**The Harper Doctrine in Red? Justin Trudeau’s Foreign Policy**

Jeremy Appel. *Canadian Dimension.* June 1, 2015

With its legacy of peacekeeping and respect for the United Nations, one notable feature of Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s foreign policy was his willingness to disagree openly with our southern neighbour. In his memoir, PET lambasted “the rigidly anti-Soviet stance taken by Reagan and his ideological soulmate [sic] Margaret Thatcher” in England. He primarily blamed these neoconservative ideologues for the heightened Cold War tensions of the 1980s. Where the neocons sought confrontation, PET sought reconciliation. This desire for reconciliation between the two superpowers ignored the fundamental power imbalance between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., but provided a multilateral framework within which larger issues could be dealt.

By contrast, “it’s hard to parse out Justin Trudeau,” says Erika Simpson, professor of political science at Western University. Attempting to decipher coherent positions, particularly on foreign policy “will only end in frustration.” And, she says, “it’s hard to figure out his foreign policy stand on anything.” This “deliberately nebulous” approach is designed to cater to as many interests as possible without being blatantly contradictory. Potential voters can then attribute to him whatever stances they like. Say what you will about Harper, but his positions on foreign issues are much more transparent than Trudeau’s.

As the most right-wing prime minister in Canadian history, Harper is notorious for taking a wrecking ball to many of our national institutions. He is in many ways PET’s opposite. He seeks confrontation with Russia, does not respect the UN, and is fanatically pro-Israel. PET certainly supported Israel, but was also somewhat sympathetic to the Palestinian point of view. No doubt, Harper’s hardline Zionism is a result of his evangelical Christian worldview, but it is equally reflective of a larger shift to the right in Canadian foreign policy. Canadian political elites have in recent years become more confrontational towards Russia, more skeptical of the UN, and more supportive of anything Israel does. This occurred in the context of an increasingly pro-American drift in Canadian politics since NAFTA.

When it comes to foreign policy, Justin Trudeau appears to have more in common with Stephen Harper than his father. With the recent spate of killings in Ukraine and Gaza, the younger Trudeau took positions that seem more inspired by Harper than PET. It is worth noting that there is much to admire in Trudeau’s domestic agenda, with its calls for legalizing assisted suicide and recreational marijuana. But in terms of foreign policy, a Justin Trudeau premiership will be business as usual. Thomas Mulcair’s NDP, which many people seem to forget is the official opposition party, seems a much more faithful adherent to PET’s multilateralist legacy than his progeny.

In an infamous interview with Persian-language Salaam Toronto, Trudeau attacked Harper’s foreign policy, particularly his hardline pro-Israel stance. “Whether it’s positioning around Israel or working closely with the United States, [Harper is] very, very much focused on what is going to play well at the ballot box,” he told the paper’s editorial board. But when Israel launched its deadliest attack yet on Gaza this summer, Trudeau took a position virtually identical to Harper. “Israel has a right to defend itself and its people,” he said. “Hamas is a terrorist organization and must cease its rocket attacks immediately.” It seems Trudeau is guilty of the very pandering for which he criticized Harper.

Nor is Trudeau much better on relations with Russia. After making a rather tasteless joke about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Trudeau needed to demonstrate he’s tough on Putin. In a statement opportunistically issued on August 24, Ukraine’s Independence Day, the Liberal leader said: “we commemorate the many who for decades fought for freedom and democracy in Ukraine, culminating in independence 23 years ago. These values were defended this year on the Maidan, and this struggle continues in the face of Russian aggression.” For this reason, the Liberals “stand united with the people of Ukraine during this current crisis.” This sounds much more like Ronald Reagan than PET.

Stephen Clarkson, professor of political economy at University of Toronto and author of a book on PET, says “Harper is unique in Canadian history. We’ve never had such an extreme right-wing government.” Although we see elements of this burgeoning pro-American unilateralism in the Chretien and Martin Liberal governments, Harper represents a significant break with traditional Canadian foreign policy. Although Chretien and Martin supported American unilateralism in Kosovo and Afghanistan, they would not have dared risk Canada’s international standing by engaging in Harper’s belligerent posturing on Russia. The same cannot be said of Trudeau.

“Domestic politics cannot be written off” as the source of Trudeau’s foreign policy positions, Clarkson says. “The young Trudeau dealing with Russia is different from his father dealing with the Soviet Union.” During the Cold War, there was a genuine threat of nuclear annihilation. PET saw it as in Canada’s national interest to use its position as a middle power to prevent this. With the fall of the Soviet Union and eventual onset of the War on Terror, Justin Trudeau operates within a far different global context than his father. Confrontation is the order of the day with this post-Cold War triumphalism that infects Trudeau as much as it does Harper.