyzes how Canada employs its economic and diplomatic arsenal to develop a reputable brand, using it to influence nations across the world and advance its policy agenda. More specifically, this article assesses the country's commitment to deliver humanitarian aid and resolve armed conflicts at a diplomatic level through international consortia such as the United Nations Security Council (Lamy et al. 2017). Another area where Canada has earned an admirable reputation in the eyes of the global community is in international public health initiatives (Kirton 2012). Moreover, as an architect of diplomatic lobbying and cultural engineering, Canada has succeeded in capturing the hearts and minds of historic adversaries, for instance, the Russian government and nation (Potter 2009). Lastly, through its perseverance and careful branding, Canada has managed to leverage its way into the hypercompetitive Hollywood cinema scene, broadcasting its national talent for the whole world to see (Tremblay 2004). In light of these accomplishments, made possible by a brand forged through years of consistent action and tangible results, Canada has successfully rendered hard borders pliable.

Keywords: Canada, International reputation, Soft Power, branding

At the apex of the Second World War, having witnessed the destructive and dysfunctional ends of warfare, emerging states sought to empower international fora with the ability to regulate global affairs (Lamy et al. 2017, 162). Institutions such as the United Nations emerged with the underlying principle of "creating some modicum of international order" (160). However, the underlying interests that compelled states to go to war were never eradicated. The potential to wage armed conflicts through hard-power mechanisms remains a guarantee of the liberal new world order, enshrined in the axiomatic ethos of the Peace of Westphalia 1648 (32).

Yet, in the advent of demilitarization and cries of peace emanating from multilateral consortia, new strategies to exert influence on foreign nations have been developed and refined. One such strategy has been the legitimization of soft power as a technique to secure international objectives. Premised on attraction, the appeal behind this method of control is its portrayal as a cooperative opportunity that stands to benefit the actors involved. Furthermore, by eschewing the coercive apparatuses of hard-power diplomacy, soft power offers a palatable alternative that placates the liberal sensitivities of the post-war international system.

Seeking to capitalize on its benefits, Canada has long been a country which has resorted to soft power as a means of ameliorating its international standing (Copeland 1998, 1). Being neither a hegemonic force nor a developing nation, Canada's classification as a middle power requires that it cooperate with other state actors as it otherwise lacks the necessary means to care for itself in isolation (Potter 2009, 433). Canada has recognized that producing and maintaining a successful international brand is paramount to operating effectively within the ambit of soft power. In this article, I discuss how Canada has developed a reputable brand, using it to successfully influence nations across the world and rendering their hard borders pliable.

Canada's classification as a middle power has driven generations of Canadian governments to position their country as a peaceful yet capable state actor. Through its interventions in international affairs, Canada has become known as a protector of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and a reliable purveyor of non-renewable energy, all while receiving praise for being one of the world's most stable democracies (Kirton 2012, 137). To earn this reputation, Canada took deliberate action in weaponizing its public relations assets and minimizing instances of misrepresentation (Copeland 1998, 2). In doing so, Canada successfully managed to grow its economy and capture the unwavering attention of an international audience. Through its strategy to employ rhetoric, Canada has resorted to using two primary methods to communicate its brand: the strategic use of its political economy and directing foreign diplomatic assets to spread cultural awareness. While the former may appear to be unrelated to the use of rhetoric, a country's identity is shaped by the actions state actors take in the

global political economy (Potter 2009, 4). This makes a country's political economy a vital asset to its international branding campaigns.

In order to keep up appearances and present Canada as a country committed to the welfare of the developing world, the recent Harper administration committed itself to raising its Official Development Assistance (ODA) fund by 8% annually, a decision made in the midst of the economic contractions affluent states experienced in the early 2000s. These consistent annual increases allowed Canada to grow its ODA budget to \$5 billion (Kirton 2012, 138), a sum that served to communicate two valuable messages: First, Canada was committed to supporting impoverished nations; secondly, Canada had the means to support these communities. More than a promise spoken from rarefied air, Canada's strategic expansion of its ODA budget was definitive proof that the country could uphold its international commitments.

Without loss of momentum, it was throughout this period that Canada also sought to direct the focus of the G8 (now G7) summits and use its modest but emphatic voice to solidify its international brand. In preparation for the 2010 G8 summit, Canada's priority themes were economic growth, climate change, freedom, democracy, rule of law, human rights and, most significantly, healthcare. While many of them have been commonplace in these forums, the decisions taken at these summits have been criticized for addressing distant issues that have little impact on regular affairs of member citizens. However, Canada's unique approach to healthcare transformed the 2010 summit into a contemporary use of power that resonated well within the group and the general public (Kirton 2012, 139).

The importance of Canada's actions were due to a marginal departure from dedicating healthcare resources to combating infectious diseases to the prioritization of "maternal, newborn, and child health" in developing nations (Kirton 2012, 139). This decision also had the added benefit of contributing directly to two of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, raising the profile of Canada's actions and characterizing them not as acts of charity from a developed country, but as dutiful service to the betterment of humanity. Compounding this initiative, Canada took advantage

of the 2010 summit to implement the Muskoka Accountability report. This was a subtle but actionable accountability measure that would help enforce G8 members' "compliance with commitments on development and health" (139).

Another area where Canada has taken advantage of political economy is in military and defense initiatives. While military operations typically fall within the scope of hard power, Canada's contributions to armed conflicts are used to enhance its relationships with other countries, particularly its allies. The necessity of such actions is driven by historic reminders such as the branding crisis which came in the aftermath of 9/11. In the months that followed, Canada was accused of housing terrorists by the United States, its closest trade partner and ally (Potter 2009, 208). To prevent the deterioration of a longstanding and highly lucrative relationship, Canada knew it had to participate in the intervention. However, the caveat to taking part in this deployment was the risk of compromising Canada's brand as peacemaker. In 2003, this was precisely the reason why Canada did not join the coalition of the willing in the war against Iraq (Bickerton and Gagnon 2014, 423).

However, NATO's sanction of this operation granted Canada the political cover it needed to keep its brand unscathed (Kirton 2012, 138). In ten years' time, Canada's loyalty to its NATO allies and the venerable brand it had crafted would be tested once again. In 2011, amidst the backdrop of civil slaughter by the Khaddafi regime in Libya, Canada was asked to participate in a fight for liberation. Green lit by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and legitimized under Responsibility to Protect (R2P), Canada took part in this war, as well. However, the lessons it learned from Afghanistan emboldened Canada to approach this conflict more proactively. When domestic political consequences in the U.S. precluded it from utilizing its aerial assets to deliver ordinance, Canada committed its own aircraft as a gesture of good will. In doing so, Canada successfully satisfied an operational deficit, confirmed that it was mission ready, and earned the appreciation and respect of the U.S. Lastly, as a strategy to reaffirm its brand, Canada also intervened in Libya through non-military means. Through the UNSC, Canada advocated for a no-fly zone to prevent insurgents from using the airspace above, and to support a Libyan citizenry in chaos, Canada

offered humanitarian aid (Kirton 2012, 142).

Non-conflictual activity has the added effect of being better received by broader segments of the international community (Potter 2009, 9). Whereas defending foreign nationals from calamity through violent means could still be perceived as doing more harm than good, exercising restraint and supplying vital resources offers greater protection from scrutiny. Nevertheless, to ensure that its philanthropy is well received, Canada must first ensure that it is seen. Indeed, whenever the world takes notice of Canada's laudable actions, be it through foreign media or interpersonal interactions with Canadian dignitaries, Canada benefits disproportionately.

Mannheim and Albritton (in Potter 2009, 23) discuss how states compete for both visibility and valence (estimable standing) in the international arena. They place the United States as the most visible state on the international stage, however its valence is the lowest of any liberal democracy in their ranking. Less visible but possessing a significantly higher valence is the United Kingdom. Canada has an equally high valence, but its visibility is much lower, even falling behind another unfamiliar but well-regarded country, Australia (Potter 2009, 24).

To protect its brand, Canada must ensure it has both visibility and valence. To address its dearth in the former, Canada has weaponized its diplomatic assets to ensure that all activities performed in its name return favorable social capital. However, the purpose of the staff and institutions funded by the public purse is not simply to deliver fanfare, but to export Canada's brand through cultural initiatives. While projecting decorum remains a necessity when conducting state affairs, cultural expositions – be they film festivals, art shows, or lectures on Canadian heritage – are much more impressionable on foreign audiences the world over. As Canada's High Commission in London reported, of all the news coverage mentioning Canada in the UK “60% [...] dealt with culture” (Potter 2009, 101). Realizing this, Canada has made it a priority to provide the international public with cultural programming since 1995 (105). To this purpose, cultural centers remain one of the mediums through which Canada enhances its international identity. Highly visible institutions and open to the public, these buildings are meant to provide a welcoming environment for the citizens

of the countries in which they are located. Two of the most notable examples are Canada House in London and Le Centre Culturel Canadien in Paris (Potter 2009, 106). Their purpose is to offer performers and scholars a platform where they may host lectures, concerts, exhibits, and screen films that reflect positively on Canada (107).

Another tool in Canada's repository is the Governor General. State visits remain a powerful branding strategy as their authoritative presence as the heads of delegations lends the visit legitimacy. Being the official head of state of Canada, when a Governor General is sent on a foreign excursion, their purpose is to raise Canada's profile and enhance its reputation (Potter 2009, 108). Notable examples include her Excellency Adrienne Clarkson's 2001 visit to Argentina and Chile. There, she and 39 Canadian dignitaries participated in public debates and discussed with Argentine and Chilean officials about the arts, peacekeeping, and aboriginal issues (109). Madam Clarkson used her visits to draw attention to Canada's contributions to these areas and demonstrate that Canada was a valuable ally to both nations.

On her subsequent trip to Germany, her diplomatic efforts led to delegation member Atom Egoyan being appointed President of the jury at the Berlin Film festival, a development that strengthened diplomatic ties and "German-Canadian bilateral cooperation" (Potter 2009, 110). In 2003, the Governor General led state visits to Russia, Finland, and Iceland where agenda items ranged from salvaging decommissioned submarines to exploring prosperous futures in geothermal energy production. To support its efforts, the delegation brought with it Canadian artists to engage the cultural predilections of each nation. In Russia, dancers and theater performers catered to local preferences. In Finland, musicians and visual artists were selected to impress the domestic high society. Lastly, in Iceland, writers and musicians were recruited to make a lasting impression. These initiatives generated more than 400 total media reports of "real importance," which equated approximately \$9 million in advertising for what amounted to be \$5.3 million in state visit costs (111).

On the consular front, embassies and consulates general also provide twin services in cultural promotion and interpersonal brand awareness; the efforts of Colin Robertson, Consul General for

California from 2000 to 2004, help illustrate this duality. To support the Oscar nomination of *Les Invasions Barbares*, a Québécois film, Robertson engaged in a five-month campaign to help the nomination board become acquainted with the movie. His strategy? Cocktail parties, private movie screenings, and mailing personally written letters to Canadian Hollywood actors to help secure the nomination. At the zenith of his operation, he invited a myriad of influential Hollywood personalities to his official residence for a final gala (Potter 2009, 202). To reward his efforts, in 2004, *Les Invasions Barbares* won the Oscar for best foreign-language film (Tremblay 2004). What this exercise accomplished was not simply securing a victory for Canada but sending a broader message to film enthusiasts and the public alike that Canada had “a deep pool of cinematic talent” (Potter 2009, 202).

In addition to paving Canada’s path to victory, Consuls and Ambassadors serve a valuable purpose as patriotic symbols. In times of crisis, these individuals are looked upon to provide safety and support. Nowhere was this more evident than in Indonesia in 2004. In the wake of the tsunami that devastated South Asia, Ambassador Randolph Mank proactively established a field office to conduct relief operations. Serving as a hub for the Canadian International Development Agency, Indonesian officials, NGOs, and donors, Mank’s strategy revolutionized Canada’s brand in the region. While simple in form, a nation saturated by reporters covering the disaster amplified the narrative of Canada acting as a beacon of hope (Potter 2009, 204).

Through these examples, one can see how soft-power strategies such as a targeted use of public funds and the proliferation of embellishing stories can transform a country’s brand into an international icon. While relatively small in scope, Canada’s tactful initiatives have allowed it to reap benefits it could never hope to gain through direct military, financial, or political efforts. Through the strategic use of economic tools, hard-power resources, and diplomatic assets, Canada has been able to create a perennial narrative that it is a country with which other states should conduct business, trust as an ally, and hold in high esteem as an invaluable member of the international community. The strength of Canada’s soft power is not limited to the immediate success of its international

projects; rather, and most importantly, it lays in the stable trust that countries have developed toward Canada. Through the confidence it has earned on the battlefield, Canada has maintained favorable trade relations with its powerful southern neighbor for decades. Moreover, its commitment to deliver humanitarian aid and resolve armed conflicts at a diplomatic level through the UNSC has helped forge Canada's glowing valence. Compounded by its fervent support of international public health, Canada has earned an admirable reputation in the eyes of the global community. As an architect of diplomatic lobbying and cultural engineering, Canada has even succeeded in capturing the hearts and minds of traditional adversaries, such as Russia. Lastly, its perseverance and careful branding have given Canada the leverage it needed to pierce the hypercompetitive Hollywood cinema scene. In light of all these accomplishments, made possible by a brand forged through years of consistent initiatives, Canada has indeed succeeded in rendering hard borders pliable.



Dael Vasquez is a political science student and fellow at York University's Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. In September 2021, he moved to the University of Toronto to complete a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-funded project on the political economy of Ecuador and Canada.

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