

TAKING SIDES: THE MYTH OF CANADIAN NEUTRALITY IN WORLD AFFAIRS

by Adam Chapnick

Canada is not a monastery. We must shake off the illusion of neutrality as a form of shelter from the evils of a wicked world, and the aspiration for independence as an end in itself.

– John Holmes¹

On 31 July 2006, the Strategic Council released a poll on the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in the Middle East that helped frame, or indeed *misframe*, the debate in Canadian circles. The crucial question was: “What should Canada’s position be in the current conflict?” The three possible answers were: “We should support Israel,” “We should support Hezbollah,” and “We should stay neutral.” Seventy-seven percent of Canadians chose the third response, and 51 percent added that the Harper government’s vocal support for Israel represented a change of position from previous governments.² Canada’s political elite were quick to echo the public response. The Liberals’ interim leader, Bill Graham, suggested that the Canadian government’s decision to take sides in the Middle East conflict potentially could limit its ability to mediate in the region. Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe went much further, condemning the Harper Conservatives for having “destroyed 50 years of Canadian diplomacy.”³

The result of the controversy was a profound distortion of Canada’s national history. The long-vaunted, and entirely inaccurate, understanding of the Canadian diplomatic tradition as having been grounded in an unwillingness to take sides was given new life. In addition, Canadians were made to think that neutrality was consistent with the national interest. Ever since 1931, when the Statute of Westminster enabled the government in Ottawa to execute foreign policy independently, Canadians have taken sides, and they have been willing to use military force to defend their position. These ideas should hardly be surprising. A country of Canada’s size, strength, and geographical location alongside the United States cannot hope to have a voice in world affairs without working multilaterally, and picking global partners more often than not entails forsaking neutrality. Moreover, since the Second World War, Canadians have committed themselves to an active role in world affairs – an approach that would be impossible without alliances and allies.

Finally, in spite of recent suggestions to the contrary, history also has shown that it is possible for a non-neutral country to mediate impartially and effectively during international crises. Neutrality, then, is, and has long been, entirely *un-Canadian*.

Before 1931, the (British) Dominion of Canada did not have the independent capacity to be neutral. As a subordinate element of the empire, it was automatically involved whenever the government in London declared war. In 1914, for example, the British brought all of the dominions into the battle against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Neither the Canadian Parliament nor the Canadian people had any impact upon the decision. Certainly, the government in Ottawa was historically capable of negotiating the extent of its contribution to imperial wars, as it did in both the Sudan in 1885, and in South Africa 14 years later, but neutrality was never a option.

The passage of the Statute of Westminster made all of the dominions autonomous states within the Commonwealth. British laws no longer had effect in Canada without the federal government’s explicit consent, and Parliament received the right to pass legislation with extra-territorial implications. While the statute was being finalized, a crisis erupted in the Chinese province of Manchuria. Japan, a member of the League of Nations, had attacked and established a puppet state called Manchukuo. China, also a League member, quickly took the case to the organization and demanded a response. Canadians were represented in the Assembly, but most had no interest in becoming involved in the crisis, nor were most officials from Ottawa willing to recommend punitive sanctions against Japan. Isolationist sentiment was particularly strong in Canada during the Depression era, and sanctions without the support of the United States (which was not a member of the League) would have been useless. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the government from taking a side. Japan had clearly acted as an aggressor, and – after a brief diplomatic controversy – Canada joined the rest of the League in condemning its actions.

Four years later, when Benito Mussolini threatened to attack what is now Ethiopia, Canada again joined the rest of the League in objecting. An Italian invasion would have violated the sovereignty of a fellow

League member, something that explicitly undermined the organization's covenant. It did not take long for the Canadian government to reject any sense of neutrality by condemning the fascist plan and eventual attack. One might counter that, in both cases, the leadership in Ottawa suggested clear limits to the extent of its willingness to contribute to a solution of the conflicts, but there is still no denying that the political elite passed judgment on who was right and who was wrong.

The Second World War was even more clear-cut. In 1937, Prime Minister Mackenzie King travelled to Germany and promised Adolf Hitler that Canadians would swim across the Atlantic to defend Britain if the German army dared attack. In 1939, the Liberal government kept its word and declared war on Germany just seven days after Great Britain and over two years before the United States followed suit. On 1 January 1942, it signed the Declaration of the United Nations, pledging itself to total war and total victory in the battle against Hitlerism. Canada also collaborated with the United States and Great Britain in developing the technology necessary to create the first atomic bomb, and it helped found the United Nations organization, a body that specifically prohibited aggressor states from membership.

In January 1947, Minister of External Affairs Louis St. Laurent declared Canada's full commitment to the Western side in the Cold War in a speech called 'The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs.' Known colloquially as the Gray Lecture, it outlined Canadian support for the concept of political liberty, and for the establishment and enforcement of a system of international law, two ideas that were anathema to the Soviet Union at the time. Canada soon after became a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a defence alliance that directly challenged Soviet expansionism. Over the next 40 years, the Canadian government took decidedly non-neutral positions on a variety of Cold War issues. For instance, it contributed troops to the UN mission against Kim Il-sung during the Korean War; it refused to recognize the legitimacy of communist China for over twenty years; it negotiated a defence production-sharing agreement with the United States; and it boycotted the 1980 summer Olympic Games to protest Soviet aggression in Afghanistan.

Certainly, some of Canada's commitments have been little more than rhetorical, and critics might argue that the rhetoric has masked an underlying neutrality, but such reasoning belies the repeated willingness of the government in Ottawa to use military force to support its position. While the Second World War is the most obvious example, it is worth recalling

that along with deploying to fight communism in Korea between 1950 and 1953, Canadians also took up arms against Iraq in 1991 and against the Serbs in Kosovo and Yugoslavia in 1999. The mission in Afghanistan, initiated by Paul Martin's Liberals – the expanded and extended by Stephen Harper's Conservatives – is consistent with a long-standing Canadian willingness to use force internationally against its enemies.

All of this is to suggest that Canadians are not a neutral people because they do not want to be neutral. Historically, the national government has made a series of deliberate choices to take sides, and has often supported its position through military force. What is more, considering the past and present geopolitical environment, neutrality – even if Canadians wanted to pursue it – would be inconceivable.

As the second-largest sovereign landmass in the world, Canada would require an overwhelming military capacity to protect itself effectively. Add to that a relatively meagre population, and the result is a country that is virtually indefensible against external threats without allied support. As the great Canadian commentator John Holmes once said, "Having the geography of a superpower, the gross national product of a middle power, and the population of a small power, we have never had any feasible alternative to opting for collective defence, if we could get it."⁴ In this context, being neutral cannot be a realistic option. As a form of security, neutrality is similar to soft power. Without the hard power to back it up, it is ineffective. One might consider the case of Belgium during the Second World War. Belgian neutrality did nothing to save the country from Hitler. Switzerland, on the other hand, was largely spared because of its ability to defend its sovereignty by force if necessary. In today's context, with its military still suffering from a generation of under-funding, Canada is in no position to declare itself neutral. Such an effort would abrogate responsibility for national defence to the United States, and Canada would sacrifice a degree of global autonomy.

The American factor is particularly important to any Canadian consideration of non-alignment. Ever since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine to Congress in 1823, the United States has taken responsibility upon itself for the security of the Americas from outside interference. Although the Canadian-American relationship has been largely cooperative, particularly over the last 100 years, that harmony has been maintained, at least in part, because of a largely unspoken commitment to collaborate in the face of a threat to North America.

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

During the 1930s, for example, Franklin Roosevelt remarked upon America's duty to "defend ourselves and our neighbourhood," without any Canadian objection.⁵ In 1938, at a speech in Kingston opening the Thousand Islands Bridge, the American president promised that the United States would not stand idly by if Canadian soil were threatened. Notably, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King answered by promising that Canada would defend itself against any attempts to attack the United States from the north.

Neutrality during the Cold War was simply impossible. The revelation of Soviet spy rings in Canada during the Gouzenko affair of 1945-1946 confirmed that Joseph Stalin considered Canada an enemy. Soviet intransigence at the UN Security Council motivated Canada to collaborate in the foundation of NATO as an alternative method of collective defence against the communist threat.

In the post-9/11 era, neutrality would not only be impossible, it would also threaten Canadian prosperity. The American national security strategy cannot accommodate anything less than full cooperation and information-sharing with Canada, particularly on the issue of border security. Neutrality would have a dramatic impact on access to the American market, stifling Canadian trade. Restrictions at the border would also hamper the tourism industry. In today's environment, Canada simply cannot afford to go it alone.

Even if alternative markets could be sought, the long-standing Canadian desire to play an active role in world affairs prevents a neutral position. Typically, smaller states have best made their influence felt internationally by working multilaterally. As a neutral power, Canada would give up the vast majority of its opportunities. The United Nations Charter, for example, obligates members to promote and maintain international peace and security, a task that precludes neutrality, and, for a long time, prevented Switzerland from seeking full membership. As a neutral country, and therefore a non-participant in the Second World War, Canada would not have been invited to the conferences that eventually created the IMF and the World Bank. It would not have joined NATO, it would not have played a role in the Korean War, nor would it have been invited to participate in what is now the G-8 international forum of industrialized nations.

Although initial impressions might suggest otherwise, Canada's willingness to take sides actually has empowered it as a peacekeeper. In fact, the Canadian experience is some of the best evidence that peacekeepers

can act impartially without being neutral. The Suez crisis is the clearest example. In 1956, Canadian diplomat Lester B. Pearson was instrumental in brokering a ceasefire arrangement between Britain, France, and Israel on one side, and Egypt on the other, that allowed a UN force to stand between them until an agreement could be reached over the status of the Suez Canal. This was, according to most historians, the birth of modern peacekeeping.

What is rarely mentioned about the Suez Crisis is how 'un-neutral' Canada actually was during the crisis. In order to obtain support for his motion to end the conflict, Secretary of State for External Affairs Pearson agreed to vote in favour of an Indian resolution that explicitly condemned Britain and France for their international aggression. This move was so unpopular among those still loyal to the British Empire at home that some have called it one of the key reasons that the Liberals lost the 1957 election to John Diefenbaker's Conservatives. In fact, during the 1957 election campaign, Diefenbaker used Suez as an example of how the Liberals had been selling Canada out to the interests of the United States. During this Middle East crisis, the Canadian government was clear: the British and the French were wrong; yet, when it came to mediating between the two sides, the world still listened.

One might note also that the Suez Crisis was not the first time that Canada had been called upon to mediate. In 1954, it was asked to participate in a series of three international commissions on supervision and control in Indochina. The groups were charged with enforcing cease-fire agreements in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The three members of the commissions – Canada, India, and Poland – were supposed to be impartial: they were mandated to condemn any and all violations of the agreements. Nevertheless, Canada and Poland were given the task specifically because they were *not* neutral. Canada was a trusted representative of Western interests and Poland was a Soviet satellite. The major powers hoped that, with the non-aligned India as a balancer, the three states would be able to evaluate each challenge to the Geneva agreements on its merits. While the Polish representatives refused to even feign impartiality, the Canadian representatives, led by Lester Pearson, generally considered the claims of both sides objectively.

Before these commissions had completed their work, in December 1963, violence broke out between the Greek majority and the minority Turkish community in Cyprus. In February 1964, the issue reached the UN Security Council. Thanks to its alliance with both Greece and Turkey through NATO,

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Canada was in an ideal position to coordinate and then to take part in the UN peacekeeping mission that was eventually dispatched.

In this context, the current Canadian government's position on the right of Israel to defend itself against terrorist aggression was generally consistent with both historical tradition and the national interest. Canada has never been neutral on Israel's right to exist. Since Hezbollah, and, indeed, Hamas do not recognize that right, neutrality would have necessitated a specific change in the Canadian position. In addition, real neutrality likely would have required the federal government to declassify Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations.

Canada's lack of influence in the resolution of the conflict of the summer of 2006 also had little to do with its government's policy. The United States certainly was not neutral, nor was France – which supported the G-8 resolution condemning Hezbollah aggression – nor was Lebanon. Canada's role was rather determined by its lack of resources. Whereas the Americans had the ability to affect Israel's military capacity, France had peacekeepers to contribute to a potential

cease-fire, and the conflict was taking place on Lebanese soil, Canada had no leverage with either combatant, no troops to supply to a UN mission, and no standing in the region. Neutral or not, Canada was in no position to play any real role.

In conclusion, the history of Canadian external relations is characterized by taking sides. Canadians have rarely hesitated to declare their support for countries and causes that advanced their national interests, and have contributed actively to international organizations that differentiate between right and wrong in world affairs. That such an approach to world affairs will continue is inevitable. So long as Canada wishes to play a meaningful role abroad, it will have to join forces with other like-minded states. When it comes to Canadian national interests, the middle way is not always the right way.

Doctor Adam Chapnick is *Deputy Chair of the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, and an Assistant Professor of Defence Studies at the Canadian Forces College. He is also the author of The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations.*

NOTES

1. John Holmes, "Canadian Security: A Historical Perspective," speech to Collège Militaire Royale, 11 April 1987, in Trinity College Archives, Toronto, John Holmes Papers, Box 9, File 13.
2. The Strategic Council. "A Report to the Globe and Mail and CTV: The Middle East Conflict." 31 July 2006, at <http://www.thestrategiccounsel.com/our_news/polls.asp>
3. Quentin Casey, "Canadian Neutrality a Myth," *The National Post*, 2 August 2006, at <<http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/>>
4. John W. Holmes, "Canadian Defence Cooperation with the United States in the North American Region," 10 October 1985, submission to the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, in Trinity College Archives, University of Toronto, John Holmes Papers, Box 11, File 3.
5. Roosevelt, quoted in Norman Hillmer and J.L. Granatstein, *Empire to Umpire* (Toronto: Irwin, 2000), p. 134.
6. Canada joined what was then the G-5 only after Italy was welcomed in a bid to prevent an electoral victory by Italian communists. Since the Canadian economy was larger than Italy's, US President Gerald Ford felt it only right that Canada be invited as well.



Soldiers from the Force Protection Company observe from their light armoured vehicle in the village of Nakadok near Kandahar.