

Lecture to Andrew Cohen's Carleton Journalism Class

October 2012

Since I published the original version of *Getting Back in the Game* this time last year, much has happened that will affect Canadian foreign policy — the proverbially good, bad, and, if not ugly, at least incalculable.

Good

Among the potentially “good” developments for Canadian foreign policy — at least in principle — was the election of a majority government that creates the opportunity to reset Canadian foreign policy.

Further, Prime Minister Harper is more comfortable in his international role than he was as a rookie in 2006

and has the political capital to do more than simply to be prime minister.

Moreover, he is aware now, as he was not when he came to office, that international affairs are crucially important to Canada (Mansbridge and Whyte interviews).

He has quietly conducted an internal re-examination of Canada's goals abroad.

He has put particular weight on economic foreign policy,

He is more aware that personal diplomacy matters in international relations—

The world is still not exactly beating path to our door

How often do you see flags along the NCC ceremonial route?

But the Prime Minister is more engaged than he was

On balance, the appointment of John Baird as foreign minister is good as well.

Although Baird's international experience is scant and not especially happy,

e.g., on climate change

and on air transport relations with the United Arab Emirates,

he is a strong personality and is trusted by the prime minister.

He has his own political standing and is therefore more capable than many of his predecessors of resisting "poaching" by cabinet colleagues with their particular agendas,

Baird seems especially to have absorbed the lesson that personal relations matter in international diplomacy

Partly as a consequence, he and the Prime Minister are succeeding in “walking back” some ill-advised policy decisions, notably on China, Turkey, the UAE, and to some extent on Mexico

And they are bringing greater coherence to Canadian policy.

The government has an opportunity to recoup Canada’s standing if it suppresses the likely strong impulse to keep on doing what has worked for it politically,

i.e., privileging communications over substance,

tailoring foreign policy to Diaspora politics,

lying low on climate change,

and disparaging the UN.

Regrettably, the early signs are not all promising.

At the G8 summit in May 2011, the prime minister parted company with his partners, including the United States, and endorsed the Likud government’s position on Israel’s borders.

And Harper and Baird's accusing the Palestinian Authority of unilateral action for taking their case to the multilateral UN, and their total endorsement of Israel's position at the UN will burden Canadian foreign policy for years to come.

Further, in the 2011 Speech from the Throne, Harper promised to "stand up for Canadian farmers and industries by defending supply management,"

the protectionist agricultural policy that profits Ontario and Quebec farmers, including separatists, at other Canadians' expense and burdens Canada's negotiations with the European Union

and even excludes Canada from the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership, potentially the most important transpacific economic group.

Further, the government has signalled that it will

slow the growth of the defence budget,

freeze aid spending at current levels,

cut back on diplomacy, and subject all departments to "strategic" spending cuts.

None of this is a prescription for a more effective foreign policy.

Bad

Under the “bad” heading, Canada failed to win the United Nations Security Council election in the fall of 2010.

From Mackenzie King to Jean Chrétien, we had won the coveted seat once a decade, since 1948.

The loss diminished our international standing and, equally bad, deprived us of an important, albeit temporary, instrument for promoting our ideas and protecting our interests.

The reasons for the loss were clear.

Stephen Harper’s government had scarcely concealed its contempt for the UN, abandoned Canada’s commitments on climate change,

shifted Canada’s aid policy focus from the relatively poorer Africa to the relatively richer Americas,

gave largely uncritical support to Israel’s deepening occupation of the West Bank and its blockade of Gaza,

and mismanaged relationships with China, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, and others.

The UN loss matters because it constitutes a remarkable indictment of the Harper government’s foreign policy.

While the UN, with its universal membership, has a few tyrants and thug states among its adherents, the great majority of its 192 members are free or partly free, according to Freedom House, the bipartisan American monitor of international democratic progress.

On the decisive ballot, Canada got just seventy-six votes.

The loss matters also because the Council, the world's top security body, handles the big issues of peace and war.

In the last decade, while the Council has sometimes been divided,

it has nevertheless outlawed cooperation with al Qaeda,

authorized military action in Afghanistan,

declined to authorize the Bush administration's attack on Iraq,

ended the bloody conflict between Israel and Hezbollah,

toughened sanctions on nuclear violators North Korea and Iran,

imposed a no-fly zone in Libya and authorized member states to protect Libyans from their psychopathic leader

and received the Palestinians' application for membership.

All of these issues have affected Canadians' interests directly or indirectly.

It is better to be a policymaker or, at least, shaper, inside the Council chamber than a policy taker outside it,

which is why Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil seek election to the Council as often as possible and why they campaign persistently for permanent status.

Ironically, we are not on the Council as it addresses the Palestinian application for membership.

Incalculable

Currently “incalculable” but obviously crucial are the breathtaking rise of China, India, Brazil, and Mexico, the political disarray of the United States and the fiscal crisis in Europe, the disappearance of existential threats to Canada and the diminishing need for alliances, the spreading scourge of illegal drugs and crime, the Arab Awakening, and the acceleration of the digital age that is transforming the context of foreign policy and the conduct of diplomacy.

What Needs to Be Done

To succeed in this rapidly changing world, there is much the Harper government needs to do, including to:

- Abandon the alternative universe it created for itself in its first five years in office, a universe in which, to quote the

2007 Speech from the Throne, “focus and action rather than rhetorical posturing are restoring our influence in global affairs ...” In this universe, saying something makes it so, international affairs are played for partisan advantage, and principle is evoked to cover all manner of policy failings, errors, and chicanery.

- Bring coherence to foreign-policy formulation by recalibrating the budgets of Canada’s international departments, re-empowering Foreign Affairs to manage foreign relationships in the common interest, realigning defence and foreign-policy purposes, reintegrating aid policy into foreign policy, and partnering more effectively with the millions of Canadians active internationally.
- Enhance Canada’s competitiveness by shoring up our key economic partnerships, incrementally and pro-actively removing unnecessary obstacles to business between Canada and the United States, our indispensable strategic partner and natural ally, and by restoring constructive political and economic relations with Mexico, so damaged by the Harper government’s self-inflicted visa fiasco of 2009.
- Urgently make China a top strategic priority. To position Canada better to profit more fully from Chinese growth, and to further diversify Canadian markets abroad, especially at a time when US demand for Canadian exports is flagging, the government should

also press ahead with the Asia-Pacific gateway and pipeline and transport corridor infrastructure on and to the West Coast.

- Expand our increasingly vital relationships with the rest of Asia where we have not been able to complete a single free trade agreement. The government should redouble its efforts to join the nascent Trans-Pacific Partnership, and to participate in the East Asian Summit to put ourselves back on the Asia-Pacific map.
- Complete the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Europe (CETA), a Canadian objective since Pierre Trudeau was prime minister, at least.

- Strengthen global governance: by rebuilding our relationship with the UN, in part by employing the best small armed force in the world in un-sanctioned humanitarian missions to protect civilians, as we are doing in Libya; by devoting increased diplomatic effort to reinvigorating arms control negotiations;

- Embrace “mini-lateralism” by making the G20 effective and rendering Canada indispensable in this most important international governance innovation; and by drawing up strategies for political, economic, and cultural co-operation with each member of the G20, including the second tier.

- Strengthen Canada’s sovereignty in the North by controlling

the Northwest Passage, promoting co-operation through the Arctic Council, and resolving competing resource claims offshore diplomatically with the five riparian states under the Law of the Sea.

- Put Canada on the right side of history by actively embracing the Arab Awakening (the twenty-first century's equivalent of the end of colonialism and of the collapse of communism), providing technical assistance in support of the development of democratic institutions, and giving political and financial backing for Canadian investment that will help give Arab citizens the prospect of better lives.
- Reground our position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in international law, human rights, fairness, and compassion. Ottawa should maintain its steadfast support for Israel's security and right to exist, but also join the growing international movement to recognize the Palestinians' right to exist, too, in a viable, secure, and democratic state, based on the 1967 borders with agreed land swaps. Given the ferment all around them, and the shifting demographic balance west of the Jordan River, those who consider themselves the Israelis' friends should help them to achieve peace while it might still be possible.
- Make a good-faith effort independent of the US Congress to address climate change, a problem whose mitigation only becomes more expensive as time goes by.

These are big steps for any Canadian government to take, but they would deliver dividends at home and lift Canada's standing internationally.

And, thanks to Canadian voters and vote splits, the Harper government has a strong political hand to play.

What remains is for the Canadian people to demand a foreign policy that enhances, not diminishes, them.