



Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird addresses the United Nations General Assembly in New York on Nov. 29, 2012.

REUTERS

Canada's led itself into a corner

DAVID CARMENT

Published Thursday, Dec. 06, 2012 07:00AM EST

Last updated Thursday, Dec. 06, 2012 07:00AM EST

The next decade could be different from anything we've seen because of an increase in conflicts around the world stemming from struggles over freedom of expression, challenges to ineffective governments and mounting economic inequality in countries throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Canada could easily find itself in demand as a mediator in these conflicts.

Unfortunately, our current conflict-management approach isn't creating the results we want or what the world needs. Insider attacks against NATO forces in Afghanistan and the assault against the U.S. consulate in Libya suggest we could become more a target than an intermediary in situations where we're supposed to be helping.

Our modest efforts in mitigating the Syrian conflict have failed to create any meaningful change in its trajectory and, so far, any recurrence of a "responsibility to protect"-type intervention seem more and more unlikely as time goes on. The mission in Libya to overthrow Moammar Gadhafi appears to have achieved its goal of changing the political leadership there but came at the cost of destabilizing both the country and its neighbours. As a conflict management tool, military force has serious limitations in producing lasting positive outcomes. The effects are uncertain and the consequences often counterproductive.

Mediation presents itself as a useful cost-effective alternative to expensive military missions. There are several liberal democracies, including Finland, Norway and Sweden, that are taking mediation more seriously. On the recommendation of a special United Nations report calling for better use of mediation at the global level, these countries are investing heavily in developing full mediation capacities as part of their diplomatic arsenal. They understand that mediation has an important role in diplomacy as part of a structured and systematic approach to conflict management.

Canada has invested only modestly in developing such tools. The results have been ambiguous at best. For example, despite Canadian backing, there hasn't been much to celebrate in the African Union's efforts to mediate some of the most deeply protracted conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. The security situations in South Sudan, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo have all worsened in the past year.

In cases where we've played a more direct role – the Dubai process, for instance, a regional effort facilitated by Canada – the results have been equally tenuous. That process was intended to address the security situation in Afghanistan arising from Pakistan's porous border. But it was initiated far too late in the game and was flawed from the start because a key regional player, Iran, was excluded from the talks.

In brief, the \$20-million or so spent by the Canadian government on mediation is far from adequate. Besides, being a successful, respected and effective mediator requires more than just a funding envelope. Credibility and even-handedness are essential, too. These are words that don't come easily to mind when we think of the current government's approach to the Middle East, where the need for long-term balanced solutions is pressing. Unfortunately, both our Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister aren't giving Canada much room to manoeuvre with their staunch support of Israel on the one hand and their distrust of the United Nations on the other.

For starters, the Foreign Minister not only opposed the UN General Assembly motion recognizing Palestine as a non-member observer state but suggested that the 138 countries that voted in favour had abandoned their principles. In response, both Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas and the Arab League intimated that Canada is no longer welcome at the table in future negotiations.

Selectivity comes with a price. For example, the 2010 decision by the government-funded International Development Research Centre to cut more than \$700,000 in grant money to the Arab-Israeli NGO Mada al-Carmel only served to fuel tensions with Palestinians and weaken our presence and influence in the region. That's because the organization works with moderate Jewish-Israeli NGOs and academics heavily invested in revitalizing the peace process. The NGO, headed by a professor who teaches at a school of international affairs in the U.S., took the Harper government to court over that decision. Bev Oda's intervention to cancel some \$7-million of funding to Kairos, a respected ecumenical NGO operating in the region, carries a similar message. At a fall summit in Quebec City, our Foreign Minister took both Iran and Uganda to task for their human-rights records, only to be publicly shouted down by those whom he criticized. Quiet diplomacy, it seems, has no place in the current government's lexicon.

Canada's credibility has been strained and the message inconsistent, leading some countries to wonder what we stand for. A recently leaked foreign policy review noted that to succeed, "we will need to pursue political relationships in tandem with economic interests even where political interests or values may not align." Given that the Prime Minister is considering making human rights secondary to trade deals, it makes sense he would openly chastise some countries on their human-rights records (such as the Francophonie summit in Kinshasa) but not make such pronouncements to other countries where we have little leverage (such as India).

Finally, there is the government's decision to shut down its diplomatic operations in Iran. This means Canada is now dependent on others to mediate our dispute with the Iranian regime. Far from

being a leader in mediation, we have managed to work ourselves into a very tight corner with diminished influence. The world does need more Canada, just not the one we have right now.

David Carment is a professor of international affairs at Carleton University, editor of Canadian Foreign Policy Journal and a fellow at the Calgary-based Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.

© 2012 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.