CANADA IN THE POST-911 WORLD: OLD PERCEPTIONS AND NEW REALITIES

BY Denis Stairs

FOR A VERY LONG TIME NOW, CANADIANS HAVE BEEN LUXURIATING IN WHAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS A SELF-CONGRATULATORY CONCEPTION OF THEIR FOREIGN POLICY AND THEIR COUNTRY'S ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE WORLD.

TO BE FAIR TO THEM, THERE IS AT LEAST SOME HISTORICAL FOUNDATION FOR THEIR SENSE OF SATISFACTION, EVEN IF THEIR SMUG COMPLACENCY IN PROCLAIMING IT IS UNSEEMLY ON ITS FACE, AND IRRITATES THEIR FRIENDS. IN THE IMMEDIATE POST-WAR PERIOD, THEIR DIPLOMATS PLAYED A SURPRISINGLY INTRUSIVE ROLE IN THE CREATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND ITS SPECIALIZED AGENCIES, IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BRETTON WOODS APPARATUS, IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS, IN THE FORMATION OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC ALLIANCE, AND IN BOTH THE DIPLOMATIC POLITICS AND THE MILITARY OPERATIONS OF THE KOREAN WAR. THEY WERE CENTRALLY INVOLVED – SOMETIMES IN COMMAND POSITIONS – IN PEACE OBSERVATION CONTINGENTS FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, AND THEIR SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, LESTER B. PEARSON, HAD MUCH TO DO, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SUEZ CRISIS OF 1956, WITH DESIGNING AND ESTABLISHING THE PROTOTYPE FOR THE FIRST GENERATION OF PEACEKEEPING FORCES. IN RESPONSE TO RECURRENT INTERNATIONAL DEMAND, THEY SUBSEQUENTLY REPEATED THE PERFORMANCE ON ALMOST EVERY CONCEIVABLE OCCASION – IN THE CONGO, IN CYPRUS AND IN A HOST OF SIMILAR OPERATIONS OF VARYING SIZE AND SIGNIFICANCE THAT FOLLOWED OVER THE ENSUING DECADES, AND WELL INTO THE 1990S ERA OF SECOND-GENERATION ENTERPRISES IN 'PEACE ENFORCEMENT' AND 'PEACE-BUILDING.' THEIR ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CURRENT 'LAW OF THE SEA' REGIME (NOT IN EVERY RESPECT A HAPPY EVOLUTION FROM THE AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW) WAS BY ANY MEASURE SUBSTANTIAL, AND THEIR LONG-STANDING INTEREST IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE, AN INTEREST GROUNDED IN FUNDAMENTAL ECONOMIC NEED, HAS GIVEN THEM AN ENERGY, ENTHUSIASM AND EXPERTISE IN THE FIELD THAT HAS LED TO THEIR HAVING AN IMPRESSIVE IMPACT ON TRADE NEGOTIATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES AT BOTH THE GLOBAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS.

Their isolation in northern proximity to the United States has made them keen multilateralists – so much so that they are now among the most pervasive of the world's diplomatic 'joiners.' Almost anyone, almost anywhere, can set up a diplomatic table, and the Canadians will want a seat at it. Usually they get one. Their interest in arms control and disarmament has been legendary. They have not been particularly successful at it; but then, no one else has been particularly successful at it, either. They have been fairly aggressive (if not always entirely honest) in their support for the developmental and other needs of the countries of what used to be called the "third world", and from the start they were leading players in the promotion of international standards bearing on human rights. More recently they have been at the forefront of attempts to create a new round of norm-changing international regimes (as in the well-known cases of the ban on anti-personnel landmines and the creation of the International Criminal Court, both of which are continuing 'works-in-progress'). And to cap it all off, they are included, however anomalously, among the unabashedly visible members of the G-7 (now the G-8) – a position they are likely to retain if only because their being deprived of it would cause the other participants more trouble than the result would be worth.

As these things go, this is not a bad showing for a country that even now has only 30 million inhabitants, particularly one that is enveloped in the kinds of constraints that come from living next door to the world's most powerful and pervasively influential state. In the circumstances, it is probably not surprising that Canadian politicians have succumbed to the temptation to exploit the diplomatic record, however shamelessly, for vainglorious nation-building purposes of their own, and having done so, to cling to the images they have created even when their meanings have begun to turn to myth.

But if mythologizing is good for politics, it is bad for the mind. It creates blinkers. It erects false premises. It leads to ill-founded policy analysis. And in so doing, it generates behaviours that can be counterproductive both at home and abroad.

This is worth saying because the reality, notwithstanding past performance and current perceptions, is that Canada's international political assets, in relative terms at least, have seriously declined. Even to those whose attention to such matters is only casual and sporadic, this reality has become starkly evident in the months that have followed the horrors of September 11. The phenomenon warrants examination.

THE CONTEXTUAL REALITIES

The decline, it should be understood, is partly the result of "vast impersonal forces" – forces that no one can control – and partly the consequence of decisions that Canadians have made for themselves. These are decisions that reflect their *real* national priorities, the priorities about which they care the most (no matter what they or their leaders may find it convenient to claim).

The "vast impersonal forces" include such obvious developments as the recovery and rise of an increasingly united Europe, the growing significance of previously isolated or incapacitated players like Japan, India and China, the disappearance of the Soviet Union and its bloc of obedient satellites as a source of countervail to the United States, the emergence of the U.S.A., for both this and other reasons, as a hegemonic power (an "imperial power with good manners", as someone once said), and the pervasiveness in that context of the processes of economic globalization (processes that for Canada have not been global, but continental).

The "decisions that Canadians have made for themselves" include above all their 'decision' to allow their armed forces establishment to run down, to permit the resources available for their foreign assistance programs to decay, and to deprive their public service (including their foreign service) of much of its capacity for considered policy analysis. The latter has resulted partly from budgetary constraints, but also from an unrestrained escalation in the volume of what can only be described as "busy work" – much of it, but not all of it, having to do with public consultations. As any beleaguered foreign service officer will now complain (after the second drink, if not the first), their professional lives are suffused more than ever before with the 'transactions' of bureaucracy. They are sometimes tasked with compiling a page or two of bulleted one-liners, but they no longer write carefully-nuanced policy memoranda, and no one would read them if they did. There is no time for considered thought. The challenge is to get through the day.

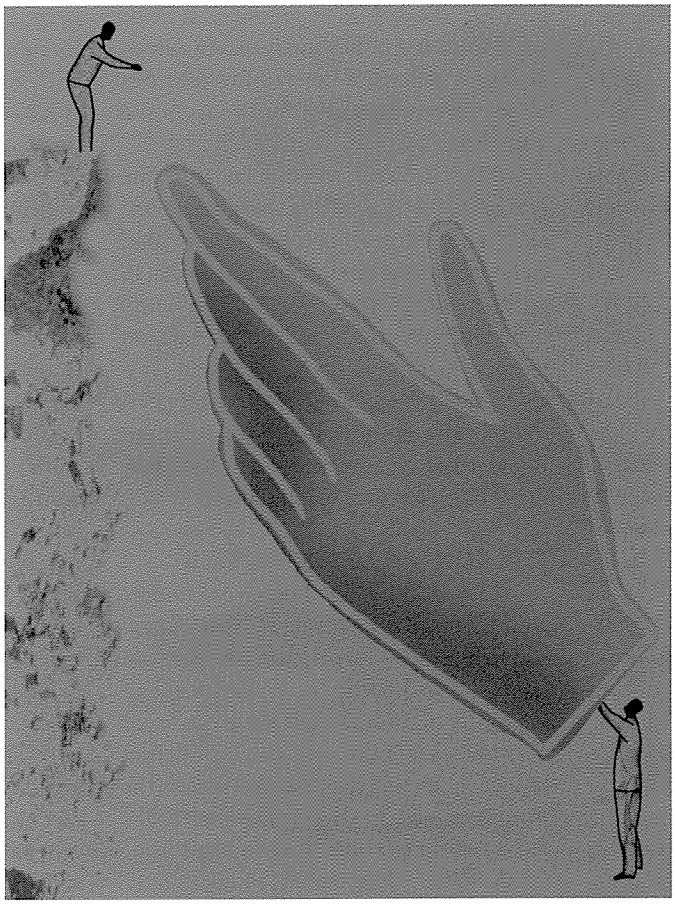
There is not space here to comment adequately on whether these various 'decisions' have been warranted or not, inevitable or not. Clearly there are reasons for them. They have been taken – it might be more accurate to say they have 'happened' – in response to the press of circumstance. Perhaps the circumstances have been irresistible. But whether the decisions themselves can be defended or not, Canadians have acquiesced in them. In effect, they have succumbed to the temptations of the free – or at least the cheap – ride. The results are thus matters of fact. And they have real consequences. The Department of National Defence, its Minister has recently announced, will soon embark upon the writing of a white paper. But precisely because of the run-down in the size of his establishment, the exercise is certain to have more to do with adjusting the purposes to the assets than the assets to the purposes. His advisers have no hope left of there being any point in doing it the other way round.

The primary implication of all these developments and others like them has been very clear to *cognoscenti* for some

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time, but as already indicated, it became starkly visible to almost *everyone* in the wake of September 11. The official response to the cataclysms in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania demonstrated beyond all possible doubt that the one fundamental imperative in the conduct of Canada's external relations is the maintenance of an effective working relationship with the United States of America. This was because the American republic, in the defence of its citizens, was showing signs that it might be led to impede the flow of traffic across the Canada-U.S. border. For Ottawa this was not a tolerable prospect. Canadians, including Canadians in high places, sympathized deeply and identified profoundly with their counterparts south of the border as they reacted to the massive destruction and loss of life that had resulted from the terrorist attack. Their feelings were real. But emotions aside, it was immediately obvious that Canada's economic dependence on the United States had now reached the stage at which any serious threat to Canada-U.S. economic exchange would lead not merely to consternation, as it did at the time of the Nixon surcharge affair in August 1971, but to outright panic.

Rather interestingly from the 'foreign policy' point of view, much, and perhaps most, of the public policy response seemed to be initiated elsewhere in government – in Justice, in Citizenship and Immigration, in the Solicitor-General's department, in Finance, in the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service, in the Department of National Defence, in Transport, and in a host of others. Almost no federal agency was exempt from the potential repercussions of the American response to the terrorist attack. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Manley, was brought in for a time to co-ordinate the Canadian reaction, and he earned an enviable reputation in the country for his performance. (He took the longer-term responsibility with him when he was subsequently promoted to Deputy Prime Minister.) But the fact of the matter was that the challenge to the government as a whole had more to do with the administration and protection of what had become a continentally-imbedded economy than with 'foreign policy' as traditionally defined. From the point of view of anyone who might be interested in the maintenance of a degree of Canadian autonomy in world affairs, this has proven to be one of the more obvious by-products of the linking of Canada's prosperity to continental integration. It is not clear that many Canadians worry about this any more. But whether they do, or they do not, it, too, is now an unforgiving reality.



THE FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are many of these, and not everyone would agree on which of them are the most important – or even on what belongs on the list and what does not. It seems safe enough, however, to suggest that the following may be among them.

First, the basic reality is that Canada cannot usefully pursue any policy option that significantly challenges what the Americans perceive (rightly or wrongly) to be in their fundamental interest, especially when that interest has a security dimension. This has always been true in *some* degree, but it is now truer than ever. If Canadian policy makers are wise, they will do as the post-war generation of Canadian foreign service officers understood that THEY had to do, which was to calculate very carefully their margins of manoeuvre so that (as Kenny Rogers might have said) they could «know when to hold them and know when to fold them.» The challenge to Canadian policy posed by the looming American deployment of a National Missile Defense system probably provides a currently visible case in point. Canadians as a whole, including Canadians in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, may not like it very much, but it might be prudent for them to "go with the flow" all the same. (Canadians in the Department of National Defence, of course, will welcome the opportunities for the collaboration that NMD is likely to bring.)

Second, in the past, when attempting to cultivate room for manoeuvre in dealing with the United States on security (and indeed on some other) matters, Canada was sometimes able to gain a little ground by working closely with others, and most notably with the Europeans. Ottawa can still try this on – and indeed there is a strong case for Canada tapping constructively into the European perspective on such matters as the Afghanistan intervention when discussing U.S. policy with American representatives behind the scenes. There is always the possibility, however remote, that the responsible expression of an

alternative point of view, a view flowing from a different geopolitical perspective, can help to offset the dangerous intellectual myopia that frequently goes with the enjoyment of hegemonic power. But given current circumstances on both sides of the Atlantic, it has to be recognized that Canada is now regarded by the Europeans not merely as a *minor* player, but as a player that is tightly locked in a compromising symbiotic relationship with its overwhelming neighbour. This is not, after all, an inaccurate perception. That being so, the sort of game that was played so well by Lester Pearson and his colleagues in the period from the 'forties to the 'sixties is much less easily played now.

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Third, this problem is greatly compounded by Canada's lack of objective foreign policy assets, including military and development assistance assets – a phenomenon to which reference was made earlier. Ottawa has less to bring to the table. This almost certainly means that the counterparts of Canadian officials and politicians overseas listen to them as courteously as before, but not as attentively as before. They may probe them for intelligence – on the American position (a position that they will expect Ottawa to know very well). But, most of the time, they will have little regard for the *Canadian* position.

None of this should be taken to mean that the 'high politics' agenda of world affairs is totally beyond Canada's reach. Multilateral diplomacy still counts and opportunities for useful initiatives will occasionally come along. But by the measures that normally apply to diplomacy of the traditional sort, it has to be recognized that Canada has receded into what may well be its more 'natural' – and much more modest – place in world affairs.

Fourth, there is, perhaps, one major area of Canadian diplomatic accomplishment that needs to be recognized as an on-going specialization of considerable importance. It has to do with the politics of international trade. Here, as noted earlier, Canadian officials have made significant and influential contributions – partly, no doubt, because Canadians 'trade' a great deal and everyone knows it, but also because their deeply vested interest in the subject has concentrated their minds and has led in consequence to their developing an unusually rich store of technical expertise. For Canada, trade diplomacy is not a hobbyist's diplomacy, but a diplomacy that goes to the core of the national economic welfare. Canada's diplomats thus *have* to do it, and it is reassuring that they know how to do it well.

Quite apart from the political controversies that surround them, however, trade negotiations have at least two limitations as a vehicle for expressing the Canadian political community abroad in a way that promotes a sense of national achievement at home. The first comes from the fact that their practical consequence has been to intensify Canada's integration with the United States and hence to complicate further, rather than relieve, the underlying Canadian problem. The second is even more fundamental. It derives from the fact that trade policy is ultimately policy in the service of Mammon. It is about the satisfaction of appetites through the effective management of a branch of macro-economic policy. This is essential – like putting gas in the car. It also makes other things – even creative things – possible. But in itself it is not a source of national inspiration. Those who produce goods and services for trade, and profit from doing so, may feel they have made an important contribution to their employees, to their shareholders, to the keepers of the public purse, to the economy as a whole. And indeed they have. But their activities inspire no public sense of collective exhilaration. If the wealthy are remembered after they have departed, it is less because of the money they made and how they made it than because of the way it was spent. And only then if it was spent philanthropically.

THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT REMAIN

Rather surprisingly, these observations seem to leave Canadians, in their somewhat desperate search for creative invention, hovering somewhere around the so-called 'human security' agenda – although not, one hopes, without their paying heed to some crucially important qualifying reservations.

To be drawn to a focus on the human security agenda (the prominence of which has greatly receded in the outpourings of the foreign service establishment since Mr. Axworthy's departure from the Foreign Minister's office in October 2000) does not require enormous faith in either the capacity or the will of Canadians to engage in long-term social engineering abroad. It requires only a willingness to believe that there may be areas within the agenda to which Canada can make a particularly useful contribution – most often, perhaps, in tandem with other governments that are similarly positioned, and occasionally in the company of private actors (NGOs and the like), as well.

Canada is sometimes able to do this kind of work not, of course, because 'Canadian values' (a tiresome phrase if ever there was one, but now pandemic in both Ottawa and the country at large – even among officials and intellectuals who should know better) are particularly different from the values of anyone else, but because Canada's geopolitical good luck gives it the luxury of indulging them. As observed earlier, the only thing Canadian officials **have** to do is to maintain an effective working relationship with the United States. Almost everything else they do in foreign affairs is voluntary. They can do it or not, as they please. And provided the cost is not TOO high, the public is prepared to go along for the ride, and to gain vicarious pleasure from the 'warm glow' that appears to result. The self-congratulatory rhetorical cant that seems to come with the sensation is not an edifying

spectacle, and observers elsewhere probably find it nauseating. Nonetheless, it does mean that the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade enjoys at least a little political room at home for diplomatic manoeuvre – and hence for constructive invention – abroad.

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It is possible, for example, that Canada could do something really meaningful about AIDS in Africa – and there are indications that it wants to make the attempt. It is also possible that it could clear some landmines from what passes for arable land in Afghanistan. There are many possibilities of this sort, and they are well known to the Canadian International Development Agency, Canadian diplomatic missions overseas, and the host of NGOs upon which the government has come increasingly to rely for the delivery of well-intended services abroad.

But if Canada continues along this route (and there are signs that it may not), the «crucially important qualifying reservations» come into play. In essence, they define important rules for the government and its representatives to follow if they are to avoid causing irritation, not to say offense, to their friends, and if they are to keep their own expectations, and those of their constituents at home and abroad, from getting out of hand.

First, they should do it more, talk about it less, and boast about it not at all. The latter – boasting about it – can sometimes yield political rewards at home, and on occasion it may be required for the effective cultivation of appropriate levels of domestic political support. But in the end it weakens the country's reputation, and hence its capacities, abroad. Least of all in diplomacy, should Caesar praise himself. This is especially true if he is only a little *Caesar*. Others can praise him if they like.

Second, Ottawa should limit its objectives in any particular case (a) to what it can reasonably hope to accomplish, and (b) to what it is honestly prepared to pay for. Canadians can certainly help other folk run their elections in cases where the task is new to them. But that is not the same thing as making them into democrats, or converting autocracies or oligarchies into democracies. It is not at all clear that Canadians (or Americans, either) know how to do that, and even if they did, it is obvious that they lack the will to pay the price and stay the course. They do not have it even in reference to a tiny place of misery disaster like Haiti. No advantage can be gained by pretending that they do.

Third, they should avoid spreading their initiatives too broadly and thinly about. Concentrating their efforts – particularly when they are reluctant to put significant stores of resources into *whatever* they do – is essential if Canada is to have any serious impact. This is easier said than done. There are folk in the system at home who *like* the thought of Canadians being everywhere. And everywhere abroad there are folk who want Canadians to be where *they* are, even if they do not care whether they are anywhere else. But in the end it does not work – either for their objectives, or for Ottawa's. Not in significant measure, at any rate. This is not to advocate an attempt to articulate Canadian niches in the style of the publicly announced grand design, a strategy that can lead to diplomatically inconvenient resentments, and in any case deprives the government of the flexibility that a working foreign policy in a kaleidoscopic world requires. But it does suggest the need to quietly and responsibly pick and choose, and then to quietly and responsibly get on with the job.

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In sum, Canada needs to recognize that its options are relatively limited in the areas where its vital short-term interests lie. Outside those areas, however, it has the luxury of being able to indulge in the performance of useful works of its own choosing. But it needs to choose well, and avoid displays of self-serving cant.

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