



CANADA-ASIA AGENDA

Reassessing Canada-North Korea Relations

G rard Hervouet

North Korea faces a critical transition with the recently announced appointment of Kim Jong-Un as leader and supreme commander of the country's army following the sudden death of former leader Kim Jong-Il on December 17, 2011. Like many countries, Canada is carefully eyeing the military regime's next moves as the country unites under the leadership of the relatively unknown youngest son of the late Kim Jong-Il. Canada has demonstrated its limited desire to engage with the reclusive military regime by imposing tough sanctions against the country. In tracing Canada's history of engagement with North Korea, author Gerard Hervouet suggests the timing could be appropriate to give more credibility to Canadian values and principles by launching a multilateral humanitarian initiative with partners in the region.¹

When Canada established diplomatic relations with North Korea in February 2001, expectations were modest. The timing was nevertheless favourable to an engagement policy, which, due to the climate of rapprochement prevailing at the time, some regarded as an overture. All hopes have been deceived. The North-Korean regime continues to be in survival mode, periodically oscillating between open provocations and calculated pauses.

The Canadian Government, under Prime Minister Harper, perceives North Korea as a sort of laboratory where the most odious political and social experiments are conducted with impunity. The excesses of the dictatorship, the famines, the ignorance of the meaning of human rights itself and the nuclear provocations strike the deepest values of the Canadian public. Many other countries share this resentment, including the United States, Australia or Japan, but they are careful to adjust the expression of disapproval

to their regional interests and the direct responsibilities they may have in Asia.

In this regard, leaders' reactions to Kim Jong-Il's death were notable--Hilary Clinton acknowledging that the DPRK was in "a period of national mourning" and stating that "the United States stands ready to help the North Korean people" urging "a new era of peace, prosperity and lasting security."² Stephen Harper, on the other hand, declaring "Kim Jong Il will be remembered as the leader of a totalitarian regime," citing the "regime's reckless decisions [that] resulted in North Korea being an impoverished nation."³

Canada has imposed its toughest sanctions against North Korea, banning all exports and imports and most financial transactions,⁴ albeit that the insignificance of bilateral trade allows for a strict and un-costly enforcement. However, the interesting, somewhat intriguing, question is whether Canada



About The Author

G rard Hervouet

G rard Hervouet is a Professor at the Department of Political Science at Universit  Laval in Qu bec City and Director of the International Peace and Security Program at the Institute des Hautes  tudes Internationales. He is also the Former President of the Canadian Consortium of Asia Pacific Security. He recently published a book entitled 'Les conflits dans le monde 2011. Rapport annuel sur les conflits internationaux.'



might be adopting against the regime in Pyongyang measures that do not really reflect its interests. More specifically, why should Ottawa go further and beyond the measures that Washington adopts?

Canada has no responsibilities in Asia anymore; our diplomatic actions are now dispersed and diluted among a variety of regional forums, and the roles we once played as a mediator or through back channels as a broker are things of the past. Canada seems to be regarded as reacting more to economic issues or specific situations than promoting new political initiatives.

The election of the Conservative government in 2006 coincided with the first North Korean nuclear test, which preceded even bolder experiments in 2009. Canada has reacted strongly, supporting Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874 with firmness.



*North Korean Soldiers at Joint Security Area
Photo Credit: U.S. Army*

In recent years, Canada has strengthened its longstanding commitment to the disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation regimes, as in the case of the vibrant plea to Main Committee II of the Non-Proliferation Review Conference in New York in May 2010. Canada has emphasized its active role in the Vienna group of 10 which prepared the NPT Review Conference and has defended vigorously the need to support all clauses of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), especially article III which states that “the IAEA is tasked with providing assurances that all nuclear material in a state is in peaceful activities.” The same declaration states “Canada believes that the Conference should support the work of IAEA in assisting States’ efforts to prevent illicit trafficking in nuclear and other radioactive material.”

Interestingly, this statement was delivered by Marius Grinius, Ambassador and permanent representative of Canada to the United Nations Office in Geneva and the United Nations Disarmament Conference. Mr. Grinius was Canada’s Ambassador to South Korea, where he was accredited to the DPRK. It should be understood therefore, that the ultimate target of these remarks was indeed North Korea, as well as Iran. It should also be noted that the Government of Canada has taken the habit in official declarations of condemning North Korea and Iran in conjunction.

The joint denunciation of North Korea and Iran was also apparent in the outcomes of the June 2010 G8 Summit in Huntsville, Ontario, when the Prime Minister, once again, insisted that the world must see to it that the funds the Iranian and North Korean governments “spend on [acquiring] those weapons will not be the only cost they incur.”⁵ Associating the two countries allows in this way to give more coherence to Canadian foreign policy, and eventually reduce some apparent discrepancies.

In September 2011, Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs used his statement to the United Nations General Assembly to send a strongly worded message to the Organisation and North Korea. Recalling the “farce of a major proliferator of nuclear arms presiding over the Conference on Disarmament,” John Baird justified his Government’s four weeks boycott of the Conference in July 2011 objecting to the chairmanship being assigned to that country as a result of rules that rotate this position according to the alphabetical order. The minister said very clearly Canada will continue “to advocate reform in how the Chair of this important body is selected.” Having foundered its Security Council bid, it was certainly a good opportunity for Canada to underline the necessity of changing some important rules of designation in the United Nations.

Other than the nuclear question, which legitimizes Canadian sanctions, the unconditional support for Washington’s firm refusal to resume the Six Party Talks short of a preliminary assurance from Pyongyang is another factor accounting for Canada’s intransigence.

The chronological order of Canada’s sanctions generally follows the ones decided in Washington. For instance, Canada strengthened its sanctions against North Korea in August 2011 following President Obama’s decision to renew American ones at the end of June.

Perhaps by closely mirroring American policy, Canada also serves some of its interests in Asia. As in the case of

Washington, the North Korean threat has drawn Canada closer to Japan and South Korea. In particular, relations with the latter country are a priority given the active negotiation currently under way of what could become Canada's first Free Trade Agreement in the region. Being closely aligned with the US and regarded as such by South Korea and Japan is not necessarily a handicap for Canada when dealing with these two countries. However, this alignment could bring more economic or political benefits if Canada was really willing to play a specific role in the future of the Korean Peninsula.

It is also relevant to highlight that a significant softening of Canada's policy towards China has taken place recently. PM Harper's famous statement in November 2006 that he would not sacrifice his views on human rights "to the almighty dollar" has since been amended. In fact, by maintaining a hard-line and inflexible position towards North Korea, it is plausible that Canada wants to send a strong message to the Chinese government, the sole open supporter of the Pyongyang regime. In other words, not everything is negotiable and Ottawa has not permanently changed its attitude or modified Canadian values in the region.



Kim Jong-Il

Photo Credit: www.kremlin.ru

The most extreme sanction policies do not always yield the anticipated results. Cuba remains the textbook case in this regard. With regards to North Korea, Canada, like other countries more directly involved, is not in a position to defuse the ever-increasing dangers and uncertainties

stemming from Pyongyang's policies. Even Prime Minister Harper frankly noted Canada's limited influence in a recent interview, "We'll continue to work with our allies to do what we can. Obviously, our ability to affect change within North Korea itself is extremely limited."⁶

Experts speculate on what might be the best strategies to adopt. None can be satisfactory by itself since the objectives of each country are very different and future scenarios range from a protracted status quo to the extreme of regime collapse. The regime itself nourishes this confusion by clinging to a scarcely credible hereditary succession system, without showing any sign of concession on any of the topics mobilizing a large part of the international community against it.

Since the sinking of the South Korean naval ship, the Cheonan, Canada has adopted a "Controlled Engagement Policy." In spite of the fact that humanitarian assistance remains permitted, food aid seems to have ceased completely. As elsewhere, it is very hard to defend North Korea's humanitarian cause in Canada, and NGOs, even the most persuasive ones, cannot count on a support network structured around a (non-existent) North Korean Diaspora susceptible of influencing Ottawa's policies; as is the case, for instance, with Burma.

Nothing suggests that Canada will lead any original and constructive initiatives on the North Korean issue, which includes, of course, denuclearization, because it is not a member of the Six Party Talks. Nor is it perceived as an important actor in Asian security dynamics. However, Canada could already step in to go along with South Korea and Japan in all their efforts to open new spaces for exchanges with the world's closed society. Without labelling them diplomatic initiatives, certain interventions by Canadian civil society actors could then be supported indirectly. With the passing of Kim Jong-Il, Canada is comforted to remain in its strong resolve and no one in Canada would disagree with the Foreign Minister's statement on death of Kim Jong-Il saying: "it is past due for North Korea to change its ways and for those who lead it to meet the real needs of the North Korean people."

At the same time, to give more credibility in the defence of Canadian values and principles, the timing could be appropriate to launch a humanitarian initiative with our Asian partners and the relevant UN multilateral institutions.

As soon as in January 2012 we can expect to observe the new North Korean leadership sending mixed signals about its future orientations. China is already behind what could have been considered as future scenarios for North Korea. The four trips Kim Jong-Il took to Beijing in the last eighteen months could support this hypothesis.

The first positive signs of a smooth transition could come with the clear confirmation of the introduction in North Korea of a "market economy" backed by China. On the diplomatic front, Pyongyang will also send the first messages

to Washington indicating a more flexible attitude about the denuclearization issue. However, nothing will be confirmed before the Six Party Talks resume.

Surely, Canada will wait to see international negotiations take a turn acceptable to the United States, South Korea and Japan before it modifies the course of its resolve. Because of the very tense political transition much could also depend on the unexpected behaviour of the North

Korean leadership. Taking into account that such a turn could come more rapidly than is currently estimated on the Korean peninsula, Canada should already anticipate, in close collaboration with the same partners, but also Australia, the type of contribution it could bring in the event of a reunification which could be gradual and pacific or more violent, but which is, in the more or less long term, inevitable.

¹ This short brief about Canada-North Korea relations was about to be posted when Kim Jong-Il's death was announced. Minor changes have been introduced specifically to assess if and how this event could change Canadian policy towards North Korea.

² <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/12/179174.htm>

³ <http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/12/19/stephen-harpers-scathing-remembrance-of-north-koreas-kim-jong-il/>

⁴ Humanitarian assistance to North Korea remains exempt from sanction. See <http://www.international.gc.ca/media/aff/news-communications/2011/231.aspx?lang=eng&view=d>

⁵ <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=3493&cachecommand=bypass>

⁶ 'Harper: North Korea at 'critical juncture,' *Bell Media*, January 3, 2012, <http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/TopStories/20111219/world-reaction-kim-jong-il-north-korea-leader-death-111219>

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