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CANADIAN DEFENCE & FOREIGN AFFAIRS INSTITUTE

## **A Short Primer to Canada and the UN**

by Colin Robertson  
September, 2012



# POLICY PAPER

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Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird [delivered Canada's address](#) to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Monday morning. He joined presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers from around the world who began descending on New York last week to speak to the 67<sup>th</sup> session. This primer was published in [Ipolitics](#)

### WHAT IS ON THIS YEAR'S AGENDA?

The agenda covers the waterfront of issues but four that will gather headlines are:

*Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency report on Iran's nuclear program:* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the General Assembly last week that it is “getting late” to stop Iran and called on nations to place “a clear red line on Iran's nuclear weapons program.” In his UNGA remarks last week President Obama said, “A nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained. It would threaten the elimination of Israel, the security of Gulf nations, and the stability of the global economy. And that is why the United States will do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.” The President, observed former U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Burns, has come down, “on the side of diplomacy and negotiations backed up by sanctions and the threat of force.”

*Syria and the estimated 25,000 people killed in recent months:* The Security Council is divided with the Russians and the Chinese not supporting any overt move to aid the rebels or to intervene militarily by the United States. In his remarks last week, President Obama reiterated the call for Bashar al-Assad to leave power but as Richard Haas, president of the Council of Foreign Relations noted, “there's a gap between American goals, which is to see the regime and leadership go, and American means, which are quite, quite, quite limited.”

*Millennium Agenda:* What next for the UN antipoverty agenda? For the past twelve years the millennium development goals (MDGs) have channeled hundreds of millions of dollars of aid money with effect – millions in China and India are now over the threshold, and in improving access to clean water, primary education and maternal and child health care. But the goals now need to be renewed and there is pressure to have the next iteration include sustainable development. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has appointed a 26-member panel of eminent persons to advise him on the global agenda after 2015 and they are expected to submit a report in the first half of 2013.

*Palestine:* Last year there was an intense debate around the Palestinian bid for UN membership, an initiative thwarted by the U.S. with Canadian support. However, in his UNGA speech last week, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said consultations are under way to upgrade, by the end of this year, the Palestinian U.N. status from observer to that of ‘nonmember state’. This is less than what was sought last year but it could still create potential problems – the U.S. Congress has legislated against support for UN agencies with Palestinian membership.

### WHAT ABOUT CANADA AND THE UNITED NATIONS?

Canada is the seventh largest contributor to the UN. Canadians were present and active participants at the San Francisco Conference in June 1945 that created the UN. We earned our reputation as a helpful fixer and bridge-builder based on our multilateral work. Peacekeeping was a useful Canadian innovation, in response to the Suez crisis of 1956. Canadians justly take



pride in our peacekeeping efforts but our larger contribution to the UN far exceeds this particular initiative. Peacekeeping reflected a special time and place, yet it tends to overshadow our work in other vital areas.

The principle underlying Canada's contribution is functionalism. As practiced by Louis St. Laurent and L.B. Pearson, it means finding our niche, based on national interests and expertise, and then doing our best. In recent years we were architects of the Responsibility To Protect doctrine and we were leaders in the campaign against land mines, child soldiers and in the creation of the International Criminal Court.

In 2010 we sought a seat on the Security Council, in competition with Germany and Portugal, as part of the Western Europe and Other Group (WEOG). We withdrew after placing third on the first ballot. It occasioned a great deal of angst amongst critics who faulted the Harper Government for waging an inept campaign and who decried what they described as a strident, unbalanced approach to foreign policy.

As Denis Stairs argues in *Being Rejected in the United Nations*, our loss probably has as much to do with the evolution and solidarity of the European Union. We would be better to recognize geography and transfer ourselves from the WEOG to the Americas. This year Australia, also part of the WEOG, is seeking a seat along with Finland and Luxembourg. The backing of 129 countries – or a two-thirds majority – is needed to win a two-year stint on the council. The result in the secret ballot is notoriously difficult to predict.

Prime Minister Harper last delivered the Canadian address to UNGA in 2010 in support of our UN Security Council bid. In [his remarks](#) the Prime Minister underlined the need for “enlightened sovereignty, the idea that what’s good for others may well be the best way to pursue one’s own interests. In business, it is called win-win. And it is good for business. In international affairs, it is good for development and for justice. And it is in the spirit of the UN Charter.”

As an indication of themes that will be addressed in this year’s address by Foreign Minister Baird, look back at [his address last year](#) to the UNGA. He elaborated on the theme of ‘enlightened sovereignty’ saying, “Multilateral institutions and multilateral action result from a collection of sovereign decisions based on individual states’ own interests: Not narrow self-interest in sovereignty’s name, but an expanded view of mutual interest in which there is room for all to grow and to prosper.”

Baird also noted that, “Canada does not just “go along” in order to “get along.” We will “go along” only if we “go” in a direction that advances Canada’s values: freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law...The Second World War taught us all the tragic price of “going along” just to “get along.” It was accommodation and appeasement that allowed fascism to gather strength. As Winston Churchill said: “An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last.” We respect state sovereignty, but Canada will not “go along” or look the other way when a minority is denied its human rights or fundamental freedoms.”

On the issue of Palestine Mr. Baird said, “Our government’s position has been clear—the only solution to this issue is one that is negotiated by the two parties themselves.” On Israel, he was equally clear: “We uphold Israel’s right to exist. We uphold its fundamental right, like any



member state, to defend innocent civilians against acts of terrorism,” declaring that “Canada will not accept or stay silent while the Jewish state is attacked for defending its territory and its citizens.”

Baird also announced that the Government would establish an Office of Religious Freedom to “promote freedom of religion and freedom of conscience as key objectives of Canadian foreign policy.” He also called for UN reform based on the principles of:

- accountability, transparency and ethics;
- financial responsibility and fiscal austerity;
- efficiency and the elimination of waste and duplication;
- regular reviews to sunset unnecessary, redundant and obsolete mandates; and
- zero tolerance for conflicts of interest, fraud and corruption.

Look also for Mr. Baird to elaborate on the theme of [his recent \(September 14\) speech](#) to the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations describing what he called the “Government’s principled, values-based foreign policy, steeped in the conviction that, as a free nation, we must promote and protect the fundamental liberties of people around the world”. A key premise of this policy, said Baird, is respect for the rights of women and “the role of the state to protect its people regardless of gender, sexuality or faith.”

Baird will also likely draw inspiration from Prime Minister Harper’s [remarks to the Appeal of Conscience Foundation last week](#) in New York where he was honored as World Statesman of the Year. Mr. Harper declared that governments must aim, “to be good world citizens, to try to understand other points of view and to act in concert with our partners, for the wider interests of humanity. That is, of course, not the same thing, friends, as trying to court every dictator with a vote at the United Nations or just going along with every emerging international consensus, no matter how self-evidently wrong-headed. When confronted with evil in the world, we do take a stand, we take strong, principled positions in our dealings, whether popular or not. And that is what the world has counted on from Canada – and received – in two world wars, in Korea, in a generation of peacekeeping operations, Gulf War One, and of course, most recently in Afghanistan and also in Libya.”

### BACKGROUND ON THE UNITED NATIONS

With a current membership of 193 states, the UN is the big enchilada of international organizations. As defined by its Charter, the purpose of the UN is threefold:

1. to maintain international peace and security;
2. to develop friendly relations among nations; and
3. to cooperate internationally in solving economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and in promoting respect for human rights.

The actions of the United Nations are based on certain principles:

- all of its members are equal;



- all members must fulfill their Charter obligations i.e., to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security;
- international disputes are to be settled by peaceful means;
- members may not use force or the threat of force against other members;
- members must help the United Nations in any action it might take in accordance with the Charter;
- the United Nations may not interfere in the domestic affairs of any state.

In scope and scale the UN constitutes its own planetary system. Its main office is in New York City's Turtle Bay facing the East River. Within it the General Assembly of all 193-member states meets from mid-September to mid-December. It's the talking shop and from the General Assembly emerges resolutions ranging from the sensible – campaigns to combat AIDs, to the stupid – Zionism as racism. The resolutions have no practical application, although they can carry moral weight.

The fifteen-member Security Council is the 'decider'. It is in permanent session to deal with issues of peace and security. The five permanent members: the U.S., China, Russia, Britain, and France are joined by another ten elected on regional lines, who serve two-year terms. Various efforts have been made to reform this 1945 hierarchy of powers, but without success.

Attention tends to focus mostly on the Security Council and General Assembly but the strength and substantive work of the UN takes place in its galaxy of over 200 specialized agencies. In addition to the International Court of Justice, Economic and Social Council, and Trusteeship Council, these include the Food and Agriculture Organization (Canadians played a key role in its creation), the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Program and the International Atomic Energy Association.

All of this is supported by a Secretariat headed by a Secretary General who is elected by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council. The UN budget is set by the General Assembly with 'contributions' of member states based on a formula that does not reflect current realities. The US provides about 1/4 of funding with another 1/4 coming from Japan, Germany, France and Britain. 'Developing' countries, including China, pay considerably less. Like the make-up of the Security Council, who pays what is in urgent need of reform.

### FURTHER READING:

For current news on the UN go to the [UN News Centre](#). For information on Canada, start with the very good [DFAIT website on our UN presence](#). It has a wealth of useful information, including a collection of speeches outlining Canada's position on the many issues addressed within the UN family. Scholar and CDFAI Senior Distinguished Fellow Denis Stairs looks at Canada's UN Security Council defeat in [Being Rejected in the United Nations](#).

Several Canadian ambassadors have written about their UN or UN-related experiences. *A Season in Hell* is a harrowing tale of kidnap in West Africa while on a UN mission by former UN Ambassador and CDFAI Advisory Council member Robert Fowler. MP and Parliamentary Secretary Chris Alexander writes of his Afghan experience while serving as Canadian ambassador and later UN envoy in *The Long Way Back*. Scholar and former diplomat Paul



Heinbecker draws on his experience as Canadian Ambassador to the UN in *Getting Back in the Game*. Former Secretary General Kofi Annan has just published a memoir *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace* that describes his half century of service to the United Nations and critically discusses recent conflicts, including his unsuccessful mission to Syria.

## ► About the Author

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**Colin Robertson** is Senior Strategic Advisor for the US-based law firm of McKenna, Long and Aldridge. He writes on international affairs and is a frequent contributor and commentator on CTV, CBC and CPAC.

He is current President of the Canadian International Council's National Capital Branch. Mr. Robertson sits on the board of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute, Canada World Youth and he is honorary chair of the Canada Arizona Business Council. He is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

A career foreign service officer from 1977-2010, Colin Robertson served as first Head of the Advocacy Secretary at the Canadian Embassy in Washington and Consul General in Los Angeles, with previous assignments in Hong Kong and in New York at the UN and Consulate General. In his final assignment he directed a project on Canada-US Engagement at Carleton University's Centre for Trade Policy and Law with private and public sector support. A member of the team that negotiated the Canada-US FTA and NAFTA, he is co-author of *Decision at Midnight: The Inside Story of the Canada-US FTA*.

He is a former President of the Historica Foundation. He was editor of *bout de papier: Canada's Journal of Foreign Service and Diplomacy* and President of the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers. He has taught at Carleton University and the Canadian School of Public Service.

He indicates that his smartest decision was marrying his wife Maureen Boyd, a Vancouverite, former journalist and author. They have three children, Allison, Sean and Conor. Robertson reads voraciously, runs slowly, swims, cycles, and cross-country skis.





## ► **Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute**

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CDFAI is the only think tank focused on Canada's international engagement in all its forms - diplomacy, the military, aid and trade security. Established in 2001, CDFAI's vision is for Canada to have a respected, influential voice in the international arena based on a comprehensive foreign policy, which expresses our national interests, political and social values, military capabilities, economic strength and willingness to be engaged with action that is timely and credible.

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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