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# Canada is not a Fireproof House

The Harper government is putting teeth in Canada's foreign policy instead of having the country rest on its almost-antique peacekeeping laurels but that doesn't mean it poses new risks

Nelson Michaud



**T**he election of Stephen Harper's Conservatives was an augur of a more proactive foreign policy for Canada. Despite the absence of a formal policy statement, the world has offered ample occasions for the new government to act, and for Canadians and international observers to evaluate whether Canada was still to wait on the sidelines as it did under the Chrétien government, or list too many priorities, but no real objectives, as it did under Paul Martin.

The actions by the Tories, including Stephen Harper's visit to Afghanistan soon after his election, the reorganization of DFAIT, efforts to improve relations with the U.S., to name but a few, came in sharp contrast to the record of the last 13

years. In reaction to this new orientation, critics started to argue that to be more active on the world scene makes Canada vulnerable to terrorist retaliation and puts Canadians and the Canadian territory at risk.

Is it the case? To answer this question, at least three myths need to be debunked.

### Myth 1: Canada is a fireproof house

The first myth is that Canada can be immune from external threats. If this was possibly true early in the last century when Liberal Senator Raoul Dandurand portrayed Canada as a fireproof house, it is no longer the case and has not been for a long time. In fact, the recent passage to a war based on unpredictable threats and

attacks on the morale of the enemy – the so-called fourth generation war – has made Canada's immunity an even more obsolete concept.

All terrorist organizations know that striking Canada is feasible and, to take but an example, that a paralysis of Canada's economic exchanges with the United States (let us say, as a result of a border closure by U.S. authorities following a terrorist attack on Canadian soil) would be harmful not only to Canada, but also to the United States due to the relative importance of Canadian-American trade on its economy. Terrorists would then hit two birds with one stone and this has less to do with foreign policy – active or not – and more to do with

Canada's geographic location and economic integration.

Therefore, from the start, we can conclude that, notwithstanding any foreign policy option, Canada is not immune from the threat of terrorist attacks.

#### **Myth 2: Canada is the servant of the United States**

Looking at Stephen Harper's more active stance on the world scene, several critics add that he plays a game coached from Washington and that, as a consequence, the country will be swept by the same wave of terror that could hit the U.S. Does this mean that a more active foreign policy is what Washington wants? And does that turn Canada into a perfect target for terrorists?

A more resolute Canadian presence internationally will please the U.S. State Department, of course. But no doubt it also pleases the Foreign Office in London, the Quai d'Orsay in Paris, and all of Canada's partners around the world. For too long Canada has pretended to be among the leading nations without paying the accompanying dues. It is time that Canada lived up to its world commitments, which in turn will generate more respect for the country.

Such respect places Canada in a better position to negotiate and get more of what it wants from its southern neighbour. Perhaps more importantly, we must consider that Canada's international influence – on which the strength of its economy and, in turn, its standard of living and its social safety net, largely depend – is enhanced when the relationship between the prime minister and the president is cordial and open. Canada played its more influential international roles during the eras of prime ministers Mackenzie King, who had an excellent relationship with Franklin Roosevelt, and later with Brian Mulroney, who was able to influence presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. As a result, Canada was instrumental in building Bretton Woods/NATO, and many UN institutions. Canada also played a role Canadians are proud of, in the dismantling of apartheid and in the responsibility to support democracy in troubled countries, such as Haiti. These actions generated respect for Canada, not problems. In fact, a country that is highly respected by its peers is less likely to become a target for terrorist retaliation, since the assailant would then face a response from several nations in solidarity with the state that was attacked.

#### **Myth 3: Canada is a neutral player**

Such solidarity is even entrenched in international charters, such as NATO's, with formal language underlining the plain notion of "all for one and one for all." Canada is no exception to this motto, and to pretend that Canada is or should be neutral has nothing in common with this reality.

Some argue that such neutrality was represented in Canada's role as a peacekeeper, so Ottawa policy-makers should stick to this role. This was a valid option

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as long as peacekeeping was the order of the day. But for more than 10 years, peacekeeping has evolved into peacebuilding and peacemaking. UN Chapter 6 (on peaceful resolution of conflicts) interventions have left room for more and more Chapter 7 (use of force) involvement. If indeed Canada is a strong supporter of multilateralism, it cannot be neutral; it has to frame its foreign policy and its actions to that evolution.

#### **The Afghanistan mission**

In the case of Afghanistan, accusations of blindly following the U.S. marching orders are especially ill-founded. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is not a U.S. operation, but led by NATO. If Canada believes in NATO, it has to play an active role in it. Does this mean that terrorists will consider retaliation against Canada? One can reasonably submit that just belonging to NATO would be enough for retaliation, since that organization is the enemy of terrorists in Afghanistan.

Some go further and advocate that this involvement goes against Canadian values. If these values include multilateralism and, lately, "the responsibility to protect," Canada cannot be excused when the situation calls for its presence.

It is wrong to perceive the Canadian Forces as CIDA agents in armoured vehicles. Gen. Rick Hillier's adoption of the "three-block war" doctrine rightly acknowledges the humanitarian needs that follow most armed conflicts and wants the Canadian military to be able to carry part of these duties. But this does not remove the prime responsibility of the soldiers to fight. If fighting is enough to have terrorists consider Canada a target, then most countries are in the same situation.

#### **To sum up**

Now that Canada is involved to a larger extent on the world scene, critics raise their voice and claim that the country should refrain from being part of foreign missions where lethal force is used. NDP leader Jack Layton asked for an immediate withdrawal of Canadian forces from Afghanistan. Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe, after supporting Canada's involvement in ISAF, asked to reconsider the question in an emergency debate in the House of Commons. Candidates in the Liberal leadership race do not agree on a common position for their party. These partisan approaches may get some votes, but they undermine the rebuilding of Canada's world influence. They wipe out the fact that securitization is an unavoidable step before any reconstruction is possible. And perhaps more importantly, they echo myths that need to be destroyed if Canada wants to remain an influential actor in world decision-making.

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