

Canadian diplomat blasts Ottawa's stance toward Russia

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LISBON—Prime Minister Stephen Harper's calculated political stance as an anti-Russian cold warrior has made Canada an irrelevant, mischievous force within the NATO alliance, according to a former Canadian diplomat.

Christopher Westdal, who served as ambassador to Russia from 2003 to 2006, blasted Canada's foreign policy stance toward Russia as outdated and specifically designed to win over ethnic votes in Canada. In doing so, Ottawa has removed itself from the debate over "sound security policy."

Harper will be on firm ground at the two-day NATO meeting which began Friday in Lisbon, Westdal said, when talk turns to the nine-year Afghan war, which Canada has committed to participating in until 2014.

But Canada will be the most marginal of players when leaders at the two-day NATO summit discuss the so-called Strategic Concept — the future of the alliance — and better relations with Russia, he said.

"Our prime minister's credibility is undermined by widespread suspicion that his government's policy in East-West security relations is tailored to suit Ukrainian, Baltic and other Russo-phobe diaspora voting blocs in Canada," Westdal wrote in a policy paper for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.

"Rigid neo-con antipathy to Russia (reinforced by conservative national media) and a foreign policy narrowly designed for diasporas have led us to the margins of irrelevance and mischief."

At the NATO table, those policies include long-standing support for extending alliance membership to Ukraine and Georgia, two former Soviet republics.

Canada, along with the United States and a few other countries, championed the two countries' bids to join NATO in 2008, when Russia was engaged in a brief, bloody border war with Georgia. Alliance relations with Moscow have been frosty ever since.

Georgia wants to join NATO, where it hopes to benefit from the mutual defence the alliance offers when one of its members comes under attack.

Harper met Friday with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili just before the official opening of the summit.

"As you know, we're very appreciative of your efforts with NATO in Afghanistan and also, we're big supporters of your NATO aspirations," Harper said.

Dimitri Soudas, a spokesperson for Harper, the government's position is unchanged on the contentious issue of new NATO memberships.

"It's Ukraine that we are supporting entering the alliance, provided they want to," he said.

The catch is that Ukraine, which voted in Victor Yanukovych as president earlier this year, no longer aspires to join the alliance.

Ottawa's menacing stance toward Russia goes further, Westdal said. It includes very public complaints about Russian bomber flights encroaching on Canada's Arctic territory, which experts have judged to be out of proportion to the threat those flights pose. Canada has also imposed new visa questionnaires that require Russians seeking to enter the country to disclose their membership in a political party, trade union and the particulars of their military service.

Russians can be sent to prison for providing such information to a foreign government, and the dispute between Moscow and Ottawa is yet another irritant in the already strained relationship.

"In Moscow . . . we've just been hard to take seriously these last five years, what with the open antipathy in our Last Cold Warrior Standing posture," Westdal said. "Such nonsense gets notices — and does us no good."

NATO nations will sit down Saturday with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev to discuss building closer ties and better relations. That will include new plans to build a missile defence shield across Europe — something Moscow once took as a personal threat but to which it has now warmed.

Russia will also agree to help out the NATO coalition in Afghanistan by transporting equipment and supplies by rail and providing helicopter and counter-narcotic support.

Most countries' outmoded attitudes toward Russia have been successfully recast, Westdal said.

"Ours never were. The world has moved on, but neo-con thought is alive and well in Ottawa. We need to lift our sights and our game."