

# **We must restore our diplomatic core**

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With his election victory, Stephen Harper has achieved a new place among world leaders. Admired for his political skills as the leader of an insurgent movement and then, as a prime minister who jockeyed a pair of minority governments into a majority, he's also recognized for steering Canada's economy through recessionary waters that are still threatening his fellow G7 leaders.

So what role will international affairs play in his government?

In several recent statements, he has told us it will be a major one. Foreign affairs/foreign relations, he said, "has become almost everything." In a world where "change is the new constant," he declared, "our party's great purpose is nothing less than to prepare our nation to shoulder a bigger load, in a world that will require it of us." Accordingly, "strength is not an option, it is a vital necessity."

If these words signal the government's intentions, then there must be a match between our aspirations and our abilities to achieve them. For too long, our capacity to be a significant player on the international stage has failed to match our rhetoric. The Prime Minister's declarations of intent have credibility, coming, as they do, from a government that has consistently supported the strengthening of our military capabilities. The Canada First Defence Strategy, including the new command structure for the Canadian Forces, has proved itself both at home and away – in Libya, Afghanistan and in the reconstruction of Haiti.

All the more welcoming, therefore, is Mr. Harper's recent statement that "re-equipping the military is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to making Canada a meaningful contributor in the world." The implications of this for Canadian foreign policy are profound. Mr. Harper seems to foresee a highly active foreign policy, and a very independent one. "We also have a purpose," he said. "And that purpose is no longer just to go along and get along with everyone else's agenda."

Implicit in Mr. Harper's statements is a recognition that Canada's national interests are at the core of our foreign policy and have never been more demanding than they are today. To do so requires rebuilding our diplomatic resources to the stature they had in the postwar era when it was widely acknowledged that the impact of Canada's contributions far exceeded its size.

The negotiation of a new accord with the United States to reverse the hardening of our border, the need to protect the access of our energy exports to American markets, the need to create new markets for our oil sands, the negotiation of a free-trade deal with the European Union and India, the strengthening of our relations with China, the protection of our interests in the Arctic – all are of the highest importance for our national interest and all deserving of the most talented of our human resources.

"To shoulder a bigger load" will necessitate a foreign service at the very top of its game. If the 1990s were a decade of darkness for the Canadian Forces, both the '90s and the noughts were equally so for the foreign service. Process took priority over policy-making. Public diplomacy, an area Canada pioneered, virtually disappeared.

Meantime, there's been a revolution in the way information is acquired and transcribed. Far from the information revolution shrinking the role of the ambassador, it's enhancing it. Out of the vortex of information and communication, the ambassador emerges as chief interpreter of data and events, chief analyst, chief intelligence officer, chief advocate and chief adviser, the central player in a field with an infinite number of actors, pursuing conflicting goals and agendas.

In this age of the Internet and WikiLeaks, the role of diplomacy needs to be assessed and understood. The Prime Minister should commission a task force on the foreign service, as he did for Afghanistan. It's been more than 30 years since the McDougall Commission looked at our diplomats. There will be no new golden age of Canadian foreign policy unless we invest in the human resources that, in the Prime Minister's words, are necessary "to making Canada a meaningful contributor in the world."

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