

Harper's Foreign Policy Success?

John Kirton

Address to the Canadian Institute for International Affairs Toronto Branch at Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP, Toronto, November 28, 2006

Introduction

As we approach the end of Prime Minister Harper's first year in power, it is appropriate to ask how successful his foreign policy has been. In answering this question, we have little consensus, argumentation or evidence to go on from those who have pronounced on this subject so far. Those commentators who have addressed this question have divided into, and at times switched among, three competing schools of thought.

The first sees a restrained retreat to America, as Harper focuses on friendlier relations with his closest geographic, economic and ideological partners George Bush, adopts American-like positions on the Middle East and UN, but restrains himself from Mulroney-like rhetoric or continentalist integration until he can secure a safe majority of seats in the House.

A second school sees ignorant, incompetent isolationism, as a Prime Minister and cabinet who are novices in international affairs remain firmly focused on their five domestic priorities and display little interest, initiatives and influence in the world outside.

A third school sees Harper himself as a rational self confident calculator whose skills as a strategist could be put to good use on the foreign as well as domestic policy front. As Harper reached his first 100 days in office, columnist Andrew Coyne (2006) concluded, with a sense of surprise and excitement in his prose: "The most striking departures have been in the area of foreign affairs: the Prime Minister's bold visit to Afghanistan, with that stirring call to Canadian 'leadership;' the groundbreaking decision to withdraw funding from the Hamas regime in Palestine; the long-overdue designation of the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist group. And capping them all, the softwood lumber deal: evidence, perhaps, that better relations with the United States pays dividends."

Can that complimentary conclusion still stand now that Harper approaches his 300rdth day on the job and looks ahead to designing and delivering foreign policy for year two? To find out it is useful to assess his record to date against three criteria. The first is the foreign policy performance produced the last time Canada had as its Prime Minister a young Albertan with little previous interest or involvement in international affairs, no ministerial experience, and heading a fractious Conservative party, a minority government, and a cabinet with virtually no foreign policy experience at all. The second criterion is Harper's success, relative to his recent predecessors, in delivering the foreign policy promises he made and that the voters chose more than the others on offer when this year began. The third is making a durable difference outside Canada by shaping

world order based on the national interests and distinctive national values that Canadians have.

By these three criteria, we can conclude that Harper's foreign policy for his first year has been a striking success and promises well for the longer term.

Disasters Avoided During the First 300 Days

The first success comes from avoiding disasters of broadly the same sort that drove Joe Clark from office within his first nine months. In 1979 as in 2006, Canada's foreign policy agenda was filled with crises in the Middle East, refugees, nuclear proliferation, soaring energy prices, and a G8 summit devoted to delivering energy security to the world. This time the Prime Minister has not brought any of these controversies on himself, by deciding, for example, to move the Canadian Embassy to Jerusalem. But Harper has remained true to the finest traditions of Joe Clark's foreign policy, with the rescue of today's "boat people" – the substantially francophone current Canadian citizens from Lebanon. As someone raised in Toronto, Harper understands the richness of the modern multicultural Canada, an understanding confirmed by his apology for the Chinese head tax of the past and desire to bring more new Canadians with professional credentials more rapidly into Canada now. As someone professionally steeped in Alberta, he knows the global energy industry inside out, and the links between oil and gas and nuclear energy and weapons in Iran, Iraq and beyond. His expertise was put to good use at his first G8 summit in St. Petersburg in July.

Another disaster avoided has been Harper's widely anticipated retreat to the right to be closer to George Bush's US. Many critics had been convinced that Harper's not-so-secret foreign policy agenda would be to give George Bush the Mulroney-esque "benefit of the doubt", by putting Canadian troops in Iraq, participating in American Ballistic Missile Defence, and walking away from the Kyoto Protocol as Bush had done during his first few months on the job. None of these nightmares has happened and they become less likely with each passing day. In cases such as Iraq, BMD, or a new "coalition of the willing" to punish a nuclear addicted Iran, Bush's America has been smart enough not to ask Harper's Canada to join in. When sounded out, as on sending a Canadian warship to interdict UN prohibited weapons from going into or out of North Korea, Harper has easily and quickly said "no" at no cost.

On the home continent, Harper has gotten Bush's America to give him the benefit of the doubt, most notably by delivering a long awaited settlement on **softwood lumber**. Those scoring the **outcomes** of bilateral bargaining between Canada and the US can put in Canada's win column a long list of victories, such as stopping American live fire exercises on the Great Lakes, and keeping the Alaska National Wildlife Reserve closed. Having survived so happily with his American neighbours for the nine months from February 6 when he was sworn in as PM, through to November 7 when George Bush's Republican Party was voted out of Congressional control, Harper should have an even easier time adjusting America in the months and years ahead.

Promises Delivered During the First Year

While America always needs attention, Harper has been focused on designing and delivering his own “made-in-Canada” foreign policy on a global scale. It was well laid out in the carefully constructed Conservative Party platform, campaign announcements, victory night address, first Speech from the Throne and Harper’s many speeches on foreign policy this year. From the start it promised global leadership for democratic development, pledged new defence and development spending to back it up, portrayed America as Canada’s leading adversary, not ally, and put the G8, OECD and NAFTA as the international institutions Canada cares about the most.

In deploying his international affairs resources, Harper has largely delivered. He has chosen his closest personal advisors from the Progressive Conservative side of his party, put professionals rather than patronage appointments in the key diplomatic posts at the UN and London, and re-integrated the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade that Paul Martin destroyed on his first day on the job. In his own summity Harper’s preferred partners have been the leaders of not only the neighbouring US but also more distant Japan and Mexico in first place, with the principle powers of France, China and Russia close behind.

Those deeply devoted to the belief that Canada was overdue to reinvest in the hard power resources long in decline will applaud Harper’s decision in his first budget to raise defence spending, even more than the Martin Liberals, to over \$16 billion annually by 2007-8. Those demanding that these re-investments be done in a balanced, indeed nuanced fashion, should similarly approve his decision to keep Paul Martin’s promise to increase ODA by 8% a year, increase that by \$425 million over five years and deliver more than three quarters of that increase during his first year largely to promote international public health. Whereas the Liberals left with a projected ODA expenditures showing they intended to rapidly retreat from Afghanistan, Harper has promised one hundred million a year for ten years, for a one billion dollar commitment in all. And because he treats the francophone dimension of Canadian foreign policy as equally as Mulroney and Trudeau did, Harper also pledged \$100 million a year for five years to Haiti, to show that Canada will also stay there for the long haul to get the job done. Note that these large commitments alone direct Canada’s ODA strongly to the poorest people in the poorest countries in the world. They are certainly not the countries one would select on a short list of two dozen or so favorites if one were looking for quick, high profile success to show off to the voters back home.

Harper’s early decisions have delivered his desired global leadership as decisively, and daringly as Pierre Trudeau did in his first year. Even before he was sworn in as PM, Harper’s faced, uniquely in Canadian diplomatic life, an American ambassador calling on Canada to spend less of defence, in this case on the new equipment needed to ensure that Canada’s Arctic remained its own. Harper immediately said “no” to the US and “yes” to Canada’s Arctic sovereignty. He moved to ensure the latter, while Torontonians were

attending conferences with Bill Clinton this summer. In contrast to Trudeau in 1970 and Mulroney in 1985, Harper has moved proactively and preventatively to defend Canada's sovereignty, territory, security and fragile environment before rather than after the Americans send their ships through Canada's Arctic domain.

Similarly decisive and daring was Harper's decision to lead the world as the first country outside Israel to cut off funding and contacts with a Palestinian government controlled by a Hamas movement legally defined as a terrorist organization by Prime Ministers Martin and Chrétien.

On Afghanistan, Harper has again led, not only with an early visit, but also by having Parliament agree that Canadian troops would remain in the top tier of those actually fighting in Afghanistan through to 2009. As with the ten year, one billion dollar development assistance commitment, this was an integral part of the underlying strategy to change the expectations of all Afghans and their immediate neighbours so that they would believe that this time, for the first time, the foreigners would stay until the goal most want was irreversibly reached.

Another promise delivered has been giving Quebec an opportunity to participate in UNESCO, along the lines of the historic agreement by Brian Mulroney, Pierre Marc Johnson and Francois Mitterrand that gave birth to the Francophone summit in 1986. This furthers the national interest of national unity at home, and the distinctive national value of promoting cultural and linguistic diversity abroad.

As Harper's first outing on the full world stage, the July 15-17 G8 Summit in St. Petersburg posed a more difficult test for the rookie PM. But here too Harper delivered. He led the G8 and its Russian host to accept open markets as the best way to ensure energy security, and to affirm human capital and innovation as the forward looking way to treat the summit's education priority, rather than through the traditional ways that were constitutionally controlled by proud provinces at home. And on the Middle East, it was Canada that drafted the innovative, action-oriented statement that was largely accepted by the G8, affirmed by Kofi Annan and the UNSC P5 member of China the next day, and approved by the UN Security Council soon after. Some months later Harper led the Francophone Summit and its many Arab and African leaders, as well as France, to set aside a resolution critical of Israel to accept the more nuanced, Canadian-initiated, G8 approved, UN-accepted approach.

Making a Difference

While Harper may be off to a strong start on a highly ambitious foreign policy agenda around the world, has he yet made a durable difference in shaping world order the way Canadians need and want? It is too soon to declare success here after only ten months on the job. But it is already clear that Harper has demonstrated that his Canada has the capacity to do this in the coming years.

In the first instance, successful global leadership requires follower-ship from consequential countries in order to create a majority that prevails in the clubs that count. This Harper has shown he can get, from many in the G8 and from France in la Francophonie on the Middle East front. He also at the APEC leaders' meeting in November got the Chinese leader to finally meet with him, with both knowing there would be a lecture on human rights and Canada's defence of its own endangered citizen, even if a dual one, abroad.

The next test is Afghanistan, where middle power Poland and Romania have already responded to Canada's call with substantial, first line combat troops coming without caveats to give the hard pressed Canadians a hand. The coming days will determine whether Canada and the Dutch, who have not defected, can get more help from the larger allies whose territory Canada's stationed combat forces in the European theatre of NATO helped defend for so long.

To be sure, there are many large issues that lie beyond: making the R2P principle that Harper has adopted and promoted work on the ground in Darfur; fulfilling his promise to control greenhouse gas emissions "in concert with the other advanced industrial states", and finding the formula to negotiate and deliver the desired bilateral free trade agreements with both India and Japan.

It is still too soon to say that Harper's full foreign policy is a striking success. And it will be until he, like Chrétien and Mulroney, has a decade on the job and can leave office by credibly claiming that national unity is secure, the Americans have accepted Canada's Arctic claim, climate change has been controlled, and the war in Afghanistan has been won. But by the standards set by his Albertan precursor, his other prime ministerial predecessors, and by his own promise to deliver global leadership, Harper is off to a strong successful start.