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The leaked Foreign Affairs document indicating Canada's reputation "has declined or is under threat" is half right. But it is not just our multilateral diplomacy at the United Nations that is failing, as has been suggested. With a couple of rare exceptions, the Harper government's bilateral diplomacy is also failing. In a word, the Harper government's foreign policy is ineffective; it is stagecraft, not statecraft.

The PMO spin machine is trying to persuade Canadians that Stephen Harper is leading a more muscular, more self-interested and at the same time more principled foreign policy. Outside this Ottawa-created alternative universe lives a very different reality.

Canada-U.S. relations, job one for every prime minister, rival those of the dysfunctional Trudeau-Nixon days; little warmth is evident between Barack Obama and Mr. Harper. The Keystone XL pipeline, the Harper government's priority, seems further from realization than ever. Negotiations on the TransPacific Partnership trade agreement are held up on two industries vital to Canada – dairy and autos – and without even so much as a heads-up, Washington cut a separate deal with Japan. Meanwhile, on global affairs, the Harper government has frequently put itself at cross purposes with Washington, for example, on the Iranian nuclear deal, effectively supporting Israel in its unprecedented and unsuccessful interference in U.S. politics.

With Beijing, our second most important and fastest-growing economic partner, the Harper government has been pursuing on again, off again, light-switch diplomacy. Mr. Harper's interest in Asia generally has been more transactional than strategic, and Canada has been excluded from the East Asia Summit. Mr. Harper has deeply alienated Mexico, our third-largest trading partner, by bungling the imposition of visas on Mexicans, inconveniencing hundreds of thousands of prospective Mexican travellers, insulting Mexican officials and costing the Canadian travel industry several hundred million dollars. Of the major trade deals the Harper government has negotiated, only the one with Korea is in the bag, albeit several years late. The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Europe is awaiting ratification by EU member states, which is not a sure thing; it could be years before it is fully implemented. The trade covered by the agreements concluded with smaller countries amount to rounding errors in our trade statistics.

In the Arctic, the Harper government's vaunted defence priority is window-dressing. The percentage of GDP Canada spends on defence has fallen under Mr. Harper to about 1 per cent (the NATO target is 2 per cent), the lowest level since the 1930s. Mr. Harper's claims to leadership on Ukraine are seen by allies as political grandstanding by a military lightweight. The Harper government's sub-contracting of our Middle East policy to Israel's Likud Party has won us few friends outside Israel. Its sale of weaponry to serial human rights-abuser Saudi Arabia gives the lie to Mr. Harper's claim to a principled foreign policy. Meanwhile, Canada's spending on foreign aid has declined to 0.24 per cent of Canada's gross national income, falling below the OECD average for the first time since 1969. Finally, Mr. Harper's hectoring at the UN has made us the world's scold and cost us a Security Council election.

Mr. Harper's foreign policy has been more presentation than performance. It is foreign posture not foreign policy.