

Ten Ways To Fix Canadian Foreign Policy

The response to John Baird's resignation as Canada's Foreign Minister has been more complimentary than critical, more hagiography than history. In the salutes to a veteran warrior departing the Parliamentary battlefield, more has been said about the strengths of his personality than about the failings of the foreign policy he served and sometimes led. Still less has been said about the depth of the hole that that policy has dug for Canada internationally.

The Harper government has had successes, notably the nascent Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Europe, the trade agreement with Korea, the maternal and children's health initiative and Mr. Baird's campaigns for gay and lesbian rights and against forced marriage. But, overall, the government's idiosyncratic foreign policy has damaged Canada's reputation and vitiated our interests. Beyond just stopping digging, there are a few things new Foreign Minister Nicholson and, more plausibly, the next government can do in style and substance to get out of the hole.

First, repair our poor relations with Washington. The template was created by Prime Minister Mulroney, who hosted eight American Presidential visits in nine years. It's through such visits that cooperation is forged. Prime Minister Chrétien received seven Presidential visits. In the Harper era there have been just three visits thus far, two by President Obama.

On the Harper government's top priority, Keystone XL, it seems unable to connect the dots between its own intransigence on climate change and President Obama's reluctance to override environmentalist opposition to the pipeline. Rather than aligning itself with Senate Republicans and futilely funding advertising campaigns extolling the pipeline's benefits, Ottawa should have cleaned up its climate change act and then approached the Americans with clean hands, as the Mulroney government did so effectively on acid rain a generation ago. It should still do so.

Second, give Mexico the attention and the respect it merits. Mexico is our third largest trading partner. 250 thousand Mexicans visit Canada annually. Or they did, until Ottawa's ham-handed imposition of a visa requirement cut tourism in half, at a cumulative cost to the Canadian economy approaching another billion dollars. Ottawa's incompetent handling of this file led the Mexican president to cancel his visit to Canada last year.

Third, update NAFTA. Little has been done to improve NAFTA in the more than 20 years of its existence. We could promote the incorporation into NAFTA of some of the advances negotiated in CETA, notably on state/province and municipal spending programs. But Ottawa is going backwards on this file. The Harper government called off the trilateral summit scheduled for Canada this month lest the tensions between Harper and the other leaders vitiate the impression of statesmanship the Harper government wishes to project in an election year.

Fourth, devise a comprehensive, aggressive strategy to engage constructively and consistently with Asia, starting with China. Because of the sheer size and unparalleled growth rate of Asian

economies, Canadian prosperity depends on increasing our share of their markets. But our share there is shrinking. Our major trading partners export more of their production to emerging markets than we do, Australia five times more. We have wasted time and opportunity and are now playing catch-up. Free trade agreements with China, Japan India and Indonesia would help, as would a successful conclusion to the Trans Pacific Partnership accord.

Fifth, bring our current posture vis-à-vis Israel-Palestine back into line with Canada's long-standing, fair-minded policies. Israel's ongoing settlement of hundreds of thousands of Jews in the West Bank is illegal, and is rendering the two state solution Ottawa notionally favours moot and diluting Israeli democracy. While we properly continue to support Israel's right to exist, we need to recognize that the Palestinians also exist and have rights. Ottawa should support not oppose the Palestinian effort to litigate the conflict in the International Criminal Court, a court created under Canadian leadership. It is better for the contesting parties to fight with legal briefs than lethal bombs.

Sixth, on Ukraine, re-align our rhetoric with reality. We contribute to NATO's efforts but we do not lead them and should not pretend we do. Ottawa is right to condemn Russia's thinly disguised aggression, but the Harper government's loud talk and little stick impresses no one, least of all the Russians. And we should take care not to let our hyperbole mislead ordinary Ukrainians into believing that the cavalry is coming. It isn't. The West, Canada included, will not fight World War III over Ukraine, except possibly by inadvertence and miscalculation,

Seventh, gear back on self-esteem; Canada is not a super power, energy or otherwise, nor a moral paragon. Our self-congratulations on values and principles are given the lie when we turn a blind eye to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, preemptively exempt Israel from the Fourth Geneva Convention in the last Gaza clash, all but advocate war against Iran, pursue arms deals with Wahhabist Saudi Arabia, and court the Gulf states and Egypt even as they perpetrate major human rights abuses.

Eighth, recognize that globalization makes cooperation with others indispensable. Ottawa should re-engage with the United Nations, whose Charter and institutions, treaties, laws and norms constitute the globe's governance ecosystem. Ottawa's truculence vis-à-vis the UN stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of our allies, and only harms Canada. Ottawa's reluctance to address climate change effectively, its renunciation of the desertification treaty and, unique in NATO, its failure to ratify the Small Arms Treaty, are seen by allies and others as unprincipled and irresponsible.

Ninth, restore the instruments of Canadian power and influence. Canadian spending on defence as a percentage of GDP is at its lowest ebb since the 1930s. Procurement problems abound, from the F35 to supply ships to Arctic icebreakers and beyond. Our aid program expenditures are half of what they were in percentage terms a generation ago. Meanwhile Ottawa deprecates its diplomats and disparages their expertise as it makes gut decisions based on ideology.

Tenth, let foreign ministers have a hand in foreign policy. while major policy decisions will continue inevitably to be made in the Prime Minister's Office, empower Mr. Nicholson, the only senior minister with a full time international avocation, to manage policy traffic at the many intersections of international interests and domestic governance,.

These 10 steps would begin to rescue us from the hole Mr. Baird and the Harper government have dug for us abroad.