Canada and the Halperin Plan: Temper Expectations

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Recommended Citation

Paul Evans, "Canada and the Halperin Plan: Temper Expectations", NAPSNet Policy Forum, March 19, 2013, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/canada-and-the-halperin-plan-temper-expectations/

by Paul Evans

March 19, 2013

This report was originally presented at the New Approach to Security in Northeast Asia: Breaking the Gridlock workshop held on October 9th and 10th, 2012 in Washington, DC. All of the papers and presentations given at the workshop are available here, along with the full agenda, participant list and a workshop photo gallery.

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I. Introduction

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II. Report by Paul Evans

Canada and the Halperin Plan: Temper Expectations
by Paul Evans

For a little more than a decade starting with the end of the Cold War in Europe Canada was an engaged, proactive and sometimes innovative player in multilateral security issues in Northeast Asia. It initiated the North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue between 1990 and 1993, a pioneering track-two process including the principal six in Northeast Asia plus Canada and Mongolia intended to lay the foundation for an inclusive regional process in a region re-framed as the North Pacific. It pursued an “engagement without illusions” approach to North Korea that included encouragement of multiple levels of academic and NGO connections and eventually led in 2001 to

the establishment of diplomatic relations. The government provided financial assistance to KEDO and supported diplomats and academics in multiple track-two meetings on a multilateral and bilateral basis that focused on regional frameworks and initiatives, including on arms control, missile defense weaponization of space, and non-proliferation.

Resource constraints and a chill of relations with North Korea as the extent of its nuclear ambitions became clear tempered some of these ambitions between 2001 and 2005, though the Liberal government was inclined to support the possibility of Canada playing an active “second circle” role as needed to advance the Six Party Talks.

The election of the Harper government in January 2006 did not just close the chapter on official government interest in multilateral processes in the North Pacific; it opened a new volume. The Conservative government has displayed little interest in inclusive multilateralism in general and has favored what it feels to be more efficient and effective bilateral relations and coalitions of the willing (e.g. PSI). It has emphasized a “principled” foreign policy focusing on the promotion of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and explicitly eschewed the Middle Power role played by its Liberal and Progressive Conservative predecessors.

Regarding North Korea, “engagement without illusions” has been replaced by an official policy of “controlled engagement.” Canada continues to provide a small amount of food aid through the World Food Program, but at the moment there is no accredited Canadian ambassador to the DPRK; senior-level contact with North Korean officials has been suspended except on topics related to regional security, human rights in the North, inter-Korean relations and consular issues; the government invoked the Special Economic Measure Act to impose sanctions against North Korea in addition to those imposed by the UN; official rhetoric is increasingly harsh (the Prime Minister issued an official statement at the time of Kim Jong-il’s death stating that he “will be remembered as the leader of a totalitarian regime who violated the basic rights of the North Korean people for nearly two decades” and that “we hope his passing brings positive change allowing the people of North Korea to emerge from six decades of isolation, oppression and misery”; and Canadian officials have been instructed to refer to the DPRK as “North Korea” in international meetings.

While there are a handful of exchange and training programs operated by Canadian NGO’s and universities, the level of activity at the civil society level has also contracted. Policy-related academic initiatives have dried up and the interest of the NGO sector in non-proliferation and disarmament issues now focuses heavily on global rather than regional processes. Recent parliamentary hearings and civil society activism have concentrated on the North Korea’s human rights record and the Minister of Foreign Affairs is scheduled shortly to issue a statement condemning the existence of political prison camps in North Korea.

On regional security frameworks, Ottawa continues to support peaceful negotiation among all concerned parties as the only way to resolve peace and security issues on the Korean peninsula, but is not actively engaged in support of the Six Party Talks. It is showing increased interest in the broader Asia Pacific regional institutional architecture, especially ASEAN and ASEAN-centred processes, but is not engaged formally or on a track-two basis on Northeast Asia or North Pacific. It took enormous effort to move the Conservative government to sign ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and work with Myanmar, steps taken as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for entry into the East Asia Summit.

On the idea of regional nuclear weapons free zones, Ottawa’s traditional support in situations where they have been established in accordance with the UN agreed principles (which stress the voluntary nature of the initiative arising with states of a particular region) has given way to skepticism and in the case of the Middle East outright opposition. As an NPT member it would have concerns about

assuming the commitments foreseen under the NWFZ accord as these are already part of its NPT obligation as a NNWS. A practical constraint would be how these obligations were defined and how they might conflict with NATO commitments. It would almost certainly oppose restrictions on reprocessing and enrichment technologies as Canada has been active in G8/NSG circles in rejecting new limitations of this kind on NPT states parties in good standing. On the verification front, Canada has traditionally favoured reliance on IAEA mechanisms.

None of this is to suggest that Canada is sanguine about North Korea's nuclear weapons program and does not have major economic and political interests in the region. But it is to say that Conservative Ottawa is very unlikely to be an enthusiastic, imaginative or leading player in supporting efforts to forge regional solutions or a comprehensive treaty in Northeast Asia. If a process did move forward and there were special requests from key allies for Canadian support, if the price tag was low (budgets for foreign relations have been substantially reduced), and if there was the prospect of hastening the transformation of the North Korean regime, Canada might play the role of third-tier supporter.

The multilateralists' North Pacific dream of 20 years ago is not forgotten and may be resuscitated under another government. For the moment that is a distant prospect.

The most valuable lesson from earlier Canadian efforts is that the "North Pacific", like ASEAN-centred conceptions of "Asia-Pacific" and "East Asia" are efforts to create configurations different than Northeast Asia. So far as the aim is not just a treaty to deal with specific issues on the Korean peninsula, as daunting as that might be, but to create some kind of regional security framework, Northeast Asia is more an "anti-region" (to borrow Peter Hayes' term) than a region in waiting. Northeast Asia configured as it is in the Six Party Talks is defined by competitive national political cultures and nationalisms, negative historical memories, and a huge deficit of strategic trust, even among erstwhile allies. The events of the last six months related to the island disputes and managing maritime boundaries speaks distressing volumes about domestic political dynamics and deeply-rooted public attitudes that make regional diplomatic frameworks at once more desirable and more difficult.

KEDO provided some instructive examples of how a multi-country administrative structure could be established that at least at the level of the participating officials showed signs of constructive regionalism. And there are encouraging developments related to at least China-Japan-South Korea collaboration on regional trade and financial cooperation (some of it connected to ASEAN-led 10+3 processes). Yet for the moment, the logic of mutual strategic distrust complicates and disrupts the logic of economic integration.

For twenty years Northeast Asian specialists have made a powerful case that there are problems in Northeast Asia that need Northeast Asia solutions, chief among them North Korean isolation and belligerence. A Northeast Asian-focused statement of cooperative principles, a Northeast Asian Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, has appeal even though when it has been raised in regional meetings it is strongly condemned as unachievable and counter-productive to the settlement of immediate disputes.

The perverse challenge is that while specific agreements may be possible, a Northeast Asian regional security framework is as far away as ever. In terms of regional architecture, a more muscular ARF of the future on non-traditional security threats and an overarching East Asia Summit process may be the best mid-term bets.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: nautilus@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author's name and affiliation.

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