

Wanted: A Coherent Canadian Foreign Policy

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, DEC 5 2012

In my previous blog post, I wrote about how we often give far too much credence to national leaders in the formulation of state foreign policies. A contingent part of the argument I put forward was that most states, due to their limited capabilities in the international system, really have very little control over their own fate in foreign affairs because they normally bind themselves to international organizations and they also form alliances with larger powers to achieve the goals of protecting themselves and hoping for some kind of tangible benefit. Great powers, and their leaders, have more of an ability to shape foreign policy strategy because they have the capability-levels to do so.

With all of this said, there has recently been an unusual amount of attention given to Canada's foreign policy strategy, with particular mention of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's staunch support for Israel's handling of the ongoing problems in the Gaza Strip. It is not at all a stretch to say that Canada has been Israel's most vocal supporter, and even when the US urged the Israeli government to exercise restraint and move towards a two-state solution, Canada remains virtually the only state not to condemn Israel's settlement building plans. In response, observers have admonished the Harper government for its unequivocal support for Israel and how such actions (or inaction) impact the historical pride Canadians took in their foreign policy approach.

Make no mistake, Stephen Harper has been attacked since his initial election in 2006 for his foreign and defence policies, but these criticisms were entirely predictable from the political left. Upon taking office, Harper immediately closed the human security office in the foreign affairs department, promised to keep Canada out of unnecessary foreign interventions, refused to engage in overly liberal issues or stances at the United Nations, and focused the nation's attention on national security matters, most notably Canada's Arctic. In 2008, Harper released his national defence strategy known as *Canada First*, aimed to emphasize the need for domestic security and sovereignty issues, and to move away from the foreign and defence policies of his Liberal government predecessors. These decisions earned Harper very few friends in the international relations community, especially among foreign policy scholars, but admittedly I was very quick to defend Harper's actions.

In a series of presentations, media interviews and newspaper editorials, I commented on how relieved I was to see a Prime Minister move away from the dangerous human security agenda towards a more realist strategy that accepted Canada's limited capabilities in the international system. I dubbed the Harper approach to foreign policy as "Restrained Pragmatism" and contented that such a shift was absolutely necessary after Canada's long-term deployment in Afghanistan and the threats posed to Canada's claims in the Arctic region. Between 2006 and 2011, I, as a known realist, saw a refreshing change that would have better reflected Canada's middle power status in the system, and that did not commit the nation's military, political and economic resources to utopian peacebuilding interventions that were of no rational benefit to Canada's national interests whatsoever.

In early 2011, Harper's Conservative government received a majority of seats in Canada's House of Commons and that is when the wheels began to fall off. Not only had the *Canada First Defence Strategy* almost disappeared, but Harper then committed Canada to the Libya intervention, began touting human rights as a cornerstone to his foreign policy, cut the funding to his Arctic commitments, and yet has been an advocate for Israel's right to self-defence and national sovereignty. What has emerged is a foreign policy without any sort of coherent vision or strategy that seems to calculate decisions based on polling information or oblivious ineptitude. I have no problem with Canada standing beside Israel in its efforts at protecting its national interests, but doing so on the heels of a Libyan intervention on

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humanitarian grounds is simply hypocritical.

While leaders may not have much ability to alter their state's place in the international system, every so often a leader makes poor decisions that do more harm to their state than good. Between 2006 and 2011, while his government was in a minority in the House of Commons, Harper's "Restrained Pragmatism" was a noticeable shift towards a realist foreign policy strategy. Since his majority election in 2011, Harper appears lost in the wilderness and such confusedness poses major risks for Canada among a system of states that love nothing more than taking advantage of others' weakness.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality

About the author:

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