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CANADIAN DEFENCE & FOREIGN AFFAIRS INSTITUTE

# **Canada and International Organizations: Time for a Review**

by Ferry de Kerckhove  
July, 2013



# POLICY PAPER

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## ► Executive Summary

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It is a common refrain that Canada's international standing has been falling over the last few years. Yet, in international economic forums, Canada's economic stability and continued progress is lauded by all. The more limited multilateral fiber of the present government points to a form of renunciation of Canada's traditional approach to international politics. The government prefers intergovernmental groupings where sovereignty is unfettered and major players' consensus is the rule. It has called in stronger terms for accountability, value for money, and results based-management in return for its financial contribution to multilateral organizations. A question arises as to the amount of leeway Canada is prepared to give today to international organizations as actors on the international stage. For the Government, multilateralism can be one of the foundations of global governance provided it produces consensus based programs of action. Yet, for all its bemoaning of the United Nations, the present Government, as much as its predecessors, has always ascribed considerable value to the functional multilateral organizations to which Canada belongs and pays over half a billion dollars to in assessed contributions. In the face of a somewhat dichotomous approach, there is a need for a broad review of international organizations we belong to, starting with their objectives and mandates and then running through the way they perform their roles and deliver their contributions. Such a review would very likely rekindle our government's faith in multilateralism and shape what has been referred to as Canada's "dignity agenda".





**I**t is a common refrain that Canada's international standing has been falling over the last few years. Canada's failure for the first time since the end of the Second World War to win a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) after six successful campaigns dating back to 1948-49 has been seen as an inability on the part of the Government of Canada to convince the members of the United Nations of its evenness in positions pertaining to key issues of peace and security in the world, particularly the Middle-East. It might also be a sign that Canada does not matter as much on the international stage as in earlier times now that new powers are emerging which, by 2050, will have economies larger than ours – India, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Korea, Turkey, Vietnam. Some are already laying a claim for permanent seats on the UNSC. Yet, in international economic forums, Canada's economic stability and continued progress is lauded by all. As reported by Minister Baird at the UN in 2011, Canada's participation in global economic governance is a source of pride for the Prime Minister. "Referring to multilateral action to address the world economic crisis, Stephen Harper said: "I saw world leadership at its best, a glimpse of a hopeful future—one where we act together for the good of all".<sup>1</sup>

### **THE UNSC CAMPAIGN – A BRAVE FACE ON A DISHEARTENING LOSS**

While it is not the purpose of this paper to review Canada's last, unsuccessful, UNSC campaign it bears recognizing that there are also deeply irritating systemic reasons for Canada's failure that have less to do with Canada than with the UN membership structures. Indeed, one should be honest enough to recognize that most members of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) rarely vote on the basis of universal values. Most votes are rather based on a) self-interests, b) vote trading, c) regional suasion based on Cold War regional distribution, or d) antiquated groupings that only have a life in New York on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue between 45<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> street, such as the *Non-Aligned* or the *Group of 77*. No wonder then that glaring aberrations in voting patterns and results are the norm. But the bottom line is that Canada did not succeed to counter these snarls and kinks. It is clear that Canada's positions on the Middle-East, and a loss of critical votes in a changing African continent, were very much at the heart of the loss.<sup>2</sup> More deeply, there was a general feeling that the Conservative Government of Canada had renounced some of the fundamental tenets that gave Canada credibility on the international stage, such as a commitment to human security, the Responsibility to Protect, a preference for multilateral diplomacy, and a desire to enhance the normative framework within which international organizations strive.<sup>3</sup> There is indeed no question that all these were seen by the present government as a Liberal legacy it felt ideologically little congruence with. The Prime Minister saw no need to compromise on principles to placate a number of less than savory regimes in order to get their votes. Operationally, and from the perspective of an ability to influence events and decisions, the present government clearly seems to prefer intergovernmental groupings where sovereignty is unfettered and major players' consensus is the rule, as opposed to multilateral organizations with dubious memberships such as in the Human Rights Council or the Disarmament Committee, where non-binding, yet important, voting patterns make for strange bedfellows.

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<sup>1</sup> Minister John Baird's speech to the UN General Assembly, 26 September 2011

<sup>2</sup> This to the point that in a multilateral forum, a traditional ally of Canada once failed to invite a Canadian representative at a consultative meeting, arguing that "Canada was no longer considered a like-minded country".

<sup>3</sup> See Denis Stairs: Being rejected in the United Nations: The Causes and Implications of Canada's Failure to Win a Seat in the UN Security Council A Policy Update Paper, Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, March, 2011.



**MULTILATERAL FIBER –  
WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW ABOUT VALUE FOR MONEY?**

Dennis Stairs recently wrote about Foreign Minister Baird’s anti UN blast on October 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 that the Minister’s “despair of the organization and the way it does its business – warts and all – is thus to despair of international politics itself”.<sup>4</sup> Evidently the days are past when Canada’s eagerness to be party to any international organization made it an instant candidate whenever a new, legitimate one, appeared on the horizon. In fact, the more limited multilateral fiber of the present government; the affirmation of superior Canadian values over international norms as in our approach to the Middle-East Peace Process; and the questioning of international development methodology, as in Haiti, with a call for more private sector focus in our assistance, all point to a form of renunciation of Canada’s traditional approach to international politics. Some have ascribed it to denial of the stark reality of international politics. As such, Canada might be led by its government into a new model of governance, at least as it pertains to international organizations. Alternatively, the government may feel there is too wide a gap between the institutional framework of international organizations and its associated norms, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the actual behaviour or functioning of intergovernmental organizations of which Canada is a member. This would not be surprising on the part of a government that believes it holds the high ground on any issue of ethics, rights or moral standing. Yet, the excessive demonizing of the UN by the Foreign Minister tends to debase the moral high ground that Canada claims to occupy.

There is no denying that there are often huge distances between an international organization’s mandate and charter, and its actual delivery or activities. So it is perfectly normal for a government to call for accountability, value for money, and results based-management in return for its financial contribution to these organizations. But one has also to recognize that, by their very nature, Westphalian-inspired international organizations were created more to be at the service of nation-states than of the global commons or trusteeship. Thus, blaming the organizations as opposed to the nations that dictate their actions, or prevent them from acting, is like blaming the ingredients in a dish rather than the choice of recipe. Of course, there are also international organizations that are poorly managed, as was reputedly the case of Food and Agriculture Organizations of the UN (FAO) under Jacques Diouf, leading many a leader to bemoan UN bodies in general.

One must look at the underlying motivations and objectives for seeking memberships in international, intergovernmental, political, economic/trade, military/defence or development organizations, recognizing the essential political nature of the decision to join and the subsequent execution of the institution’s mandate over and beyond its functional purpose. There is nothing wrong in questioning the value of an institution per se or its relevance and adaptability to changing times.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, given the fairly ideological approach to international relations by the government of Canada, there is a fundamental question as to the amount of leeway Canada is prepared to give today, compared to earlier administrations, to international organizations as independent actors on the international stage. With a limited multilateral fiber, it is not surprising that the Government had no qualms about withdrawing from international bodies such as the UN Convention to Combat Desertification referred to as a

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<sup>4</sup> “Pogo Land: the challenge of UN Reform”; The Dispatch, CDFAI, Winter 2012

<sup>5</sup> The best example with which the author was associated in his capacity in the early 90’s as Director of Economic Relations with Developing countries at DFAIT was the withdrawal of Canada from UNIDO in keeping with the Washington Consensus on limiting the role of industrial policy in economic development processes.



“bureaucratic talkfest” with little concern for the decision being branded by some as “a departure from global citizenship”. The same applies to its withdrawal from the “Northern Dimension Partnership on Public Health and Social Well-Being”. More importantly, the Government has no intention to put up another bid for Canada to join the Security Council in the foreseeable future. That decision must have been made on the basis of a clear assessment that this Government stood little chance to win but also, more profoundly, on the grounds that the costs outweigh the benefits of two years on the front row. This government viscerally does not feel it needs to be there inasmuch as a) its key allies are on the Council and hold sway on issues of critical importance for world peace and security, b) it would bring little or no influence to alter Russian and Chinese vetoes, and c) more importantly, it has no agenda of its own to foster in the Council the way Canada had in the past on issues like blood diamonds or Responsibility to Protect.

The question is whether these decisions are profoundly ideologically driven or if the international multilateral system is in such disarray that Canada is in fact a precursor of things to come regarding international perspectives on multilateralism. The tepid reaction by the Government to the recent adoption by the UN of a historical arms trade treaty aimed at eliminating excessive and poorly regulated international weapons transfers seems to point to the former.

#### **ISRAEL A SPECIAL CASE OR A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF THE APPROACH?**

The Official Opposition in the House of Commons, as well as many scholars, point to the Government’s policy towards the Middle East as a case of ideology trumping reality, if not international law. Many have argued that the request for a vote on granting observer status to the Palestinian Authority at the UN was certainly not an illegal move potentially deserving the wrath of Canada, no more than an expansion by Israel of illegal settlements in the West Bank or East Jerusalem. The fact that an overwhelming majority of the UN membership, including most like-minded allies of Canada, voted in favour of the resolution in the General Assembly certainly gave the cause a lot of legitimacy and could hardly be branded an extremist move.<sup>6</sup> More disquieting is the fact that on certain occasions, the Government has objected to the assigning of the blame on Israel for failing to abide by its international legal obligations. Indeed, the Government had no qualms about voting against a UN resolution condemning Israel for allowing settlements in East Jerusalem and the Golan, a resolution Canada had voted in favour of in previous years. Some argue that some of the Government’s pro-Israeli votes on UN resolutions pertaining to the fate of Palestinians under occupation are at odds with the provisions of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention. Whatever way it is presented, it is objectively true that Foreign Minister Baird’s meeting with Israeli Justice Minister Livni in East Jerusalem contravened 45 years of diplomatic practice. Indeed, both the United States and the member states of the European Union do not allow their officials to meet Israeli officials in East Jerusalem to avoid any intimation of recognition of Israel’s annexation of that part of the city. As a result, the deeply legitimate concern of the Government for Israel’s security that is fully shared by the overwhelming majority of Canadians is in itself sullied by what is perceived as an uncompromising support for anything the Israeli Government does, including some fairly egregious actions towards Palestinians on the altar of Israel’s security, pushing further away any chance of a solution.

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<sup>6</sup> This being said, the result, as Liberal MP Irwin Cotler recognized, will not help fostering peace in the end but only contribute to a hardening of positions.



### **MULTILATERALISM ESSENTIAL TO GLOBAL GOVERNANCE?**

Scholars of international organizations theory argue that multilateralism is at the heart of global governance. For Professor Arthur Stein, “although unilateralism remains an ever present possibility and although international organizations reflect the power and interests of their members, the growing number of such organizations, as well as international laws and agreements, over their past century, makes multilateralism an existential reality”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, to the extent that multilateralism includes principles, rules and norms to which states have subscribed, should we assume that a country like Canada abides scrupulously to these and that contraventions, disregard or neglect only appear at the margins? Or is it not that the present Government is far less interested in improving the adequacy of international institutions and the overarching multilateral system, formal and informal? More fundamentally, is it possible that a government committed to the rule of law, law and order, and good governance – very much at the heart of Prime Minister Harper’s vision for Canada – has little faith in the instruments of global governance beyond the few groupings where it is seen as a fairly discrete partner such as G-8 and G-20? There is no question that the present Government has a profound dislike for the politics of the United Nations, and its antics, and that it finds itself more comfortable with economic institutions provided they don’t fall under the direct orbit of the unsavory lot of the UN General Assembly. At the heart of the matter, in the minds of Canadian leaders, is a concern about the legitimacy of the actors that dominate the political multilateral arena! It is not limited to contrarian views on the Middle East. In the eyes of the Government, multilateralism can be one of the foundations of global governance provided it goes beyond expressing common values and produces consensus based programs of action as opposed to idle resolutions. And that consensus should not be of the lowest common denominator kind, not the kind that Margaret Thatcher described “the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no one believes”.

### **A FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION**

For all its bemoaning of the United Nations, the present Government, as much as its predecessors, have always ascribed considerable value to the functional multilateral organizations to which Canada belongs and pays over half a billion dollars to in assessed contributions. And while it laments the “talkfest” in the political meetings in New York and Geneva, the Government has always endorsed the results of the Treasury Board mandated five-year review of the effectiveness and efficiency of these international organizations in terms of meeting the Government’s objectives and has forcibly demanded improvements in those organizations considered to be mismanaged. Thus, the real question today is the management of the dichotomy between purely “political organizations” such as the UNSC and UNGA<sup>8</sup> and the painstakingly built architecture of functional organizations whose leaders and managers desperately try to avoid political interference in the work at hand. Indeed, a rational approach to the role and effectiveness of international organizations as an expression of multilateralism looks at the way they:

- influence and structure relationships among parties and players;
- influence performance of parties and players;

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<sup>7</sup> “Incentive compatibility and global governance” in A. Alexandroff (ed.) *Can the World be Governed*; WLU Press, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> One should forget altogether about ECOSOC which is even more useless as an economic institution than as a political outlet for the expression of frustration by developing countries still clinging to old think and speak.



- help channel ideas that are brought to decision making; and
- assist states in cooperating to build appropriately integrated and often iterative systems of governance, nationally and internationally, and ensure that these systems operate with appropriate scope and scale.

More specifically, international organizations make their contributions through:

- their convening power (debates they sponsor and encourage);
- direct integration they foster (through involvement of diverse players);
- research and monitoring that they sponsor and diffuse;
- capacity building they enable;
- conceptual, legal, regulatory, and operational frameworks they develop;
- legal regulatory and technical tools they build;
- partnerships they encourage and enable;
- some direct service delivery (especially emergency assistance); and
- accountability mechanisms they build for states and agencies.

It is within this broad framework that international organizations should be reviewed, starting with their objectives and mandates and then running through the way they perform their roles and deliver these kinds of specific contributions. While this is not the place to conduct an organization by organization evaluation, it is a fact that political multilateralism has been in crisis ever since the 2002 Iraq war. In a hope to rekindle faith in a reformed United Nations in the wake of the UN World Summit of 2005, then Secretary General Kofi Annan called on a high-level panel to look at “threats, challenges and change” in the world. Interestingly, despite a few positive developments, very few political/strategic/security issues were resolved as the crises continued to prove insuperable. Indeed, it could be remarked that “while the ongoing crises occupy capitals, organizations, and embassies all over the world, there is a growing sense that these are very much legacies of the past and that, however dangerous each of them might be, they blind us to much more fundamental problems that loom in the future but whose contours we can already perceive or recognize”.<sup>9</sup> One could argue that, from the Canadian standpoint, we could easily leave some of the “old” organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or even a more recent one like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as both have achieved their mandates. But the real question is how much more aggressively Canada should be engaged in the Arctic Council to deal with polar ice melting, the now maligned Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) on water, on the United Nations Fish Agreement (UNFA) to deal with vanishing fish stocks, the International Maritime Organization to confront marine pollution, and the International Energy Agency to foster stability in energy markets. We are active players in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) because of Iran, but at the same time we resist proposals for a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone for the Middle East so as not to upset Israel. As evidenced in the recent spat with Qatar on the International Civil Aviation Organization, Canada is very capable of mobilizing energy and efforts when it comes to thwarting an egregious attempt to dispossess us of a treasured international asset. A full review of our membership in international organizations would very likely rekindle our government’s faith in multilateralism. Taking these for granted is not sufficient.

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<sup>9</sup> Ferry de Kerckhove, “Multilateralism on Trial”, in A. Alexandroff (ed.) *Can the World be Governed*; WLU Press, 2008.



**IN CONCLUSION: TESTING THE DIGNITY AGENDA**

In a recent paper for CDFAI, Colin Robertson argues that there is an emerging John Baird “dignity agenda” founded on the simple premise that “doing what is morally right is in our national interest”.<sup>10</sup> He hastens to add that “if it is to succeed, the dignity agenda will need to demonstrate the kind of tangible accomplishments that former foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy’s human security agenda achieved, notably the landmark Treaty on Land Mines and the creation of the International Criminal Court”. In the multilateral world, the confluence of values and interests determines our decision to become members or not of an intergovernmental organization. A dignity agenda might call for a less brutal approach to the multilateral world and for a more compassionate understanding of the different approaches to world problems. More balance and less stridency do not translate in lowering our thresholds of acceptance. But it certainly makes for better listening. Be they deeply frustrating at times, international organizations do offer a window to the world and Canada cannot be as great a country as it deserves if it does not use that window.

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<sup>10</sup> [“John Baird’s ‘dignity agenda’ an idealistic notion that just might work”](#) The Globe and Mail, 5 June 2013

## ► About the Author

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**Ferry de Kerckhove** was born in Belgium in 1947. After attending secondary school Graduate I in France, he did his military service in 1965-66 (2nd Lieutenant Tanks). He has a B.Soc. Sc. Honours in Economics, an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Ottawa and pursued Ph.D. Studies at Laval University in Québec City. Mr. de Kerckhove has published several papers on international relations as well as on the relationship between the Muslim world and the West in specialized journals.

After working as an intern at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Mr. de Kerckhove became a Researcher at the Québec Centre for International Relations and then later headed up the International Security Section at the Canadian Institute for International Affairs (Québec section).

In September 1973, Mr. de Kerckhove entered the Canadian Foreign Service. After a stint in European Affairs, he was posted as Third Secretary to the Canadian Embassy in Tehran. When Mr. de Kerckhove returned to Canada in 1976, he became Assistant Secretary, Inter-Departmental Committee on External Relations then moved to East European Affairs (Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania). From 1978 to 1981, he was responsible for Canada-France relations. From 1981 to 1985, he was Economic Counsellor at the Canadian Delegation to NATO.

Back in Canada, Mr. de Kerckhove became Deputy Director of the Political and Strategic Analysis Division, then Director of the Economic and Trade Analysis Division in the Policy Planning Bureau. In 1989, he became Director, Economic Relations with Developing Countries Division. In September 1992, he was posted to Moscow as Minister and Deputy Head of Mission.

Mr. de Kerckhove returned to Ottawa in September 1995 to become Associate Chief Air Negotiator. In January 1996, he became Deputy Head of the Policy Branch and Director-General, Federal-Provincial Relations in Foreign Affairs and International Trade. He remained in this position until being named Canada's High Commissioner to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in August 1998. He spent three years in Islamabad. On September 13, 2001, Mr. Ferry de Kerckhove presented his credentials as Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia. He was also accredited to Timor Leste.

Mr. de Kerckhove returned to Ottawa in September 2003 and joined the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa as a Canadian Center for Management Development Diplomat in Residence.

On August 9th, 2004, he returned to the Department of Foreign Affairs and became Director General, International Organizations. In July 2006, he added to his responsibilities the function of Personal representative of the Prime Minister for Francophonie.

From September 10th 2008 to September 10 2011, Mr. de Kerckhove was in Cairo as ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt.

He retired from the Foreign Service on September 23d, 2011.

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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