HARPER POLICIES DOOMED UN BID

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By Chantal Hébert, The Toronto Star, 15 October 2010

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It is hard to think of a time in this country when there has been such a public disconnect between official diplomatic expectations and actual results. It is just as hard to fathom what Canada's misguided confidence was actually based on.
With the notable exception of Israel, precious few UN members really had compelling reasons to want Canada on the Security Council.

That was particularly true of the influential countries that have the potential to command voting blocs at the UN.

Take the Council's permanent members.
Surely Canada did not expect China — with whom the Harper government got off to a very poor start in its first mandate — to be enthusiastic about its bid. No amount of fence-mending on the prime minister's part can change the fact that he initially led the least China-friendly Canadian government in decades.
And then what about Russia? Over the past four years the Conservative government has repeatedly framed it as a potential aggressor — literally poised to invade Canada's airspace at the drop of a hat — the better to justify its military spending choices.

One can also wonder whether, having just locked horns with Canada over a transaction tax at the recent G8/G20 summits and lost, France was inclined to go an extra mile on its behalf at the UN.

A few years ago Canada might have been able to call in some favours for having stood up to the U.S. over the Iraq war. But today the roles are reversed. President Barack Obama originally opposed the war while our current prime minister skewered Jean Chrétien for not supporting it.

As for Canada's Afghanistan dividend, it is largely spent now that NATO and American entreaties have failed to convince Ottawa to reconsider its 2011 exit from Kandahar.

Moving on to North America, the decision to impose a visa requirement on Mexican visitors to Canada has not endeared it to that country. Moreover, since 9/11, Ottawa has spent as much time trying to stand apart from Mexico in security-concerned Washington as consolidating its links with its NAFTA partner.

Finally, Canada does not support the quest of emerging powers such as India and Brazil for a permanent seat on the Security Council; in a vote based on national self-interest it would have been naive to expect support from either quarters.

In the wake of the lost vote, one rationalization that has emerged from Conservative backrooms is that Canada's defeat is really a moral victory for it amounts to retaliation for a so-called principled approach to the conduct of foreign affairs.

But it is hard to see what human rights principles guide Canada when it alone of all Western nations allows one of its own to continue to be held in Guantanamo or when its government is willing to padlock Parliament to avoid scrutiny of the country's treatment of Afghan detainees.

The day after the UN bid, Harper resurfaced to stand shoulder to shoulder with China's envoy to Canada at a celebration of the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Just last week Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize for his courageous pursuit of human rights. For that, he remains in detention and will almost certainly not be allowed to travel to Oslo to receive his prize. Against that backdrop, the Prime Minister still had nothing but lavish praise for China.