



The degree of importance Canada places on human rights within a foreign policy context varies, not so much with the type and degree of abuse or repression, but with other considerations. For instance, human rights were paramount for decades in defining relations with South Africa, and dominated the Commonwealth agenda. In China, they have been subordinated to trade and investment. Constructive engagement versus vigorous condemnation with shades of grey in between. Consider Cuba, consider Nigeria. Two different approaches. Both may be perfectly justified.

Some approach will have to be chosen with respect to Russia and its human rights abuses in the North. Irrespective of whether Canada opts to trumpet the rights of aboriginal peoples in other Arctic Council nations, or soft pedal the issue, our own record with respect to First Nations, both in the past and today, will be raised. Indeed, Canada's human rights record with respect to aboriginal peoples is hardly above reproach.

For Canada, the issue is twice bedevilled. First of all, like China, Russia is probably simply too big and too important to allow purity on human rights issues to dominate relations. Secondly, and more importantly, any foreign policy position on the whole vexed question of collective minority rights, both with respect to aboriginal peoples and ethnic or linguistic minority, will reverberate in the domestic Canadian political agenda.

To be blunt: how will it play in Quebec if Ottawa is supporting the right of self-determination of minorities elsewhere.

It is, in short, a minefield, in the shaping of a "Circumpolar" foreign policy.

For while Canada may have much to offer and to share in terms of its accumulated experience in land claims, treaty settlements, even the creation

of new types of sub-national entities — witness Nunavut — that experience may be neither welcome nor relevant in Russia.

Equally problematic and closely-related, is the question of Canada's clearly articulated foreign policy priority of promoting democratic development. Just as that policy priority has entangled our relations with some Latin American countries, so it seems certain to do the same, with respect to Russia in a Circumpolar context.

Many irons in many fires. Is there enough heat?

If memberships are the criteria, Canada's commitment to multilateral fora is unmatched. APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), NATO, the Commonwealth, the Francophonie, OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), OSCE (Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe), UN (United Nations), WTO (World Trade Organization), the list goes on.

If that weren't enough, the current government has made two more hemispheres, the Americas and Asia-Pacific, specific priorities. After long shying away, for fear of bedevilling relations with Washington, we have joined the OAS (Organization of American States). And now, this spring, there is a spirited diplomatic effort to again win a two-year seat on the UN Security Council.

All those commitments, new interests, new priorities, not to mention new embassies in the plethora of states which didn't even exist a decade ago, must be set against sharp cuts in foreign affairs spending and even sharper cuts to Canada's assistance to developing societies.