**Canada, the world's principle power
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There is much talk these days about "principle" in Canadian foreign policy, as if it were a new mantra. Under less rigorous governments, the Conservatives argue, Canada was guided by opportunism and expediency. No longer.

When the Conservatives were elected in 2006, for example, they tried to get tough on China. Canada would condemn China's sorry record on human rights; conscience would trump commerce. This also meant extending more openness toward Taiwan, the world's pariah.
So Stephen Harper, quite pointedly, refused to visit China. When he changed his mind and did visit some two years later, he was dressed down in public by the Chinese for taking so long to get there. Harper accepted the humiliation.

By then, of course, Harper had learned his lesson in realpolitik: that China is simply too big to ignore or deplore. Whatever his reservations about China's record, he swallowed them. Critics of China in his cabinet - such as Jason Kenney, who, as an opposition MP, had made a highly publicized visit to Beijing to support a leading Chinese dissident - were ignored.

Rest assured the federal cabinet is revisiting those concerns in its extended deliberations over the acquisition of Nexen Inc. by a Chinese state-owned company. Someday, when the cabinet minutes are released, we will know who said what. But here's a safe bet: there are two strong factions in cabinet (pro-rights versus pro-business) and they are strongly divided on this question.

The takeover is likely to go ahead and the rights crowd will lose again. Once again, principle in foreign policy will be circumstantial, flexible and dispensable, especially when it clashes with the national interest.

But their reversal on China notwithstanding, the Conservatives continue to make a virtue of principle. Our leaders have learned to strut in international forums, as the Prime Minister did at the World Economic Forum in Davos last winter, when he boasted of our virtuous economic management. Or, John Baird at the United Nations, criticizing the failings of the organization, particularly its inability to stop the civil war in Syria.

Principle, principle. It has a way of getting into everything. Because Iran is an odious, murderous regime, we close our embassy there and force the Iranians to close theirs in Ottawa. This makes us feel good, even sanctimonious, but it denies any role for ourselves as moderator, much less mediator, in the effort to prevent a nuclear Iran.

The prime minister said early this year that Iran cannot be allowed to get the bomb, implying that Canada would support a military strike by Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities (rather than opting for a policy of deterrence and containment). His talking points sounded like they had been written in Jerusalem.

Then again, this is consistent. We are now the world's moral superpower. We shout at our adversaries, like impatient people shout when speaking a language they don't understand, convinced that simply raising their voices will make them understood. It doesn't.

There was a time that Canada aspired to be a principal power. To some observers, it is. (See Leon Ney-fakh's essay in The Boston Globe of Nov. 4.) But the measures of power are no longer size, resources and influence. To us, the issue is morality, pure and simple, and we have cornered the market on it.

Let there be no mistake: Canada may or may not be a principal power, but it is certainly a principle power.

This was on display, once again, in our excessive reaction to the overwhelming vote in the United Nations General Assembly to extend "non-member observer status" to the Palestinians. Bad enough that we voted with only a few other member-states (all of which, beyond the United States, are wholly insignificant) in opposing a measure that a former prime minister of Israel, among other prominent Israelis, thought innocuous. Bad enough that an overwrought Baird rushed down to the United Nations - which he and the prime minister so distrust - to deliver Canada's denunciation, in person and in anger.

Worse, though, were the veiled threats ("we will be considering all available next steps," Baird said) and the suggestion of reviewing - read ending - our aid to the Palestinians. Then there was the ham-handed order to our diplomats in Israel, Ramallah and the United Nations to return home, which the media read as a rebuke.

"Ottawa recalls Middle East envoys - Back for consults," said one newspaper. In the world of inept headline writing, this one suggests that our diplomats were being withdrawn in protest rather than summoned home for talks. For the ambiguity, blame our foreign ministry.

In any event, Baird has expressed Canada's displeasure, while offering Canada's "good offices" - as if we have any in the region. Later he seemed to soften his stand on the Palestinians, much as Harper softened his stand on attacking Iran's nuclear installations and on condemning China on human rights.

Principle? This is posturing.

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