From Lip Service to Neglect: The Evolution of Canadian Foreign Policy and the Darfur Genocide

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Table of Contents

Abstract
Martin's Rhetoric: Campaign to Office
Martin's Action: A "Limited" Response
Harper: A Muzzled Response
Afghanistan
Canada-United States Relations
The Canadian Forces
Domestic Politics
Conclusion
Endnotes

Abstract

Students of Canadian political culture can expect to develop a deep pride for our illustrious and celebrated military history. From the victory at Vimy Ridge during the Great War to the invasion of Normandy during World War II, Canada has left a lasting mark in military intervention across the globe. More recently, Canada has stood back from any robust military commitment and has instead defined itself as a peacekeeping state concerned with issues of development and humanitarian assistance rather than war and peace. The purpose of this paper is to examine the evolution of Canada's policy concerning humanitarian issues, more precisely, in response to the Darfur genocide since 2003. This paper evaluates Paul Martin's policy during his prime ministership and then analyzes Prime Minister Stephen Harper's policy since his election in 2006. This examination demonstrates that Martin's rhetoric regarding Canada's contribution to stopping the Darfur genocide became so exaggerated that it was impossible for government action to accommodate. By contrast, although Harper's limited action in sending financial aid and military expertise to Darfur mirrors that of his predecessor, Harper has effectively taken the air out of Martin's inflated rhetoric. Harper's reluctance to address publicly Canada's response to the Darfur genocide represents a divergence from the trend in contemporary Canadian foreign policy; in other words, Harper's rhetoric matches his government's action. Why the drastic change? As this essay will
argue, Harper's deflated rhetoric on the Darfur genocide is the by-product of his strategy to focus his foreign policy message on missions that will achieve the most political points at home, namely, militarizing the Afghanistan war, ensuring closer ties with the United States, satisfying the Canadian Forces, and defining himself in relation to the previous and present Liberals as a decisive leader. In short, Harper has largely neglected the Darfur genocide in order to position himself as a decisive leader concerned with issues of peace and security instead of issues of development and human rights.

**Martin's Rhetoric: Campaign to Office**

From the beginning of his role as leader of the Liberal party in 2003, Paul Martin consistently voiced a strong support for increasing Canada's role in humanitarian efforts across the globe. More precisely, Martin stated that Canadian foreign policy should espouse Canada's "deepest values" in protecting citizens from human rights abuses perpetrated by tyrannical governments.  As he declared at the Liberal Party leadership convention in November of 2003, Canada should take a stand in proposing a "new thinking about how the international community governs itself." He further promised that a government under his leadership would "always express the concerns of Canadians about the poor and underprivileged of the world." The worsening situation in Darfur in 2004, for Martin, provided just such an opportunity for Canada to apply a new form of leadership and export its values internationally. Martin endorsed the UN's "responsibility to protect" (R2P) agenda in 2004, and argued that the international community should not be deterred by an "outmoded" concept of state sovereignty. In his view, the Sudanese government lost their right to state sovereignty when they failed to protect their own people. The massacre of over 50,000 people at the hands of the Janjaweed militants in 2003 demanded that the international community should "do whatever is required" to prevent "another Rwanda" genocide. Martin went as far as to guarantee that his government would secure a "lead" role in the effort to "mobilize the international community...to stop the ethnic cleansing and massive abuse of human rights in the Darfur region of Sudan." Martin reiterated this focus in his first throne speech in February 2004. In the speech, titled "A role of pride and influence in the world," Martin committed his government to championing "new rules governing international actions when a government fails to protect its own people from tyranny and oppression." When viewed on its own, Martin's rhetoric reflects a clear commitment to placing Canada at the forefront of international intervention in Darfur.

**Martin's Action: A “Limited” Response**

In reality, Martin's response to the Darfur genocide was nothing more than "conservative, limited, and symbolic." When the UN asked for troop commitments for the Darfur mission from its member states in August 2004, Martin responded that Canada would not be contributing any troops but would instead commit only "$250,000 in flak jackets, helmets, and other gear" to the mission. This initial contribution was widely criticized by Canadian military brass as well as members of Martin's own party. Indeed, David Kilgour, a Liberal Member of Parliament from Alberta, insisted that Martin's limited response to Darfur was equally as shameful as Canada's response in the mid-1990s to the Rwandan genocide. Likewise, Romeo Dallaire, former commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, stated that he was "disgusted" with the "lame and obtuse" response of the Martin government. Dallaire even went as far as to conclude that the Martin government's response to Darfur was driven by the same racist motivations as Canada's limited response to the Rwandan genocide. Reeling from this criticism, Martin increased the Canadian commitment to Darfur. In May of 2005, Martin pledged to send $170 million to support the African Union peacekeepers in Sudan, as well as $28 million in aid to go to international aid organizations working in Chad. In addition, Martin committed an "advisory team" of Canadian military personnel to accompany 100 Canadian military officers to lend their expertise to the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS). But this commitment certainly falls short of Martin's promise in 2004 to do "whatever is required" to stop the genocide. As Kim Richard Nossal notes, Martin's "rhetoric excesses" and "platitudes" were "so entirely divorced" from his actions that "they can only have been spoken to generate political support." Evidently, Martin's limited contribution to the Darfur genocide never matched the exaggerated rhetoric upon which he was elected.

**Harper: A Muzzled Response**

Similar to the Martin government's "token" response to Darfur, Stephen Harper's commitment has only been in the form of financial support and aid. His first major contribution occurred on May 24, 2006, when Harper committed a combined package of $40 million in humanitarian aid to the Darfur region. Of this package, $20 million was contributed to "basic humanitarian assistance, such as food, clean water and medical assistance" while the other $20 million would go towards supporting the AMIS peacekeeping mission. However, Harper was specific in pointing out that no Canadian troops would be committed to the mission at that time, stating that the Canadian government would only "help the African Union implement the Darfur peace agreement." On August 2, 2007, Harper's Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter MacKay committed an additional $48 million to the AMIS. MacKay stated that this money would be used by the AMIS to support "peacebuilding projects" and "reconstruction efforts" as well as "helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft and aviation fuel that is critical in allowing the AU to move troops and supplies" within Darfur. But while the UN and AU formed a "Hybrid Operation" to deploy an additional 20,000 troops into Darfur by 2008, MacKay only "welcomed" the deployment, again refraining from committing a robust Canadian contingent to the mission. Thus, while Harper and Martin combined to donate $441 million in humanitarian assistance to Darfur since 2004, both Prime Ministers stopped short of contributing anything more than token deployments of military personnel.

However, while Harper's response to Darfur has mostly mirrored that of the Martin government, Harper's rhetoric has been far less forceful and, at times, muzzled and stifling. Since his election as Prime Minister on January 23, 2006, Harper has yet to make a formal address to specifically outline Canada's stance towards Darfur. Indeed, the majority of comments regarding Canada's position in Darfur since Harper assumed the Prime Minister's office have come either through multilateral channels or from the Foreign Affairs Minister. For example, when Nuala Lawlor, a Canadian diplomat in Sudan, and her European Union counterpart were exiled by the Sudanese government on August 23, 2007, the Canadian government responded one week later by expelling a Sudanese diplomat from Canada. Throughout this time, it was Peter MacKay, and not Harper, who issued the expulsion and fielded questions from reporters on the issue. In another case, Harper went as far as to flat out refuse to comment to reporters on a moderate increase in assistance to Darfur, which prompted twelve members of the press gallery to walk out of Harper's news event.
In fact, as Duane Bratt points out, Harper has largely shied away from personally commenting on any humanitarian assistance during his prime-ministership. 34 For example, Harper's platform during the 2006 Federal Election was void of any direct commitment to increasing humanitarian aid, let alone the Darfur genocide. 35 Moreover, neither of his two throne speeches made any reference to the Darfur genocide whatsoever. 36 The only reference to any form of foreign aid in the 2007 throne speech was in relation to Canada's development work in Haiti: "Canada's efforts in Haiti are a compelling example of how we can work with our neighbours to ensure security and development...our Government will bring greater focus and effectiveness to Canada's international assistance to ensure that Canadians' money is well spent." 37 By focusing on the efficiency of Canadian spending on humanitarian aid rather than using excessive platitudes to describe token action, Harper has taken the air out of Martin's inflated rhetoric.

**Afghanistan**

In contrast with his Darfur policy, Harper has been extremely committed, in both action and rhetoric, to militarizing the war in Afghanistan. This dichotomy in foreign policy between Darfur and Afghanistan has been highlighted by opposition members in the House of Commons. On September 21, 2006, Liberal Member of Parliament Keith Martin and Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe criticized Harper for focusing "too much on the military aspect of Afghanistan" while "failing to focus attention on the plight of the refugees in Darfur." 38 Duane Bratt supports this point, although without the partisan spin. In his terms, Harper has shifted the focus of Canadian foreign policy "away from economic and social policies towards defence and security policies." 39 Indeed, Harper used his first international trip, one of great symbolic importance, to visit the Canadian troops in Afghanistan. The visit galvanized press gallery attention to the mission. 40 Moreover, Harper both "extended and expanded Canada's mandate in Afghanistan." 41 On May 17, 2006, Harper was able to successfully pass a motion in the House of Commons which extended Canada's mission in Afghanistan from 2007 until 2009. Harper also drastically increased spending on the Canadian military. Between his 2006 and 2007 budgets, Harper increased the "core military funding" by $1.1 billion while purchasing an additional $17.1 billion worth of "strategic and tactical airlift planes and helicopters, supply ships, and transport trucks." 42

While he allowed multilateral organizations and members of his own caucus to take on the public role of articulating Canada's humanitarian efforts, Harper has "taken ownership of the (Afghanistan) operation." 43 Harper has repeatedly stressed that the Afghanistan mission represents a "moral" responsibility to promote "Canadian values like democracy and freedom"—the same rhetoric that Martin used to describe Canada's obligation to Darfur. 44 After winning the 2006 election, Harper promised that he would "continue to help defend our values and democratic ideals around the world—as so courageously demonstrated by those young Canadian soldiers who are serving and who have sacrificed in Afghanistan." 45 Harper elaborated upon these themes during his first speech to the Canadian troops in Afghanistan. He stated that by staying in Afghanistan, the Canadian troops were "standing up for...core Canadian values." As he clarified, "it's never easy for men and women on the front lines...but cutting and running is not your way. It's not my way. And it's not the Canadian way." 46 Harper reflected this focus in the 2007 throne speech, insisting that his government would not "abandon the people of Afghanistan" before 2011 and would continue to pursue a mission that is both "noble and necessary." 47 In this way, Harper has chosen to make the war in Afghanistan the primary focus of his foreign policy at the expense of development initiatives, such as Darfur. What are Harper's motivations for centering his foreign policy on Afghanistan rather than Darfur?

**Canada-United States Relations**

First, Harper understands that a stronger commitment to Afghanistan has the capacity to create closer ties with Canada's traditional allies, such as the NATO representatives and, most importantly, the United States. Since his time working as a policy expert for the Reform Party in 1987, Harper's two main foreign policy goals have been creating closer relations with the United States and enhancing the Canadian military. 48 Harper posited that the "knee-jerk" resistance to the United States is misplaced because "Canada is confronted by the same threats from rogue nations...as is the United States" in their pursuit of the Taliban in response to 9/11. 49 While sitting in the opposition Canadian Alliance Party in 2002, Harper argued that not joining the United States' coalition in the invasion of Iraq severely weakened "Canada's reputation with its allies and [did] nothing to uphold the credibility of the United Nations." 50 In this sense, one can see Harper's commitment to Afghanistan as repaying a debt that was left to the United States from not sending troops to Iraq. Conversely, a robust Darfur policy involving troop deployment and a vast increase in development spending in that region would involve lessening the Afghanistan commitment, leaving the NATO allies to pick up the slack left by Canada for the second time in five years. Certainly, this approach would further weaken relations with the United States, something that contradicts one of the two pillars of Harper's foreign policy agenda.

**The Canadian Forces**

Another reason why Harper chose to center on Afghanistan rather than Darfur is because of lobbying by the Canadian Forces. No one has been more outspoken in arguing for greater combat roles in Afghanistan than Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier. In the aftermath of 9/11, Hillier made an aggressive and controversial statement that Canadian soldiers would kill the "murderers and scumbags" in Afghanistan. 51 As Sean M. Maloney proports, Hillier was only voicing the true sentiment of the armed forces who wanted to "get into the fight" against the terrorists who attacked the United States in 9/11. 52 Hillier also spoke out against the Harper government for not doing enough in Afghanistan, even to the point where he has received a reprimand from Peter MacKay. 53 Bratt sites two reasons why Hillier and the Canadian Forces wanted to fight in the Afghanistan war rather than be deployed to another security situation, like Darfur. First, the Canadian Forces prefer fighting in "NATO-led" operations, such as Afghanistan, rather than UN operations. Interviews with Canadian troops stationed in Afghanistan illustrate that in "too many UN operations, Canadians are forced to work with, or compensate for, poorly trained and equipped troops." 54 On the other hand, the troops from "the United States, Britain, or France" are always "professionally trained and equipped." 55 Second, the Afghanistan mission offered a chance for the Canadian Forces to diminish the perception that they were only useful for UN peacekeeping and humanitarian operations and snow removal and flood relief, but not for fighting wars. While these other missions are valuable, the Canadian Forces' brass argued that these operations are "ancillary to their primary function of war fighting."

By increasing troop deployment and presenting strong rhetoric in favor of a militarized Afghanistan mission, Harper granted the Canadian Forces their wish of a NATO-led combat mission instead of another UN humanitarian operation, with the hope of garnering the respect of the military brass in
the process.

Domestic Politics

Third, Harper has used robust action and rhetoric for the Afghanistan mission rather than Darfur in order to demonstrate his leadership abilities to the Canadian public and further divide the Liberal party. Although Paul Martin was successful as a finance minister in the Chrétien government, his prime ministership was defined by failing to take a firm stance on issues of foreign policy, such as aid to Darfur, as well as domestic fiscal policy. In fact, The Economist went so far as to term him “Mr. Dithers” in February 2005 for his indecisiveness. 47 Certainly, Harper does not want to fall into the same mold as Martin, and the Afghanistan file is an excellent opportunity to exemplify decisive action. Indeed, Harper pushed measures through the House of Commons in May 2006 to extend the Afghanistan mission until 2009. He also used strong language in the 2007 throne speech, stating that his government would not “simply abandon the people of Afghanistan after February 2009” and that he would maintain a Canadian military contingent in Afghanistan until 2011. 48 Even the heading of his official government website—“Strong Leadership: A Better Canada”—reflects the importance of Harper’s guidance in shaping Canadian policy. On the opposition side of the House, the Liberals were going through a leadership election in 2006, and all contenders except for Michael Ignatieff were in some degree opposed to the Afghanistan mission. The eventual winner, Stephane Dion, has yet to establish himself as an assertive leader, and has been plagued by rumors of mutiny from within his own caucus. 49 As such, Harper believes that focusing the foreign policy debate in the House of Commons on Afghanistan can “highlight the divisions and contradictions within the Liberal Party and show Canadians that the Conservatives [are] the best choice on issues of international peace and security”. 50 and at the same time show the United States that the Canadian government is a partner in military resolve. In the post-9/11 era, issues of state security remain an important topic for voters. By manipulating the foreign policy debate to centre on issues of security rather than development, Harper can hope to score domestic and foreign political points at the Liberals’ expense.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Harper has largely neglected to address the Darfur genocide in order to define himself as a strong and decisive leader who is more concerned with issues of peace and security than development and humanitarian efforts. As this examination has illustrated, the extent to which Harper has neglected Darfur is amplified when compared with the verbosity of his predecessor, Paul Martin. By contrast, one can point to numerous indications where Harper has matched strong commitments with decisive action in Afghanistan. In a time where Martin paraded myth as truth, Harper firmly established Canadian foreign policy rhetoric in reality.

However, Harper continues to misinterpret the true lesson of Martin’s mistakes. Martin was wrong not because his lofty rhetoric did not match his action, but rather because his inferior action did not live up to the standard set by his rhetoric. Indeed, Martin was correct to voice the opinion that Canadians have a duty as citizens of the world to prevent and oppose atrocities against humanity. But instead of assuming the task of ramping up Canada’s commitment to help those in dire need in Darfur, Harper deflated Martin’s rhetoric to both match and perpetuate a careless response to the genocide. To this end, Harper’s legacy does not differ from that of his predecessor, but in fact reflects a carbon copy. Whether it is through lip service or outright neglect, Canadians can expect that what matters in contemporary Canadian foreign policy is not the policy itself, but how the policy is portrayed at home. All of which does little to end what has already become the worst humanitarian disaster of the new millennium.

About the Author

My name is Samuel Yorke and I am entering my fourth year at Queen's University majoring in Political Studies with a Minor in Economics. I would like to thank Prof. Kim Richard Nossal, Head of the Political Studies Department at Queen’s University, for his support and advice in the process of writing this paper.

Endnotes

1. While there was debate in 2003 surrounding the use of the term “genocide” to describe the atrocities in Darfur, it is without question in 2007 that the humanitarian crisis in Darfur has reached a genocide level. More specifically, I will use the term “Darfur genocide” to refer to the killings since February 2003 by the Janjaweed militias, who are largely supported and abetted by the Sudanese government. The rape, theft, and destruction of villages at the hands of the Janjaweed militia has directly resulted in the murder of more than 200,000 people and the displacement of about 2.5 million people. For a more in depth coverage of the Darfur genocide, see “Sudan: the crisis in Darfur, a timeline,” CBC News, 31 August 2007, [www.cbc.ca/news/background/sudan ... ].

2. The argument that Paul Martin’s rhetoric with regards to humanitarian intervention in Darfur far exceeded the actions of his government is best articulated by Kim Richard Nossal, who also points out that this type of “inflated” rhetoric represents the development of a trend in Canadian foreign policy started during the Chrétien administration. See Kim Richard Nossal, “Ear Candy: Canadian policy toward humanitarian intervention and atrocity crimes in Darfur,” International Journal (Autumn 2005): 1007-1032.


5. Ibid.


11. Ibid.


20. One example of where Harper used a multilateral statement to issue a policy response on the Darfur genocide is the “G8 Statement on Sudan/Darfur” at the recent G8 Summit in Heiligendamm, Romania. In this case, Harper joined the G8 leaders in expressing their “deep concern that the situation in Sudan continues to be marked by conflict and strife.” The statement insisted that the G8 leaders will take “appropriate action” at the UN Security Council if the Sudanese government does not “express its full acceptance of the [UN-AU] Hybrid Operation.” However, the statement stops short of elaborating on what exactly the “appropriate action” would be if the Sudanese government did not accept the UN-AU Hybrid peacemaking contingent. See “G8 Summit Statement on Sudan/Darfur,” [www.canadasudan.gc.ca].

21. There are certain exceptions where Harper has spoken directly about the Darfur genocide and recommended that the UN to take larger steps towards stopping the violence, and it has been at multilateral meetings, such as at the 11th Summit of the Francophone. But cases such as this are certainly exceptions in Harper’s rhetoric, and far from the norm of the Martin era. See “World must do more for ‘desperate’ Sudan: Harper,” CTV News, 28 September 2006, [www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/s ...].


23. On the whole, Harper has been known to have a “testy” relationship with the media ever since the beginning of his prime ministership. In this case, Harper retaliated when members of the media walked out on his press event by issuing a statement declaring that he would no longer give news conferences for the national media. See “Harper says he’s finished with Ottawa press corps,” CBC News, 24 May 2006, [www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national ...].


26. Speech from the throne, 4 April 2006 and 16 October 2007, [www1.pm.gc.ca].

27. Ibid.


34. Bratt, “Mr. Harper Goes to War,” 11.


37. Speech from the throne, 16 October 2007, [www1.pm.gc.ca]


39. Ibid.

40. Bratt, “Mr. Harper Goes to War,” 11.


42. Sean M. Maloney, Enduring the Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan (Potomic Books: Washington, 2005), 57. Quoted in Bratt, Mr. Harper Goes to War, 12.

44. Bratt, "Mr. Harper Goes to War," 12.

45. Ibid.


48. Speech from the throne, 16 October 2007, [www1.pm.gc.ca].

49. [www1.pm.gc.ca].

50. Don Martin, "Dion has to hope for fortune reversal," National Post, 1 December 2007, [www.nationalpost.com/opinion/col ...].