

The Measure of a Friend: A Comparison of Cold War Canadian Attitudes Toward Military Collaboration with the United States

Joel Anthony Botter

Few bilateral relationships have been described with as much rhetorical warmth — and analytical imprecision — as that between Canada and the United States. During his 1961 address to the Canadian Parliament, President John F. Kennedy famously declared that “geography has made us neighbours, history has made us friends, economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies.”¹ The speech has since entered the canon of North American political memory, frequently invoked as evidence of an enduring and uncomplicated partnership. Yet Kennedy’s formulation obscures the extent to which the relationship has been marked by friction, asymmetry, and periodic crisis — particularly in matters of defence and sovereignty.

Indeed, even at the moment Kennedy spoke these words, relations between Ottawa and Washington were strained by deep personal and strategic disagreements between Kennedy and Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, most notably over nuclear weapons and Canada’s role within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD).² That episode was not anomalous. Rather, it exemplified a recurring pattern in which public narratives of bilateral harmony coexist uneasily with episodes of diplomatic tension, policy divergence, and mutual frustration. While historians have long been attentive to these contradictions, popular and political discourse continues to oscillate between two simplifying myths: Canada as America’s indispensable partner, and Canada as America’s latent casualty.

This paper intervenes in that interpretive divide by examining two seemingly paradoxical decisions taken during the late Cold War. In the early 1980s, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau — often portrayed as anti-American, economically nationalist, and skeptical of NATO orthodoxy — approved the testing of American air-launched cruise missiles over Canadian territory.³ Only a few years later, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney — who publicly emphasized his personal affinity with President Ronald Reagan and promised to make Canada a “super ally” of the United States

¹ John F. Kennedy, “Address to the Parliament of Canada,” May 17, 1961, discussed in Ian L. MacDonald, “JFK’s Epic Speech to Parliament: An Enduring Moment in Time,” *Policy Magazine*, May 16, 2021.

² John Ibbitson, *The Duel: Diefenbaker, Pearson, and the Making of Modern Canada* (Signal, 2023), 211–238; Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945–1984* (University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 154–156.

³ John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1968–2000*, vol. 2 (Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2009), 395–412; John Clearwater, *Just Dummies: Cruise Missile Testing in Canada* (University of Calgary Press, 2023), 87.

— declined to participate in Reagan’s flagship Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI).⁴ At first glance, these outcomes appear counterintuitive. Prevailing assumptions about ideology, personality, and bilateral warmth would suggest precisely the opposite pattern of cooperation.

The central question of this paper is therefore not whether Canada is subordinated to the United States or securely sovereign, but rather how Canadian leaders navigate structural dependence while preserving political agency. Why did Trudeau accept a controversial weapons testing program while Mulroney rejected a project of enormous strategic importance to the Reagan administration? What do these decisions reveal about the limits of personality-driven diplomacy, and about the practical constraints that shape Canadian foreign and defence policy?

This study argues that the answers lie less in ideological alignment or personal rapport than in a convergence of pragmatic considerations: the technological maturity of the proposed systems, their fiscal and political costs, their implications for alliance cohesion — particularly within NATO — and their consequences for Canadian sovereignty as understood by both elites and the public. Cruise missile testing represented a relatively low-cost, finite, and strategically legible contribution to alliance deterrence at a moment of acute transatlantic tension.⁵ SDI, by contrast, was speculative, exorbitantly expensive, legally ambiguous, and potentially destabilizing to the logic of nuclear deterrence itself.⁶

By situating these decisions within broader historiographical debates on Canadian–American relations, this paper contends that clichés — whether of inevitable American domination or effortless partnership — are analytically insufficient. They capture prevailing attitudes, but not governing logic. The Canadian–American relationship, as revealed through these two cases, is neither one of passive acquiescence nor of principled resistance. It is instead characterized by negotiated cooperation under constraint, where Canadian leaders exercise limited but meaningful choice within a structurally asymmetric partnership.

Historiography

The historiography of Canadian–American relations is both extensive and conceptually fragmented, reflecting the enduring difficulty of reconciling Canada’s formal sovereignty with its deep structural dependence on the United States. From early political history to Cold War strategic studies,

⁴ Brian Mulroney, *Memoirs* (Douglas Gibson Books, 2007), 338–345; Raymond B. Blake, *Transforming the Nation: Canada and Brian Mulroney* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 186.

⁵ Susan Colbourn, “‘Cruising toward Nuclear Danger’: Canadian Anti-Nuclear Activism, Pierre Trudeau’s Peace Mission, and the Transatlantic Partnership,” *Cold War History* 18, no. 1 (2017), 22.

⁶ Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), 95–123; James G. Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954–2009* (University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 171.

scholars have repeatedly returned to the problem of asymmetry: how a middle power adjacent to a superpower preserves autonomy without provoking retaliation or forfeiting security.⁷ Within this literature, two interpretive frameworks have emerged that closely parallel the clichés prevalent in popular discourse. One emphasizes Canada’s vulnerability to American domination — economic, cultural, and strategic — while the other stresses the stability, intimacy, and mutual benefit of the bilateral partnership.

Historically, Canadian sensitivity to the United States long predates the Cold War. Scholars of early North American history have emphasized that American independence itself posed an existential challenge to British North America. The failed American invasion of Quebec in 1775–76 and the subsequent War of 1812 entrenched a political culture in British North America that equated independence with survival through differentiation from the republic to the south.⁸ The fear of annexation remained salient throughout the nineteenth century, shaping Canada’s political development during Confederation. As Phillip Buckner and others have shown, the experience of the American Civil War loomed large over the Confederation debates, encouraging Canadian elites to design a centralized federal system that deliberately reversed the American allocation of powers between federal and state governments.⁹ In this sense, Canadian political institutions were forged not only in emulation of British models, but in conscious reaction against perceived American excesses.

By the twentieth century, however, the axis of concern shifted from military invasion to economic and cultural penetration. The growth of American investment in Canadian natural resources, manufacturing, and media prompted a sustained nationalist critique, particularly in the postwar decades. The Gordon Commission’s 1957 report marked a turning point by framing foreign — implicitly American — ownership as a threat to Canadian economic sovereignty.¹⁰ This concern found political expression during the Trudeau era in policies such as the creation of the Foreign Investment Review Agency, which scholars have interpreted as the culmination of a longer tradition of economic nationalism rather than an idiosyncratic Trudeauite innovation.¹¹ Within this strand of historiography, Canada appears as a structurally constrained actor, perpetually reacting to American power rather than shaping outcomes.

Running parallel to this tradition is a more integrationist literature that emphasizes cooperation, institutionalization, and shared strategic

⁷ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 18.

⁸ Amy Noel Ellison, “Montgomery’s Misfortune: The American Defeat at Quebec and the March toward Independence, 1775–1776,” *Early American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017), 597.

⁹ Phillip Buckner, “British North America and a Continent in Dissolution: The American Civil War in the Making of Canadian Confederation,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 7, no. 4 (2017), 520–521.

¹⁰ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 43.

¹¹ English, *Just Watch Me*, 123.

culture. From the Second World War onward, Canada and the United States developed dense networks of military, economic, and diplomatic coordination, most notably through NORAD and NATO.¹² Historians such as Robert Bothwell and John Herd Thompson have argued that by the early Cold War, Canadian policymakers had accepted the permanence of American power and oriented their strategy toward managing dependence rather than resisting it.¹³ Within this framework, the metaphor of the “longest undefended border” functions less as myth than as shorthand for a historically unprecedented degree of trust between sovereign states.

Yet even within the integrationist school, there is little suggestion that harmony was automatic or unproblematic. Scholars of defence and diplomacy emphasize that cooperation often emerges from negotiation and compromise rather than shared enthusiasm. The Bomarc missile controversy of the early 1960s, for example, has been interpreted as evidence of the limits of Canadian autonomy within alliance structures, but also of Canada’s capacity to delay, modify, or condition American initiatives.¹⁴ Similarly, studies of NORAD renewal and ballistic missile defence reveal recurring Canadian efforts to constrain the strategic consequences of cooperation, particularly where sovereignty and public legitimacy were at stake.¹⁵

More recent historiography has attempted to move beyond the binary of domination versus partnership by focusing on process, contingency, and domestic politics. James Fergusson’s work on ballistic missile defence, for instance, emphasizes the iterative nature of Canadian decision-making, shaped by bureaucratic consensus, alliance politics, and technological uncertainty rather than by ideology alone.¹⁶ Susan Colbourn and others have similarly highlighted the transatlantic dimension of Canadian foreign policy, demonstrating that Ottawa’s choices were often influenced as much by European alliance dynamics as by bilateral considerations with Washington.¹⁷ In this literature, Canada emerges as a constrained but strategic actor, operating within a narrow corridor of acceptable options.

This paper aligns most closely with that latter approach while retaining the heuristic value of the older clichés. The myths of American takeover and effortless partnership are not dismissed outright; rather, they are treated as indicators of prevailing political moods that shape, but do not determine, policy outcomes. During the late Trudeau years, nationalist anxiety about American influence reached a postwar peak, while the early

¹² John Hilliker, Mary Halloran, and Greg Donaghy, *Canada’s Department of External Affairs, vol. 3: Innovation and Adaptation, 1968–1984* (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 27.

¹³ John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies* (Crane Resource Centre, 2004), 61.

¹⁴ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 137.

¹⁵ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 92.

¹⁶ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 170.

¹⁷ Colbourn, “‘Cruising toward Nuclear Danger’,” 22.

Mulroney era coincided with renewed rhetorical emphasis on bilateral harmony.¹⁸ Yet, as the cases examined here demonstrate, these atmospheres did not translate directly into policy decisions. Instead, Canadian responses to American military initiatives were governed by calculations of cost, feasibility, and alliance impact across personal and ideological identities.

By comparing Canadian reactions to cruise missile testing and the Strategic Defence Initiative, this study contributes to the historiography by reinforcing a view of the bilateral relationship as situational and transactional. It challenges interpretations that treat Canadian compliance or resistance as reflections of national character or prime ministerial temperament. In doing so, it underscores the importance of material constraints and strategic context in shaping Canadian foreign policy — an approach that bridges traditional diplomatic history with more recent international political sociology.¹⁹

The Bilateral Relationship: Trudeau and Mulroney in Comparative Perspective

The contrast between Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Brian Mulroney has become a foundational organizing device in the historiography of late Cold War Canadian–American relations. Trudeau is frequently portrayed as skeptical, aloof, and intellectually resistant to American power, while Mulroney appears as instinctively pro-American, emotionally invested in personal diplomacy, and rhetorically committed to continental partnership.²⁰ While these characterizations capture important stylistic differences, they risk overstating the degree to which personal temperament translated directly into policy divergence. A closer examination of the bilateral relationship during their respective tenures suggests that both leaders operated within a shared structural environment that constrained Canadian options regardless of their ideological inclinations.

Trudeau assumed office in 1968 amid growing Canadian unease about American dominance, intensified by the Vietnam War and the rapid expansion of U.S. economic penetration. His early foreign policy initiatives reflected a desire to recalibrate Canada’s external relationships by reducing dependence on the United States without provoking outright confrontation. The so-called “Third Option,” articulated in the 1972 foreign policy review, envisioned diversification of trade and diplomatic engagement toward Europe and Asia as a means of insulating Canada from American leverage.²¹ Historians have debated the seriousness and feasibility of this initiative, with critics emphasizing its limited material impact and

¹⁸ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 221.

¹⁹ Bruno Charbonneau and Wayne S. Cox, “Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration: The Canadian–American Defense Relationship,” *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 4 (2008), 311.

²⁰ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 185.

²¹ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 301.

supporters highlighting its symbolic importance in redefining Canadian autonomy.²² Regardless of its outcomes, the Third Option reflected a broader Trudeau-era impulse to reassert sovereignty through policy innovation rather than alliance withdrawal.

In bilateral terms, Trudeau's approach to Washington was marked by calculated distance rather than antagonism. Though personal relations between Trudeau and successive American presidents — particularly Richard Nixon — were often strained, Canadian participation in NATO and NORAD remained intact.²³ Trudeau's skepticism toward American strategic priorities did not translate into wholesale disengagement but instead manifested in efforts to delimit Canadian commitments. The 1969 decision to reduce Canada's conventional forces in Europe exemplifies this pattern: Ottawa sought to assert control over its defence posture while remaining within alliance frameworks.²⁴ This balancing act underscores the degree to which Trudeau's foreign policy combined nationalist rhetoric with pragmatic accommodation.

By contrast, Brian Mulroney entered office in 1984 explicitly committed to repairing what he described as a "damaged" relationship with the United States. Mulroney's worldview was shaped by a conviction that Canada's prosperity and security were inseparable from American leadership, particularly under the Reagan administration.²⁵ His cultivation of a close personal relationship with President Ronald Reagan — symbolized most famously by the "Shamrock Summit" — has loomed large in both popular memory and scholarly interpretation.²⁶ Yet historians caution against reading symbolism as policy determinism. Mulroney's embrace of personal diplomacy did not eliminate Canadian leverage; rather, it reframed how that leverage was exercised.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations provide the clearest illustration of Mulroney's continentalist orientation, though even here the relationship was more adversarial than harmonious. Scholars such as John English and Raymond Blake emphasize that the negotiations involved significant Canadian resistance on issues such as cultural protection and dispute resolution mechanisms.²⁷ Far from capitulation, the FTA reflected Ottawa's effort to lock American power into predictable institutional arrangements — an objective not dissimilar in logic, if not tone, from Trudeau's sovereignty-driven initiatives.²⁸ In this respect, Mulroney's strategy represented a shift in method rather than an abandonment of long-standing Canadian concerns.

In security and defence matters, the Trudeau–Mulroney contrast appears sharper but remains more nuanced upon closer inspection.

²² English, *Just Watch Me*, 214.

²³ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 253.

²⁴ Hilliker, Halloran, and Donaghy, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, 89.

²⁵ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 52.

²⁶ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 67.

²⁷ English, *Just Watch Me*, 432.

²⁸ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 256.

Trudeau's later years in office were marked by renewed engagement with arms control and disarmament, culminating in his 1983 "peace mission" to world leaders. While widely criticized as quixotic, the initiative reflected genuine anxiety about the escalating nuclear arms race and Canada's marginalization within strategic decision-making.²⁹ Importantly, Trudeau's activism did not result in Canada's withdrawal from alliance structures or rejection of American defence cooperation. Instead, it sought to carve out a diplomatic role for Canada that complemented, rather than supplanted, its military commitments.

Mulroney, for his part, publicly aligned Canada with American strategic priorities during a period of intensified Cold War rhetoric. His government supported NATO's dual-track decision and emphasized the moral clarity of Western opposition to the Soviet Union.³⁰ Yet this alignment did not translate into unconditional support for all American initiatives. As scholars of Canadian defence policy have shown, Mulroney's cabinet frequently weighed alliance solidarity against domestic political considerations, particularly where sovereignty or public opinion were implicated.³¹ The resulting policies often reflected compromise rather than deference.

What unites the Trudeau and Mulroney eras, therefore, is not ideological convergence but structural continuity. Both prime ministers confronted the same fundamental asymmetry in power, and both recognized that outright resistance to American leadership was neither feasible nor desirable. Their divergence lay primarily in rhetoric, symbolism, and diplomatic style. Trudeau favoured intellectual distance and institutional buffering, while Mulroney emphasized intimacy and personal trust.³² Neither approach fundamentally altered the underlying dynamics of the bilateral relationship.

This continuity is especially evident in defence cooperation, where Canada's geographic position and limited military capacity imposed persistent constraints. Regardless of the prime ministerial worldview, Canadian policymakers understood that continental defence required cooperation with the United States. The key question was not whether to cooperate, but how to do so in a manner consistent with domestic legitimacy and sovereignty.³³ In this sense, the Trudeau–Mulroney comparison reinforces a central theme of the historiography: Canadian foreign policy is best understood as a series of adaptive responses to structural conditions rather than as a reflection of individual leadership alone.

By situating Trudeau and Mulroney within a shared strategic environment, this section challenges interpretations that reduce Canadian–

²⁹ English, *Just Watch Me*, 462.

³⁰ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 134.

³¹ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 112.

³² Charbonneau and Cox, "Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration," 316.

³³ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 279.

American relations to personality-driven narratives. While leadership style mattered, it did not override the imperatives of geography, alliance politics, and material capability. The cases examined in subsequent sections — cruise missile testing and the Strategic Defence Initiative — demonstrate how these imperatives shaped Canadian decision-making across ideological divides, revealing deeper continuities beneath apparent change.³⁴

Cruise Missile Testing

The decision to permit American cruise missile testing on Canadian territory during the early 1980s stands as one of the most revealing episodes in late Cold War Canadian–American defence relations. It exposed the tension between alliance obligations and domestic legitimacy more starkly than almost any other policy issue of the period. Although the testing program was ultimately approved under the Trudeau government and reaffirmed by Mulroney, the controversy surrounding it illustrates the limits of ideological explanation and underscores the structural constraints shaping Canadian decision-making.

The cruise missile emerged in the late 1970s as a central component of NATO's response to the deployment of Soviet SS-20 intermediate-range missiles. Highly accurate, low-flying, and difficult to detect, the American air-launched cruise missile was intended to restore strategic balance in Europe while strengthening the credibility of NATO's deterrence.³⁵ For the United States, effective testing required vast, sparsely populated airspace that could simulate operational conditions — an attribute Canada possessed in abundance. From Washington's perspective, Canadian participation was not merely convenient but strategically valuable.³⁶ For Ottawa, however, the request presented acute political and symbolic difficulties. The testing program was framed domestically not as a technical matter but as a moral and existential one, linking Canadian territory directly to the machinery of nuclear war. Public opposition intensified rapidly, fueled by an increasingly mobilized peace movement and widespread anxiety about nuclear escalation.³⁷ Polling throughout the early 1980s suggested that a majority of Canadians opposed cruise missile testing, even among those who supported NATO membership.³⁸ This disjunction between alliance support and policy approval complicated the government's ability to justify cooperation.

Trudeau's handling of the issue reflected his characteristic effort to reconcile nationalist sentiment with alliance realities. Despite his skepticism toward American strategic doctrine, Trudeau accepted that

³⁴ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 143.

³⁵ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance* (Twayne, 1994), 129.

³⁶ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 96.

³⁷ Colbourn, "'Cruising toward Nuclear Danger,'" 16.

³⁸ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 266.

refusal to cooperate would have serious consequences for Canada's standing within NATO and NORAD.³⁹ Canadian defence planners and diplomats warned that denying the testing request could marginalize Canada within alliance decision-making and weaken its ability to influence broader strategic debates.⁴⁰ As a result, the Trudeau government approved cruise missile testing in 1983, framing the decision as a contribution to arms control rather than militarization. Trudeau argued that strengthening deterrence was a prerequisite for meaningful disarmament — a position that echoed NATO's dual-track logic even as it clashed with public perceptions.⁴¹

Historians have emphasized that this justification represented a deliberate effort to depoliticize the issue by casting it as technical and procedural. Robert Bothwell characterizes the decision as an exercise in damage control, aimed less at advancing American objectives than at preserving Canadian credibility.⁴² Similarly, John English notes that Trudeau viewed the testing program as a finite and controllable commitment, distinct from permanent basing or deployment.⁴³ In this sense, cruise missile testing was carefully bounded to minimize its symbolic resonance while satisfying alliance expectations.

The transition to the Mulroney government did not fundamentally alter this calculus. Although Mulroney entered office with a more openly pro-American posture, he inherited a policy framework that left little room for reversal. Cancelling the testing program would have signalled unreliability at a moment when Mulroney was seeking to rebuild trust with Washington.⁴⁴ Moreover, senior officials advised that withdrawal would offer no tangible security benefit while incurring high diplomatic costs.⁴⁵ Mulroney therefore reaffirmed Canada's participation, despite continued domestic opposition. What distinguishes Mulroney's approach is not the substance of the policy but its presentation. Whereas Trudeau emphasized arms control and strategic balance, Mulroney framed cruise missile testing as a necessary contribution to Western unity and deterrence.⁴⁶ This rhetorical shift aligned more closely with Reagan-era discourse, yet it did not translate into expanded commitments. The testing remained temporary, geographically limited, and tightly regulated by Canadian authorities.⁴⁷ These constraints underscore the continuity of Canadian objectives across administrations: cooperation without the surrender of control.

³⁹ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 331.

⁴⁰ Hilliker, Halloran, and Donaghy, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, 204.

⁴¹ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 339.

⁴² Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 341.

⁴³ English, *Just Watch Me*, 493.

⁴⁴ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 121.

⁴⁵ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 134.

⁴⁶ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 287–288.

⁴⁷ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 104.

The cruise missile controversy is often cited as evidence of Canadian subordination to American strategic priorities.⁴⁸ Such interpretations, however, risk overstating the degree of coercion involved. Archival studies reveal that Canadian officials actively negotiated the terms of the testing program, including flight paths, environmental safeguards, and oversight mechanisms.⁴⁹ While Ottawa could not veto the broader NATO strategy, it exercised meaningful agency in shaping its national contribution. This pattern reinforces the argument that Canadian autonomy operated within narrow but real parameters.

Equally important is the domestic political legacy of cruise missile testing. The episode galvanized civil society activism and contributed to a broader culture of skepticism toward nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ Although the policy itself proceeded, the intensity of public opposition constrained future governments' freedom of action, particularly with respect to missile defence and weaponization of space. In this respect, cruise missile testing functioned as a precedent-setting event, shaping the political environment in which later decisions — most notably those concerning the Strategic Defence Initiative — would be made.

Ultimately, the cruise missile testing decision reveals the inadequacy of explanations rooted solely in leadership ideology or bilateral warmth. Trudeau approved the testing despite his nationalist reputation; Mulroney maintained it regardless of his rhetorical closeness to Washington. In both cases, the decisive factors were alliance credibility, strategic geography, and the perceived costs of non-cooperation.⁵¹ The controversy thus exemplifies the situational logic that governed Canadian–American defence relations in the late Cold War, highlighting continuity beneath apparent change.

The Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI)

The Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), announced by President Ronald Reagan in March 1983, posed a fundamentally different challenge to Canadian policymakers than cruise missile testing. Whereas cruise missile testing involved the controlled use of Canadian territory in support of an existing alliance strategy, SDI raised questions about the future of deterrence itself, the weaponization of space, and the coherence of arms control regimes that Canada had long supported. The Canadian response to SDI — culminating in the Mulroney government's 1985 decision not to participate formally — reveals the outer limits of Canadian cooperation with American defence initiatives and underscores the contextual nature of Canadian autonomy.

⁴⁸ Hilliker, Halloran, and Donaghy, *Department of External Affairs*, 213.

⁴⁹ Colbourn, "'Cruising toward Nuclear Danger'," 29.

⁵⁰ Charbonneau and Cox, "Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration," 316.

⁵¹ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 293–294.

Reagan's SDI proposal envisioned a technologically advanced missile defence system capable of intercepting incoming ballistic missiles before they reached North American targets. By challenging the logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD), SDI represented a potential paradigm shift in strategic thinking.⁵² For the United States, the initiative combined genuine technological optimism with political signalling, intended to pressure the Soviet Union and restore American confidence after a decade of perceived decline.⁵³ For allies, however, SDI generated deep uncertainty. European governments worried that missile defence could decouple American security from that of NATO, while arms control advocates feared the collapse of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.⁵⁴

In Canada, the initial reaction to SDI was cautious but not dismissive. Trudeau's government, still in office at the time of Reagan's announcement, refrained from outright condemnation, reflecting a reluctance to alienate Washington prematurely.⁵⁵ Trudeau himself viewed SDI skeptically, seeing it as technologically implausible and strategically destabilizing, yet he avoided framing the issue as a bilateral confrontation.⁵⁶ This restraint mirrored his approach to cruise missile testing: maintain dialogue, preserve alliance credibility, and avoid irrevocable commitments.

The policy dilemma intensified after Mulroney's election in 1984. Mulroney's personal rapport with Reagan and his broader ideological alignment with American conservatism created expectations — both domestically and internationally — that Canada would participate in SDI research.⁵⁷ The administration in Washington actively encouraged Canadian involvement, emphasizing potential economic benefits for Canadian firms and presenting participation as a natural extension of continental defence cooperation.⁵⁸ These inducements resonated with elements of Mulroney's cabinet, particularly those concerned with industrial development and technological modernization.

Despite this pressure, the Mulroney government ultimately declined formal participation in SDI in February 1985. Historians have emphasized that this decision was not the product of anti-American sentiment but of a careful assessment of strategic, political, and institutional risks.⁵⁹ Unlike cruise missile testing, SDI lacked a clear alliance mandate. It was a unilateral American initiative, only loosely connected to NATO strategy, and its long-term implications were deeply

⁵² Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 381.

⁵³ Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (University of Missouri Press, 1997), 114.

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *NATO and the United States*, 147.

⁵⁵ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 347.

⁵⁶ English, *Just Watch Me*, 505–506.

⁵⁷ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 142.

⁵⁸ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 118.

⁵⁹ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 126.

uncertain. Canadian officials feared that participation could entangle Canada in a program that undermined arms control norms and limited Ottawa's diplomatic flexibility.⁶⁰

James Fergusson's detailed analysis of the SDI debate highlights the vital role of bureaucratic skepticism. Canadian defence and foreign policy officials questioned both the feasibility of missile defence and the assumption that SDI would enhance continental security.⁶¹ They also noted that Canada already benefited from American missile defence developments through NORAD without assuming direct responsibility for their success or failure. Participation, therefore, offered limited strategic gain while exposing Canada to political and financial liabilities.

Domestic political considerations further constrained the government's options. The peace movement that had mobilized against cruise missile testing remained active, and public opinion polling indicated widespread opposition to SDI, which was frequently portrayed as a step toward the militarization of space.⁶² Mulroney's political capital, while substantial early in his mandate, was not unlimited, and cabinet discussions reflected concern that SDI participation could fracture public support for the government's broader agenda, including free trade negotiations.⁶³ In this context, restraint appeared politically prudent.

The decision not to participate in SDI has often been interpreted as evidence that Mulroney's pro-Americanism had clear boundaries.⁶⁴ While he was willing to align rhetorically with Reagan and support alliance cohesion, he resisted initiatives that threatened to redefine Canada's strategic role without adequate consultation or consensus. Unlike cruise missile testing, framed as temporary and reversible, SDI appeared open-ended and transformative. This distinction proved decisive.

Comparing the SDI and cruise missile cases underscores a key argument of this paper: Canadian cooperation with American defence initiatives was conditional rather than automatic, shaped by assessments of duration, control, and strategic coherence. Cruise missile testing was acceptable because it reinforced existing deterrence structures and preserved Canadian oversight. SDI, by contrast, challenged foundational assumptions about deterrence and arms control, placing it beyond the threshold of acceptable cooperation.⁶⁵ Importantly, Canada's refusal to participate in SDI did not produce lasting damage to the bilateral relationship. Washington expressed disappointment, but cooperation in other areas — including NORAD modernization and intelligence sharing — continued largely unaffected.⁶⁶ This outcome reinforces the conclusion that Canadian autonomy, while limited, was real and recognized by

⁶⁰ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 306.

⁶¹ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 133.

⁶² Colbourn, "'Cruising toward Nuclear Danger,'" 34.

⁶³ Blake, *Transforming the Nation*, 145.

⁶⁴ English, *Just Watch Me*, 522.

⁶⁵ Charbonneau and Cox, "Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration," 321.

⁶⁶ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 143.

American policymakers when exercised within a framework of transparency and alliance loyalty.

In historiographical terms, the SDI episode complicates narratives that depict Mulroney as uncritically aligned with American interests. It also challenges interpretations that equate Canadian resistance with ideological opposition. The decision not to participate was neither a rejection of continental defence nor an embrace of neutrality; it was a strategic judgment grounded in uncertainty, risk management, and domestic legitimacy.⁶⁷ Taken together with the cruise missile testing case, SDI illustrates the situational logic governing Canadian defence policy in the late Cold War. Cooperation was extensive but conditional, and divergence was possible without rupture. This pattern reinforces the central claim of this study: that Canadian–American relations during this period were defined less by personality or rhetoric than by context, constraints, and calculated choice.⁶⁸

Conclusion

This study has examined Canadian responses to American defence initiatives in the late Cold War in order to reassess the dynamics of Canadian–American relations beyond familiar binaries of dependence and partnership. By situating cruise missile testing and the Strategic Defence Initiative within a comparative framework spanning the Trudeau and Mulroney governments, it argues that Canadian policy was neither ideologically predetermined nor purely reactive. Instead, it emerged from a process of constrained choice shaped by alliance obligations, strategic geography, domestic legitimacy, and uncertainty about long-term consequences.

The contrast between cruise missile testing and SDI is central to this conclusion. Both initiatives originated in Washington, both carried significant symbolic weight, and both provoked domestic opposition in Canada. Yet Ottawa responded differently to each. Cruise missile testing was approved and sustained across administrations because it was bounded, reversible, and integrated into existing alliance structures. SDI, by contrast, was rejected because it threatened to alter the strategic foundations of deterrence and arms control without providing Canada with commensurate influence or clarity. The divergence between these outcomes underscores that Canadian cooperation with the United States was conditional rather than automatic.⁶⁹

This finding complicates leadership-centered interpretations of the Trudeau–Mulroney divide. While differences in rhetoric, style, and personal diplomacy were real, they did not override structural constraints. Trudeau’s nationalist instincts did not prevent approval of cruise missile

⁶⁷ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 307.

⁶⁸ Hilliker, Halloran, and Donaghy, *Department of External Affairs*, 231.

⁶⁹ Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence*, 147.

testing, nor did Mulroney's continentalist outlook compel participation in SDI. In both cases, decisions reflected assessments of risk, duration, and control rather than ideological alignment or personal affinity.⁷⁰ The implication is not that leadership was irrelevant, but that its influence operated within a narrow corridor defined by material and institutional realities.

This paper aligns with scholarship that emphasizes process, contingency, and bureaucratic mediation in Canadian foreign policy. It challenges narratives that treat Canada as either a passive subordinate or as a uniquely moral actor resisting American power. Instead, it presents Canada as a pragmatic middle power navigating asymmetry through selective engagement. This perspective preserves the explanatory value of traditional clichés — fear of domination and celebration of partnership — while reinterpreting them as political moods rather than determinants of policy.⁷¹

The cases examined here also highlight the importance of domestic legitimacy as a constraint on foreign policy. Public opposition did not prevent cruise missile testing, but it shaped how the policy was justified, limited its scope, and influenced subsequent decisions. The SDI debate, in particular, demonstrates how accumulated public skepticism toward nuclear weapons narrowed the range of acceptable cooperation. In this sense, domestic politics did not dictate outcomes but set boundaries within which policymakers operated.⁷²

More broadly, the Canadian experience during the late Cold War illustrates the paradox of sovereignty in asymmetric relationships. Canada could not unilaterally redefine continental defence, yet it retained the capacity to refuse participation in initiatives that exceeded its tolerance for uncertainty or loss of control. That refusal did not rupture the bilateral relationship, suggesting that American policymakers recognized — and accommodated — Canadian limits when they were articulated consistently and within alliance norms.⁷³

In conclusion, Canadian–American relations in the late Cold War were neither a story of seamless harmony nor one of perpetual constraint. They were situational, negotiated, and deeply shaped by context. By examining moments of both compliance and resistance, this study demonstrates that continuity, rather than rupture, characterized Canadian defence policy across ideological divides. Understanding this pattern is essential not only for interpreting the Cold War past but also for assessing the enduring challenges of asymmetry and alliance management in Canadian foreign policy.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Thompson and Randall, *Ambivalent Allies*, 312.

⁷¹ Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion*, 352.

⁷² Colbourn, ““Cruising toward Nuclear Danger,”” 34.

⁷³ Charbonneau and Cox, “Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration,” 327.

⁷⁴ Hilliker, Halloran, and Donaghy, *Department of External Affairs*, 232.

Bibliography

- Blake, Raymond B. *Transforming the Nation: Canada and Brian Mulroney*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.
- Bothwell, Robert. *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945–1984*. University of British Columbia Press, 2014.
- Buckner, Phillip. "British North America and a Continent in Dissolution: The American Civil War in the Making of Canadian Confederation." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 7, no. 4 (2017): 512–540.
- Charbonneau, Bruno, and Wayne S. Cox. "Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration: The Canadian–American Defense Relationship." *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 4 (2008): 303–323.
- Clearwater, John. *Just Dummies: Cruise Missile Testing in Canada*. University of Calgary Press, 2023.
- Colbourn, Susan. "'Cruising toward Nuclear Danger': Canadian Anti-Nuclear Activism, Pierre Trudeau's Peace Mission, and the Transatlantic Partnership." *Cold War History* 18, no. 1 (2017): 1–40.
- Ellison, Amy Noel. "Montgomery's Misfortune: The American Defeat at Quebec and the March toward Independence, 1775–1776." *Early American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017): 585–615.
- English, John. *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1968–2000*. Vol. 2. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2009.
- Fergusson, James G. *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954–2009*. University of British Columbia Press, 2010.
- Fischer, Beth A. *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*. University of Missouri Press, 1997.
- Freedman, Lawrence. *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*. 3rd ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hilliker, John, Mary Halloran, and Greg Donaghy. *Canada's Department of External Affairs, Volume 3: Innovation and Adaptation, 1968–1984*. University of Toronto Press, 2017.
- Kaplan, Lawrence S. *NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance*. Twayne, 1994.
- Thompson, John Herd, and Stephen J. Randall. *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies*. Crane Resource Centre, 2004.