

Party leaders need to articulate a role for Canada in the world

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An overarching vision

Through its foreign policy, a country seeks to safeguard and advance its national interests and other goals on the international stage. Typically it includes a set of core principles or overarching values that, in Canada's case, have traditionally sought to balance Canada-United States relations on the one hand, and an innovative and dynamic engagement in the United Nations system and in building and strengthening international law on the other.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has sought to limit Canada's foreign policy to "economic diplomacy." He has also systematically reduced serious international issues—like the Ukraine crisis or the Iran nuclear negotiations or the international arms trade—to black and white caricatures, designed to appeal to narrow segments of potential Canadian voters.

Using the rhetoric of a so-called principled foreign policy, he has explicitly rejected the once highly-respected role of Canada as an international honest broker, a bridge-builder, a seeker of compromise and consensus, which Harper has characterized as mere spinelessness and a manifest lack of moral clarity.

But in action he has frequently demonstrated neither principle nor clarity, decrying Iranian human rights abuses while forging ever close relations with a viciously repressive Egypt; distorting our obligations under the Refugee Convention to privilege the relatively small number of Syrian Christians fleeing Islamic State over the millions of Muslims fleeing their government's barrel bombs; reversing course on China even to the point of allowing one of its state-owned companies to take over Canadian oil and gas company Nexen, to cite but a few of many such examples.

The first topic up for debate should be each party's vision of the broad strokes or overarching principles underpinning Canadian foreign policy in the 21st century.

Both NDP Leader Tom Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau call, in slightly different terms, for Canada to resume its role as a constructive international player. As world leaders gather at the UN General Assembly on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, we need to hear from Tom Mulcair why he thinks Canada's re-engagement with the United Nations system (including through UN peacekeeping) is the best way for Canada to help tackle global problems.

Justin Trudeau should explain why he appears to be placing less emphasis on the UN system and, if that is so, he should identify the alternative mechanisms he thinks Canada can exploit to enhance global peace, justice and prosperity.

Once the leaders have articulated the broad principles underpinning their vision of Canadian foreign policy, the debate can logically proceed to how those principles would be applied to address specific global challenges—beginning with confronting international terrorism.

International anti-terrorism

UN Security Council Resolution 1373, passed unanimously in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States, unambiguously treats terrorist acts as criminal activity. A companion declaration, also adopted unanimously, affirms the need for a “sustained, comprehensive approach” “in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and international law” and including “efforts to broaden the understanding among civilizations and to address regional conflicts and the full range of global issues, including development issues...”

Despite this laser focus on a criminal justice response in full accordance with international and domestic law and an equally clear recognition of the broader, interrelated issues to be addressed, the war on terror launched by former US president George W. Bush in the wake of the attacks was primarily a military effort and remains so to this day.

US President Barack Obama has replaced American military boots on the ground with drone strikes and air campaigns, although he has also frequently articulated the need to situate the military effort within a much broader political framework that addresses the governance failures and political exclusion that fuel terrorism. Against this backdrop of mainly counter-productive military efforts, party leaders should be asked to outline their vision of a comprehensive approach to confronting violent extremism, as a prelude to discussing the specific situation of Iraq and Syria.

Ending the war in Syria and Iraq

The NDP has rejected any military role in the US-led coalition against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria while the Liberals would pull out of the air war but keep some Canadian military trainers on the ground in northern Iraq.

Ongoing UN efforts to broker a negotiated settlement among the main parties to the conflict in Syria have been stymied from the outset by continued Western insistence (with Canada among the loudest) that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad surrender any role in a new government.

Recently, however, another vociferous Assad opponent, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, has floated the possibility of Assad’s short-term participation in a transitional government. An even more ambitious power-sharing plan is being developed by Russia with the stated aim of uniting all but the most hardline factions in one government able to effectively take on Islamic State, or ISIS.

With coalition air strikes barely slowing Islamic State down, and Russia stepping up heavy weapons shipments to the Syrian government lest it fall to Islamic State; in other words, with no positive military outcome in sight, what should Canada be doing to help end the wars in Syria and Iraq?

Israel and Palestine

The Harper government and opposition parties all say they are committed to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. In practice, Stephen Harper has become one of Israel's most reliable cheerleaders, going so far as to equate criticism of Israeli government policies with anti-semitism.

At the very end of the Maclean's Leaders debate, in a short exchange, Tom Mulcair took issue with Stephen Harper's "Israel, right or wrong" approach and asserted the importance of a "balanced approach" with the objective of a "safe state for Palestinians and a safe state for Israelis". Justin Trudeau did not address the issue.

Recalling the low key, constructive role that Canada used to play, such as chairing the Refugee Working Group as part of the broader Madrid negotiating process, each leader should be asked what concrete steps Canada could take to advance the two-state solution, as well as to address the steady deterioration in living conditions of Palestinians in Gaza and the Occupied Territories.

Canadian policy towards Iran

Despite our long-standing credentials and expertise on nuclear non-proliferation, Canada's role with respect to the negotiation of the historic Iran nuclear deal was to hector from the sidelines.

With its passage now largely assured, the stage is set for a broader American-Iranian rapprochement, albeit a nuanced one, given the implacable opposition of the Netanyahu government in Israel and the hostile reaction of some of America's key Gulf allies.

Justin Trudeau has already pledged to re-open diplomatic relations with Iran while Mulcair has also signaled his desire to put the relationship on a better footing. It will be important to hear how each party assesses the potential for a more constructive relationship with Iran over the next four years.

Canadian military exports and the Arms Trade Treaty

Canada, like most of its Western counterparts, has traditionally closely controlled the export of military equipment, to avoid contravening UN arms embargoes, fueling regional conflict and facilitating human rights abuses.

Canada's 10-year, \$15 billion armoured vehicle deal with Saudi Arabia seriously compromises that policy. Not only is there strong evidence that the Saudis used Canadian equipment to help suppress the peaceful protests in Bahrain in 2011, more recently Saudi Arabia stands accused of war crimes in the prosecution of its air war against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

With our export control policy in apparent tatters, it is incumbent on all party leaders to explain what further restrictions, if any, they believe should be placed on Canadian military exports to Saudi Arabia and what role international law should play in such determinations.

More broadly, party leaders should also be asked to indicate their position on Canada's shocking failure to sign and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty, a groundbreaking international convention, setting global standards for trade in armaments, which entered into force in December 2014 and now has 130 signatories including the United States.

Cluster munitions treaty ratification

Also on the topic of binding international rules of the road, Canada's implementing legislation for the treaty banning cluster munitions elicited much criticism for provisions that could see Canadian soldiers assisting states not party to the convention with the use of cluster munitions. All opposition parties voted against these offensive provisions of the enabling legislation.

Under this topic the onus falls to the Conservative government to try and explain when it would ever be justifiable for Canadian soldiers to participate in the use of cluster bombs, and why Canada as a party to the treaty does not forthrightly condemn Saudi Arabian use of cluster bombs in Yemen.

Canadian leadership on nuclear disarmament

This past August marked the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and earlier in the spring the latest review conference of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty took place in New York City.

Despite the pledge of its 190 members to negotiate the elimination of all nuclear weapons, significant modernization programs are underway or planned in all nine of the current nuclear weapons states. Even NATO's tactical nuclear weapons are being upgraded.

All party leaders should outline what concrete steps Canada should take to achieve a verifiable treaty for the prohibition and elimination of all nuclear weapons, and to bring NATO doctrine into conformity with our obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Women and foreign policy

Canada was among the first to recognize that empowering girls and women, particularly through education, yields significant development dividends. We also helped influence what ultimately became UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), which highlights not only the disproportionate impact of violent conflict on women and girls, but also stresses the important role women can and should play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building. Each of the party leaders should be asked to outline their position on the gender dimension of Canada's foreign policy.

Trade and the Environment

Tuesday's Globe and Mail contained excerpts from a "Canadian manifesto for the planet and one another", penned by Naomi Klein and David Suzuki among others. It reads in part: "We call for an end to all trade deals that interfere with our attempts to rebuild local economies, regulate corporations and stop damaging extractive projects."

Party leaders should be asked to explain how they would ensure that international trade agreements do not impede democratic accountability and good faith actions of governments to protect and advance the public good.

Conclusion

Above all, Canada's federal party leaders need to articulate a role for Canada in the world that is commensurate with our history, our capacity and our duty to help build a more just, peaceful and prosperous world for all.

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