



Changes to the Canadian Foreign Policy Agenda: From Liberal Internationalist to Neo-Realist

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“Canadian soldiers from the UN Disengagement Observer Force lower the Canadian flag in March, 2006, during a handover ceremony ending Canada’s 32-year contribution to the mission along the disengagement line between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights” (The Star <http://www.thestar.com/News/GlobalVoices/article/429864>)

Changes in the Canadian Foreign Policy Agenda From Liberal Internationalist to Neo-Realist

Canadian foreign policy has historically been focused on factors such as Human Security, peacekeeping, multilateralism, and development. As Mintz, among others, points out many have argued that the Canadian foreign policy agenda has been characteristically liberal internationalist in nature (Mintz, Tossutti, L., & Dunn 496). The authors on to elaborate Canada's history in the international realm. It has, they note, been distinguished by great internationalists such as Nobel Peace Prize winner and Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, who involved Canada heavily in activities such as peacekeeping, dispute resolution between countries, and in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. Indeed they even note that, for a time, Canada earned the nickname as the "helpful fixer" in the international realm.

Since the establishment of Stephen Harper's Conservative government, however, Canadian foreign policy has begun to take on different characteristics. Scholars such as O'Reilly & Murrett have pointed out that Harper's attitudes towards foreign policy are more comparable to those of George W. Bush than to Lester B. Pearson (O'Reilly, Murrett 2). There have been incremental but increasingly major changes in policies regarding security, trade, immigrants, multilateralism, and peacekeeping. It is the objective of the present essay to provide evidence to support this claim. We will examine economic and security policy initiatives under the Harper regime for evidence of departures from traditional foreign policy behaviour. This essay argues that Canada's foreign policy initiatives are markedly different under the Harper regime. Yet, in spite of the changes, there remain some traditionally Canadian characteristics. I then move to argue that Harpers' foreign policy agenda, while in general dissonance with Canadian foreign policy initiatives over the twentieth century, has not been, taken as a whole, overly successful.

A Departure from Liberal Internationalist Peacekeeping

We will first look at some of the major departures from traditional Canadian foreign policy that has come about under the Harper regime. O'Reilly & Murrett, mentioned earlier, use evidence from Harper's arctic security policy and his attitude toward involvement in Afghanistan to support the claim that his government's foreign policy style is markedly different than that of his predecessors. Whereas historically, Canada's policies have often been somewhat more pacifistic (for instance, not getting directly involved in the Iraq war or Vietnam) – Harper has gotten Canada involved in a drawn-out offensive in Afghanistan. Harper's initiative in Afghanistan, in spite of Conservative attempts to frame it as such, does not resemble a peacekeeping mission. Furthermore, peacekeeping missions with heavy Canadian involvement have traditionally occurred through the UN, as opposed to being national or NATO initiatives. Not only has the Harper administration engaged in more non-multilateral national offensives, it has also cut the number of troops dedicated to peacekeeping.

It seems clear that Canada's foreign policy has indeed changed, but perhaps what has emerged has still kept many traditionally Canadian characteristics. For example, Murray & McCoy view the Afghanistan initiatives in a different light:

“Canadian Forces' participation in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan may prove that the idea of middlepowermanship has been replaced as the dominant Canadian foreign policy strategy in favor of peacebuilding, which has become increasingly popular in United Nations (UN) rhetoric and doctrine, especially since the adoption of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005.” (Murray and McCoy 172)

So, perhaps the Harper initiatives do indeed still retain some liberal internationalism at their heart, such as demonstrated by a commitment to the core principles of R2P, for example. Also, perhaps Harper's national security focus isn't something so new, either. As Murray and McCoy

elaborate: “Using security as the foundation upon which to build foreign policy, Canada set the notion of national protection as a major element in its Cold War foreign relations strategy” (Murray and McCoy 172).

Nevertheless, accounting for all of these changes, O'Reilly & Murrett argue that since Harper first entered office in 2006, Canada has entered a new era in foreign policy (O'Reilly and Murrett 4). They note that Canada's involvement in Afghanistan has become increasingly unpopular amongst the Canadian populace. They also go on to note that Canada is asserting its authority over the northern territories. The Harper administration's northern sovereignty agenda is also a break from traditional Canadian approaches. While it isn't wrong to claim sovereignty over much of the land in the north, claiming sovereignty over the Northwest Passage is more contentious. Furthermore, the problem doesn't necessarily rest in the claiming of sovereignty, rather, it may rest in how the administration goes about doing so. Does the Harper administration claim the land by calling upon the rule of law to settle the dispute, or does it claim the land by sending out more military planes and ships to patrol the area? Much of the world considers the Northwest Passage to be international waters, but Harper wants to send a message loud and clear to everyone who thinks so: this is our water, and we are working to ensure it is defended. O'Reilly & Murrett sum up the nature of the Harper administration's attitude toward foreign policy thus:

“As prime minister, Harper has favored a self-interested foreign policy and privileged the so-called Anglosphere (i.e., English speaking countries). By unashamedly advocating *Realpolitik*, he has seemingly flouted Canadian liberal internationalism, a long standing consensus attitude which stipulates that the country must promote the international good.” (O'Reilly and Murrett5)

So, while a nuanced analysis is critical to prevent whitewashing the Harper administration, it seems clear from an analysis of the Harper administration's attitude toward Afghanistan, the arctic, and peacekeeping that there has been a general break from traditional Canadian foreign policy attitudes. It would appear that the traditional liberal internationalism of the Lester B. Pearson is over, and the neo-realism of George W. Bush has arrived to replace it. Military missions are favored over peacekeeping, and national security is favored over human security.

Economics

During Harper's time as Prime Minister, Canada has also seen some relatively major changes to its national and international economic attitudes as well, although perhaps not as drastic as the changes to security and intervention policy. Ackelson points out that the Canadian-US border has been allowed to 'thicken' in recent times (Ackelson). It would seem, then, that the Harper regime has been at least somewhat complicit with allowing borders to thicken, which has affected trade adversely. The traditional Canadian-US stance on border security has usually embodied a constant drive for more openness. Of course the events of September 11th, 2001 changed the context of that drive for openness. Nevertheless, it would appear that Harper is allowing the traditional open Canadian-US border to thicken in favor of improved security. So, again, we have a turning away from the openness of the liberal internationalist sentiment, and a movement towards the closed, nationalistic sentiment instead. This subtle change becomes even more evident when we consider the case of the proposed takeover of Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan Inc. (PotashCorp) by BHP Billiton Limited (BHP). In November 2010 Industry Minister Tony Clement announced his decision to reject the proposed takeover of Potash Corporation by BHP. The justification was that the proposed takeover was not, in his opinion, "of net benefit to Canada" (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/potash/potash->

[ruling-casts-doubt-on-foreign-takeovers/article1784911/](#)). As Osler, among others, put it: “this [was] only the second investment rejected under the *Investment Canada Act* (outside of the cultural area) since the legislation was enacted in 1985” (Osler, Hoskin, and Harcourt). Again, it seems quite evident that there has been a subtle yet important shift in Canadian economic strategy. The Harper regime pursues national economic interests at the expense of the international. Borders thicken, international trade takes a hit, and foreigners interested in our businesses are sent packing. Many of these subtle security, intervention, and economic policy changes have plausible long-term negative effects on the Canadian economy.

Political Effects of Security, Military, and Intervention Policies

The political damage from the Harper administration’s policies regarding the arctic, peacekeeping, and military intervention has been considerable. Canada, traditionally seen as a pacifistic, international-minded middle power, is now often viewed as a US strong-arm wannabe. Canada, becoming deeply embroiled in the conflict in Afghanistan, has lost much of its credibility as a peaceful, non-combatant country. The decline in Canada’s participation in peacekeeping programs only serves to reinforce the notion that Canada doesn’t care about the international realm – except where its own national interests are at stake. Harpers arctic military policies send a signal loud and clear to other countries: this is our land. All-in-all, Canada is much more likely now to be seen as nationalistic, militaristic, willing to invade foreign countries, in favor of military solutions as opposed to the rule of law or diplomacy, and power hungry. It’s no wonder if the attitudes of the international community have soured against Canada, as demonstrated from Canada’s recent loss of a seat in the Security Council. The international community may feel that the old Pearsonite liberal internationalist Canada has come and gone.

An excellent demonstration of how the international community has reacted to Canada's new foreign policy initiatives is Canada's failed attempt to win a Security Council seat at the United Nations. Doubtlessly, however, Canada's reputation had an effect on how the international community voted. Many have argued that members of the international community saw Canada's transition in an unfavourable light. They might have asked themselves whether it is characteristic of a country like Canada to be vying for a Security Council seat in such a manner. Harper's militaristic attitude about security or purchasing expensive pieces of military equipment seems to have fallen on deaf ears in the international community. Regardless, somehow it doesn't seem surprising that Canada failed in its bid for a seat. And maybe the reason is that Canada just doesn't have a place doing aggressive military operations and engaging in nationalist-militarist showboating. Canada's foreign policy history, as mentioned before, is thoroughly steeped in a liberal internationalist essence. Much to Harper administration's dismay, it won't be easy to change the Canadian foreign policy spirit.

Conclusion

In this essay evidence was sought to support the claim that the Canadian foreign policy agenda has been changed significantly since the Conservative government was first elected in 2006. Since then, it is evident that Canada's foreign policy has become more nationalistic, more interventionist (when it serves national interests), more and more militaristic. Peacekeeping operations are giving way to military occupations, and free trade and openness is giving way to closed borders and protectionism. Economically, the effects have probably been mixed. Canada suffered only a mild recession where much of the rest of the world struggled with massive debts and credit crunches. However, it could be argued that the Harper administration's choice to intervene in the bid for Potash Corp has turned off some investors from Canada, potentially

causing some damage in the long run. This risk will be multiplied if the Conservative government makes a habit out of such intervention. The political ramifications of Canada's new foreign policy agenda have been less than positive. Canada has lost much of its credibility as a peace-loving, pacifistic middle power. Instead, Canada is likely seen by many as a US strongman wannabe. However, the simple reality is that Canada will probably never be able to live up to this role. Canada was well suited in its position as a peaceful middle power with a liberal internationalist mindset. It might have even been more influential internationally when it was. Perhaps evidence of this sentiment is the fact that Canada was denied the Security Council seat it wanted. Either way, this paper has shown that there have been important changes to the Canadian foreign policy agenda. This paper has also show than the effects of this new agenda have been, by-and-large, not beneficial to Canada.

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