GLOBAL COOPERATION INSTITUTE

CANADA

Becoming a Model Power

Executive Summary
By Jonathan Glennie and Alejandro Torres

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Canada stands at a crossroads. For much of the post-war era, it has been considered (in Lester Pearson's phrase) a *middle power*: a country "strong enough to act, small enough to be trusted." Yet the world of 2025 is very different to the one in which Pearson was such an influential figure.

Today, global trust is fragile. The multilateral institutions that once professed shared progress are fraying under the strain of inequality, climate disruption, and renewed geopolitical rivalry. Canadians remain proud of their reputation for decency and pragmatism, but anxious about how their country should act in a more dangerous, divided world. Voters expect their leaders to defend prosperity and security first, but they also want Canada's global role to reflect the fairness and cooperation they value at home.

The question Canada needs to answer is not how much power it has, but how that power can best serve its long-term security, prosperity, and purpose in the world, building on its already impressive track record.

This paper proposes a new term that could describe Canada's response to today's global challenges: **Model Power.** Where *middle power* was a position in the hierarchy, *model power* describes an aspiration: to lead with commitment but humility, by demonstration, not dominance, turning fairness, competence, and cooperation into strategic assets.

Model Power has twin engines: a **narrative renewal** that makes cooperation believable and popular again, and an **action agenda** that proves it works, through fair finance, capacity support, coherent policy, and accountable institutions.

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What is a Model Power?

The term *Model Power* describes a new way of thinking about how nations lead in a fractured world. For decades, labelling power has been a favourite pastime of international relations scholars: *great powers, middle powers, soft power, smart power, normative power*. Each captures something important (size, method, moral stance) but none explains how a country can wield influence credibly and ethically in an interdependent, sceptical age.

A *Model Power* is a country that demonstrates rather than declares, showing through its conduct, policies, and partnerships how power can serve both national interest and global progress. The term is not a claim to virtue but a commitment to coherence, and it rests on five defining attributes: mutual interest, aspiration, demonstration, learning, and connection - together forming a philosophy of credible cooperation for the 21st century.

1. Mutual interest. Model Powers link domestic priorities to global progress

A *Model Power* fuses domestic renewal with international responsibility, showing that caring about global outcomes strengthens national wellbeing, despite current claims to the contrary. In an interdependent age, doing the right thing internationally and doing the smart thing at home have become the same test. But *Model Powers* cannot afford to be unrealistic: every ambition must be mediated by domestic political analysis.

2. Aspiration. Model Powers try to make the world better

A *Model Power* begins with purpose. It asks what power is for, not just how much it has. Its ambition is to use strength for shared progress, turning fairness and competence into strategy and impact. Rather than competing for moral superiority, it is wise enough to know its own shortcomings and constraints and therefore welcomes others into the project of cooperation.

3. Demonstration. Model Powers influence through example, not assertion

A *Model Power* models power. It earns trust through behaviour, proving that ethics and effectiveness are allies. Its diplomacy is performative in the best sense, showing what can be done despite constraints. It doesn't overpromise or moralise; it models what is possible, policy by policy, building legitimacy capital that others rely on and learn from. n a sceptical age, the power of rhetoric is limited. Results persuade.

4. Learning. Model Powers learn as they cooperate

A *Model Power* acts with humility. It recognises that power itself is problematic and that no nation has yet mastered its use. Wise countries and their leaders know that they will get things wrong and so turn monitoring and evaluation into a philosophy of governance; self-correction as credibility.

5. Connection. Model Powers empower others

A *Model Power* recognises that progress depends on trust and mutual exchange, building efficient channels of communication and collaboration that allow ideas, knowledge, and innovation to flow across borders. Its diplomacy values transparency and reciprocity, listening as much as it speaks. By turning information-sharing and joint learning into tools of statecraft, a *Model Power* redefines influence as connection.

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The twin engines of Model Power

The challenge for a *Model Power* is to link an effective narrative to credible action. The first gives direction, defining purpose, aligning values, and rebuilding belief in cooperation as a shared investment. The second gives traction, converting that belief into performance through finance, capacity, policy, and institutions.If it gets these two engines motoring together, Canada could prove that moral ambition and national success are two sides of the same coin.

1. Narrative renewal: making cooperation believable again

For Canada, rebuilding belief in cooperation begins with telling a story that is both principled and practical. Canadians remain proud of their country's reputation for fairness but wary of overreach; they support engagement abroad when it serves their wellbeing and aligns with their values. Public support is the foundation of modern foreign policy: a model narrative must convince citizens as much as diplomats that cooperation is in their interest.

Based on our research, we suggest three interlocking ideas as the basis of a strong, modern, model narrative.

Mutual interest means recognising that global engagement is not charity but enlightened self-interest. Polling shows that Canadians overwhelmingly support investment in global health, women's rights, and climate action when these are linked to national wellbeing. This is not a new narrative, but one that seems to have got lost over time. It needs to return to the centre of the narrative.

Effectiveness restores public confidence by proving that cooperation works. Canadians trust organisations that deliver results and lose faith in rhetoric without evidence. Demonstrating that global partnerships can save lives, prevent crises, and grow economies rebuilds belief not only in Canada's global role but in multilateralism itself.

Complementarity reflects Canada's instinct for fairness i.e. doing *its share*, no less and no more. Canadians want their country to contribute as part of a wider effort. They also want a balance between government leadership and the important work of other sectors such as civil society, and business. Influence lies not in dominance but in alignment, making systems work better together.

These three principles – mutual interest, effectiveness, and complementarity – define what "doing the right thing" means in the twenty-first century.

2. Action agenda: turning credibility into capability

A renewed narrative starts the process of rebuilding belief, but it can only be secured through credible results. That means an effective action agenda that will allow Canada to model power through four operational elements: **financial investment, capacity support, policy coherence,** and **institutional reform.**

Financial investment. By building support for Global Public Investment – a cooperative approach in which all countries benefit, contribute and decide priorities – to complement traditional "aid", Canada can finance shared priorities such as global health, education, and women's empowerment, strengthening its own prosperity and security.

Capacity support in the modern world means focusing on a genuine exchange of knowledge and skills, helping to build scientific, digital, and governance capabilities abroad and also in Canada, because Canada has as much to learn as to teach. This has been termed Circular Cooperation.

Policy coherence means aligning trade, climate, migration, and development so that domestic and international priorities reinforce each other instead of contradicting themselves.

Institutional reform anchors cooperation for the long term. Canada can help advance fairer global mechanisms on debt, tax and other areas, while ensuring that its own institutions remain transparent, accountable, and exemplary.

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Inspiring a new generation of global cooperation

If Canada commits to becoming a *Model Power*, it could renew its global vocation and show once again that principled leadership can be in the interests of its own citizens as well as the rest of the world. Building trust through credible action, it could inspire countries of different sizes, capacities, and contexts, forging alliances whose strength lies in shared purpose, and showing that fairness, cooperation, and competence can drive meaningful global progress.

Our proposed *Model Power* concept is being applied here for the first time to Canada, but it could equally well serve as a useful framework for countries in other regions seeking to redefine their role in the world. It offers an alternative to traditional hierarchies of power that have long dominated international relations, allowing nations with diverse characteristics, regardless of their size, wealth, or geopolitical weight, to envision an active and constructive global role.

The language of *Model Power* provides a vocabulary for those states that aspire to shape global and regional agendas through example, cooperation, and credibility rather than dominance. It invites countries to see leadership not as a privilege of the powerful but as a responsibility shared by those willing to act with purpose, consistency, and collective ambition.

Methodology
This paper is the product of research and analysis throughout 2025 by the Global Cooperation Institute, supported by Canadian and international partners. It draws on a decade of Canadian **public opinion data**, showing consistent support for international engagement tempered by concerns about fairness and effectiveness. It also synthesises global and Canadian **academic and other literature** on diplomacy, development, and governance, and incorporates first-hand insights from policymakers, academics, and practitioners via **expert interviews.**

About the Global Cooperation Institute (GCI)

The Global Cooperation Institute is a Bogotá-based think-and-do tank dedicated to reimagining international cooperation, financing, and governance for a more just and sustainable world. Its signature ideas – *Global Public Investment, Circular Cooperation, and the Public Good Narrative* – aim to rebuild trust in collective action through research, dialogue, and practical reform.

Jonathan Glennie is the Executive Director of the Global Cooperation Institute and a leading international thinker on the future of global cooperation, financing, and development.

Alejandro Torres is Deputy Director of the Global Cooperation Institute. Formerly he worked for the Colombian government on international cooperation, with a particular focus on migration.

For more information please contact laura.granados@globalcooperation.institute or visit our website www.globalcooperation.institute

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