

Canada's Foreign Policy Under Scrutiny

By Canada Institute Staff



On February 21, 2019, the Canada Institute hosted a dynamic discussion with Andrew Cohen on the state of Canada's foreign policy. Cohen, a Global Fellow of the Canada Institute and Associate Professor of Journalism at Carleton University, prefaced the conversation by outlining two, overarching observations the world has made about Canada: 1) Canada is emerging as a moral leader of the free world 2) Canada's presence in the world is essential. Cohen explained that he has reservations about these observations because "while Canada has done fine things [on the foreign policy front]," it has not lived up to its potential on the global stage.

Canada's response to the refugee crisis in the Middle East served as a primary focal point for its moral leadership in the world. Cohen praised the Government of Canada's effort to welcome [40,081 Syrian refugees](#) to Canada as of January 2017.¹ Yet, Cohen recalled the impressive historic efforts such as [Project 4000](#), which aimed to resettle immigrants from Southeast Asia following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Project 4000 raised Canada's quota of people it accepted following the war from 8,000 to 60,000.² Cohen reiterated that while Canada is perceived as a leader on refugee policy, it is not fully exerting the soft power granted by the country's socio-economic advantages to meet or exceed the commitments established by the country's foreign policy agenda.

Moreover, Cohen questioned Canada's essentiality by pointing to the nation's inability to obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The ebb and flow of the Canada-Saudi Arabia bilateral relationship was a common thread in the discussion. He noted that while Canada called out Saudi Arabia's human rights record, Canada did not stop purchasing Saudi oil nor did it stop selling Saudi Arabia light armor vehicles. Cohen characterized Canada's foreign policy as "gestural" and called for it to challenge itself to further commit time and resources to advancing diplomacy and democracy. In short, Cohen insisted Canada walk the walk in foreign policy.

Andrew Cohen's remarks provoked a lively discussion among participants, including many Canada Institute Global Fellows, who pushed back on some of Cohen's assertions, highlighting especially Canada's impressive efforts to promote women in combat.

1 The event webcast did not detail the correct number of refugees nor did the speaker reference a specific year. Thus, the Canada Institute has included the figures reflected by the Government of Canada.

2 April Carrière, "[History and Legacy of Refugee Resettlement in Ottawa](#)", *Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership*. (June 2016).