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TRUE NORTH: FOREIGN POLICY

High moral tone, meaning well, do not make foreign policy

By Brian Lee Crowley

Joseph Stalin, on being told that the Pope was opposed to some course of action the Soviet dictator favoured, famously sneered, "How many divisions does the Pope have?" The Catholic Church had the last laugh, of course; good men and women fought back against Communism. But Stalin's question is a brutal reminder that moral principles without the means to back them up are just windy rhetoric.

That's a tale worth meditating on here in the capital of one of the world's wealthiest countries, one many others around the world look to for leadership on a wide variety of international issues, from the Middle East, terrorism, Afghanistan, landmines, the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations, and many more. For in this capital our political leadership shows a disconcerting inability to articulate the reasons why Canada needs to be more tough-minded about its defence and national security interests.

Stalin's question underlines two reasons why high moral tone and meaning well can never be the sum of one's foreign policy.

One is that bad people are not moved by moralizing. I quote Stalin, not to suggest we emulate the views of one of history's most egregious criminals, but rather to remind us that bad people think that way and often do control divisions, including fifth columns of terrorists in western countries such as Canada.

Robert Mugabe, Hugo Chavez, Mahmoud Amadinejad and Osama Bin Laden are quite impervious to appeals to their better nature or a higher moral law. Like Stalin they aim to harm the west, victimize their own population, or both, and talk won't change that. But just like Stalin, they all want to know if their opponents have both the will and the means to oppose them. Having no divisions means your only option is talk. Talk must always be the first choice, but what do we do when talk fails?

The other thing Stalin's question tells us is that only those with the means to act on their principles can give those principles life.

This is a basic truth our current government has proven remarkably unable to explain. When asked to justify the purchase of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, for example, it falls back on ludicrous claims that Russia is slaving to launch an aerial assault on our peaceable kingdom. This can only give comfort to those who oppose what they thoughtlessly qualify as "militarism" or "toys for the boys."

Neither explanation is right. The reason Canada needs a well-equipped military and the resolve to use it is this is the price of admission to the table where decisions are actually made about the great issues that afflict the world, the issues that Canadians care about.

Oh sure, there is the talking table, crowded with governments ready to share their opinions but powerless to act on them. Earthquake in Haiti? Invasion of Kuwait? Ethnic cleansing in Kosovo? Failed states acting as launching pads for terrorist attacks on the west? Iran and North Korea going nuclear? Knowing they can never be called upon to do anything, those at the talking table can breezily call for "the international community" to do whatever they wish, secure in the knowledge that they will never have to pony up.

Not at the action table. Here sits a smaller but more select group: those nations ready, willing and able to risk blood and treasure, to do the hard and dangerous work of implementing real-world decisions. You sit at this table when you have the means and the will to contribute to a solution.

Canada has reliably been at the action table because of our long and proud tradition of willingness to put ourselves on the line when circumstances require it. That's why U.S. Senator and former Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman reiterated the other day to an Ottawa audience how large a debt of gratitude the U.S. and our other NATO allies owe Canada for our Afghan mission.

Responsible nations know both that the world's Stalins are not swayed by rhetoric, and that responsibility has a price. That price includes making sure we have the equipment and the will to play a role commensurate with our size and our resources in alliance with those who share our values: freedom, democracy, opportunity and the rule of law. We must have divisions as well as principles.

It is always fair to ask whether fighter jets or armoured vehicles or helicopters or ships are the right equipment for our "divisions". But when we make those choices, the money is not wasted, nor is it diverted from "more important" uses like health care or education.

The first duty of government is to keep us safe and safety in our dangerous world is a collective affair. We must be ready to pay the price of admission.

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