

Defending Canada in 2013

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, JAN 2 2013

Throughout the last weeks, I have seen a number of commentaries about what the world might look like in 2013. As the new year is now upon us, I offer some thoughts for what Canada's defence and foreign affairs leadership should consider as we move into 2013.

1. Develop a coherent and modernized strategy for the defence and foreign affairs priorities of Canada. The proposed strategies and doctrines of the last 20 years do not apply to the current global context and relying on outdated concerns makes little sense. It seems as if the Harper government is going through a bit of an identity crisis when it comes to its defence and foreign affairs principles and the solution has been not to have a guiding strategy for either department.
2. Time for a shakeup in the Defence Department. Peter MacKay has done a good job during his tenure in showing support for troops abroad and for raising the profile of the *Canada First* strategy when it was initially introduced in 2008, but the time for new blood at the top of the DND is needed. Between the helicopter chauffeur to inexplicably porous treatment of Canadian Forces veterans, MacKay has too much baggage and if the Harper government is serious about changes in the defence sector, the first change should be the person leading it.
3. Make the Arctic a priority...again. There is no greater priority for Canada's national defence and foreign policy concerns that the circumpolar region, and the government's recent decline in Canada's Arctic interests is a risky strategy. Other states, none more notable than Russia, have clearly identified the region as a priority, but since his majority election in 2011, Harper's commitments to the Arctic seem to be fading from memory. If Canada wants its claims in the high north to be taken seriously by other states and international organizations, it must recommit itself to a pragmatic northern strategy.
4. Under no circumstances should Canada involve itself in a mission, or multiple missions, invoked under the guise of humanitarian intervention. Overextended military forces, economic uncertainty, and the often limited success of these missions bring their benefit to Canada into question. There will be no shortage of areas that might qualify for such interventionism under clandestine doctrines like the Responsibility to Protect, but it is time for Canada to admit that overburdening the nation's defence and foreign affairs infrastructures is not currently in the national interest.
5. Ensure that behavior matches capabilities. This builds on the previous point in some way, but is focused more on measurable national capabilities and Canada's place in the international system. At the heart of Canada's historical successes in foreign and defence issues has been its recognition that, as a middle power, it is severely limited in defending and extending itself. To compensate, Canada has traditionally aligned itself with the United States, and also entrenched itself into multilateral institutions. The time is ripe for the Harper government to re-engage with international organizations that will help Canada achieve its goals and lessen the impact of certain global issues on Canada as well. Most of all, Canada's behavior at the United Nations needs to reflect that of a developed and well-respected state, rather than what has become an almost embarrassing and childish propensity to just not show up.
6. Repair relations with our veterans. There is not much that needs to be said here beyond the immediate need for the federal government to stop waging war with its own veterans. They have served the country with honour and the country should reciprocate in kind.

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About the author:

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