

A Canada that Can't Say No? Managing the Bilateral Security Relationship with the United States in the Wake of September 11

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How can a country that is extremely dependent on a superpower both for its defense and for its economic well-being conduct an autonomous foreign policy and stand up to the dominant partner? When examining the current bilateral relationship between Canada and the United States, and the range of reactions in Canada to the newly reaffirmed U.S. assertiveness in security affairs, I am reminded of a Japanese nationalist tract published in the late 1980s and titled “A Japan that Can Say No.” In a world where the U.S. had turned to a new assertiveness of its power in economic affairs, Japanese nationalists lamented the fact that their country so obediently followed any whim and demand of the United States. In their view, Japan simply had abandoned any sense of autonomy, and even self-respect, in literally conceding every last bit of its sovereignty to the United States. Of course, in the United States itself, the situation tended to be perceived in a rather different light. The consensus view in some circles might actually have been that it was next to impossible to make Japan take a step in the direction of American interests and priorities.

One has to be wary of making too much out of analogies, but there may be a parallel between this episode in U.S.-Japan relations and the current state of the Canada-U.S. security relationship. Canadian nationalists might perceive their country to be entirely subservient, ready and willing to ask “How high?” whenever Uncle Sam says “Jump!”. Meanwhile, in Washington, the perception of Canada’s willingness to accede to U.S. demands in the security area may be, on the whole, somewhat less sanguine. There are circumstances, of course, in which saying “No” to a dominant partner simply is not an option. One is reminded of Stephen Leacock’s comment about how Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King might have justified why his country, newly enfranchised from British control over its foreign affairs, would run so quickly to Britain’s defense:

- Did Canada, asked Leacock rhetorically, go to war for Britain because it had to?
 - No, Canada did not have to go to war.
 - Then why did you go?
 - Well, of course, because we had to.

Today, when it comes to issues that strike at the very heart of the U.S. national interest, Canada is in a similar position and the reaction to the events of September 11 was in the same

category. Canadians and their government swiftly offered support to their neighbors. When the United States called for help in the immediate aftermath of the attack, answering “No” simply was not an option. Apart from issues that call for unconditional response, however, there has to be some room for disagreement. The question then becomes: What are the circumstances in which Canada can say “No”?

The Trouble with Being Rich and Weak

In general, all would agree that it is better to be rich and powerful than poor and weak. Most would probably also agree that being rich and weak is preferable to being poor and weak. But to be rich and weak can also be an uneasy position in a dangerous world. Canada, not unlike Japan, happens to be in that position. Fortunately, or perhaps in some ways unfortunately, Canada has a rich and powerful neighbor who has some degree—but by no means an unlimited amount—of tolerance for free riding on the part of its allies. Like Japan and many other allies of the United States, Canada would not realistically be able to defend itself adequately in the event of an all-out attack on its territory by a determined and well-endowed enemy. Even in their role as an expeditionary force, the Canadian Forces can hardly aspire to make a significant difference by acting alone, outside the framework of a broader coalition. In such a position of relative dependency and weakness, what is the margin of maneuver for a meaningful foreign policy? Here I take a narrow and conventional view of what foreign policy is about by identifying three key areas, inspired by Maslow’s well-known hierarchy of needs. Foreign policy is about the quest for physical security, material well-being and what I shall refer to, for lack of a better term, as “psychological” security. This last term includes the notion of a secure identity, a sense of purpose expressed in the promotion of values, and a sense of autonomy in the conduct of one’s internal and external affairs. Keen observers of contemporary Canadian foreign policy will have noticed that these concepts are very close to the so-called “three pillars” of this country’s foreign policy.¹ More theoretically oriented readers will also note the relationship between this category of foreign policy objectives and Joseph Nye’s notion of “soft power,” which often refers to Canadian foreign policy as a model.² The problem for Canada is that it is almost entirely dependent upon the United States for its physical security and material well-being, which tends to undermine the foundation of its “soft-power” claims, and to foster a rather tense relationship with its neighbor when it comes to anything that falls into the third category.

In short, the United States is the fundamental provider of physical and material security for Canada and others in a comparable position, but the very magnitude of its military and economic power also generates a great deal of insecurity—albeit of a different kind—for its allies. After September 11 and the ensuing resurgence of American power and resolve, it has become even more obvious that Canada’s material well-being and physical security are

¹ The three pillars, as identified in the 1995 Foreign Policy Review, are: “The promotion of prosperity and employment; the protection of our security, within a stable global framework; and the projection of Canadian values and culture.” The ordering is out of sync with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, but the basic ideas involved in its conception are present.

² On this concept, see: Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* 80 (Fall 1990), pp. 153-71. Nye cites Canada as an example recently in “In the Global Age, America’s Not Such a Big Cheese,” *Washington Post* (October 6, 2002), p. B3.

irremediably tied to the United States. A year later, therefore, what are the options and the range of credible choices for Canada's security policy in the foreseeable future?

Here I review some of the issues on the bilateral security agenda from Canada's perspective, and attempt to determine whether and how these issues will influence the bilateral relationship in the years ahead.

Continental Defense After September 11

At the root of any transformation in U.S.-Canadian security relations in the wake of September 11 is a fundamental shift in the U.S. outlook on security issues. Few historical analogies allow us to understand the extent to which the events of that fateful day awakened amongst Americans the feeling that we live in a dangerous world, and that the United States is no longer immune from this danger. For Canada, this new environment has direct consequences in at least five areas: continental defense; border management; the outward projection of the war on terrorism; the dormant issue of ballistic missile defense; and the continuing problem of the commitment-capability gap in Canada's international-security policy.

The Expansion of Bilateral Cooperation for Continental Defense

The new attitude regarding security policy in the United States since September 11, 2001, represents an enormous constraint on the range of available choice for Canada when it comes to continental defense. In the current American mindset, the distinction between "homeland defense" and "continental defense" is almost entirely academic. In this context, the United States will do whatever it feels it must do to defend its territory, regardless of what Canada feels, wants, says, or does. Framed in this way, the question of whether Canada ought to further integrate its armed forces with the Americans for the purpose of continental defense might also be, in a sense, almost entirely academic.

On October 1st, 2002, the United States launched NORTHCOM (Northern Command), an integrated command structure that oversees the military aspects of homeland defense and treats the North American continent as a single operational theater. Simply put, this would mean an extension to all areas of military and naval operations of the existing level of cooperation already in place in air defense with NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command, based in Colorado).

Although Canada's participation in this new command structure has, for all practical purposes, already been accepted in principles, some of the details still need to be ironed out. Nonetheless, the prospects of Canada's inclusion in NORTHCOM has provoked the ire of some Canadian nationalists, who have raised countless objections to this new plan.³ But the integration of forces into this new command is not a change in the nature of the military relationship, only a change in degree. Also, the Canadian military generally tend to view it in a favorable light, as it promises to clarify the rules and procedures of any cooperative action and involves, in their perception, very

³ See, for example, Michael Byers, "Canadian armed forces under US Command," Liu Centre for the Study of Global Issues, University of British Columbia, May 6, 2002. This report was commissioned by the Liu Centre's director, former Canadian foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy <<http://www.liucentre.ubc.ca>>.

little, if any, loss of control to their U.S. partners. Finally, in my own assessment, the absence of clear rules for coordinating military actions across the border in the event of a major crisis could lead to communication failures or misunderstandings that might have more serious consequences for Canadian sovereignty than the extension of current operational cooperation to a wider range of activities might entail.

Managing the Longest No-Longer-So-Undefended Border

The image of the world's longest undefended border has almost become a cliché in discussions of Canadian-American relations. Within hours after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, however, things had already started to change. Although it is still possible for thousands of deer and a number of smugglers to crisscross the border at any time of day or night without too much hassling from the authorities, the border has become, and is likely to remain for quite some time, a great deal less undefended than it was on September 10, 2001. The question for Canada is: How to minimize the costs of this new reality for Canadians?

This is not a minor issue. Since new controls were instated at the border last year, the roads leading to many crossings have become virtual parking lots, making the cost of driving through U.S. controls higher, on a bad day, than the tariffs used to be on certain goods before free trade agreements. Partial solutions to this imbroglio have been found that involve a better use of innovative technology to speed up the process, and cooperation with industry to ensure the more efficient movement of sealed containers from plant to plant. But these all are band-aid solutions that cannot entirely redress the losses to the Canadian economy due to a major slowdown in trade.

A more fundamental proposal has been to make major concessions to Canadian sovereignty and autonomy in policy-making, and harmonize immigration and customs procedures with the United States, even share the task of controlling access to the continent, to create a *de facto* common border, or a security perimeter, around northern North America (this might eventually include Mexico, but this could raise a great deal more resistance in the United States). This kind of proposal, which has been dubbed a "Big Idea," or "strategic bargain" by its most articulate proponent,⁴ would not be realistic, for two main reasons.

First, if some Canadians are more than willing to trade some measure of policy autonomy and a stepped-up defense effort in return for the economic security that might result from a deeper integration, they tend to overestimate the capacity of U.S. policy makers to engage in such cross-issue linkages. The notion that Canada's willingness to accede to U.S. security interests might soften the resistance of opponents to further market integration misrepresents the fragmented nature of the U.S. policy environment. In fact, pressures from stronger countervailing trade interests in the U.S. are much more likely to lead to the resolution of Canada's current trade woes on Capitol Hill than any amount of well-intentioned effort to strengthen North American security.

Second, even if the Canadian government committed itself to uphold the same standards

⁴ See, for example, Wendy Dobson, "Shaping the Future of the North American Economic Space: A Framework for Action," C.D. Howe Institute Commentary 162 (April 2002). In this essay Dobson calls for a "Big Idea" to tie together the U.S. need for physical security with Canada's goal of economic security, partly at the expense of Canada's autonomy in setting its own immigration policy.

for entry into Canada that U.S. authorities are imposing for entry into their own territory, this would be unlikely to have much effect on the tightening of controls at the U.S. border. This is compatible with the “unilateral impulse” that has marked the U.S. approach to security issues even before the terrorist attacks of last year. Indeed, even if U.S. agents themselves took charge of controlling access to Canada, it is unlikely, in the current state of mind of the American people, that their government would surrender any legal means of monitoring the movements of “potential” terrorists.

The new reality at the Canadian border is likely to remain an irritant from Canada’s perspective for a long time to come. Politicians will exploit it to reassure their nationalist supporters that they don’t pander to the United States. They will also remain willing to defend Canadian values vehemently when complaining against such unfortunate practices as ethnic profiling at the U.S. border, but this is unlikely to make the United States change its course.

New Challenges and Old Issues that Won’t Go Away

Saying “No” to the Americans on Iraq and other Foreign Ventures?

As much as bilateral issues pose a challenge for Canada’s sense of policy autonomy and self-identity, the issue of what position should be adopted over potential U.S. preventive intervention in Iraq leaves ample room for redress. Indeed, the fact that this issue involves intense negotiations amongst allies and beyond allows the Canadian government to affirm its independence vis-à-vis the United States while remaining committed to being a part of a multilateral force if deterrence is not enough to make Saddam Hussein mend its ways. As is usual in security matters, when the stakes are high it is only through multilateral forums such as the United Nations or the Atlantic Alliance that Canada can wish to exert a moderating influence on the United States. In this situation, there is little reason to assume that the policy model that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War—which led Canada to participate in some capacity in every major multilateral intervention under U.S. leadership since the Gulf War—would not hold once more if the international community finds Iraq in clear violation of its obligations. What makes this issue less problematic in terms of Canada’s security policy is its multilateral dimension. In terms of domestic support, this component certainly is a precondition for public approval, but without clear signs of aggression on Iraq’s part, as was the case in the Gulf War, or without a clear humanitarian dimension, as was the case in Kosovo, the public might reserve its approval—especially if top political leaders are as incapable of articulating the purpose of their actions as they were in the case of the war over Kosovo, in which ordinary Canadians fortunately were able to perceive on their own the purpose of their country’s actions, without much guidance from the top.⁵

⁵ For a case study of Canada’s participation in the Kosovo conflict, see Kim Richard Nossal and Stéphane Roussel, “Canada and the Kosovo War: The Happy Follower,” in Pierre Martin and Mark R. Brawley, eds., *Alliance Politics, Kosovo, and NATO’s War: Allied Force or Forced Allies?* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). For a summary analysis of how public opinion reacted to this conflict, see Pierre Martin and Michel Fortmann, « Support for International Involvement in Canadian Public Opinion after the Cold War », *Canadian Military Journal* 2 (Autumn 2001), pp. 43-52.

The issues that will present far greater challenges politically in the coming years are two problems that already marred the bilateral security agenda before September 11, and are bound to resurface sooner or later, are ballistic missile defense (BMD) and the wide and unsustainable gap that exists between Canada's security commitments and the size and strength of its armed forces. Here I address the latter first.

Closing the Commitment-Capability Gap

The wide gap between Canada's security commitments and its capability to assemble, equip, and transport enough troops to carry these commitments through is hardly anything new. By NATO standards, Canada has remained for many years a laggard in terms of the relative size of its military budget. In a world where danger lurks anywhere and can loom at any time, given the size of the country, and given the proportionate size of the ambitions of some of its foreign-policy makers, an adequate, self-standing defense would require an unimaginable increase in military spending. Considering that even a much more onerous defense effort might still be inadequate against some ideal standard, the choice for Canada has so far turned out to be an easy one. Indeed, faced with the choice between a defense that would be costly and yet still inadequate, and one that would be inadequate but cheap, Canadian politicians have preferred the latter.

The paradox is that there is, and there had been for some time even before the tragic events of September 2001, a great deal of public sympathy in Canada for a substantial injection of funds into defense. A recent Senate committee looking into this matter even recommended a substantial increase of \$4 billion, or about one-third of the current budget, even taking the unusual step of calling for a 30-month moratorium on foreign interventions to allow the Canadian Forces time to rebuild and regain their shape.⁶ Although the moratorium idea was not well received, there remains a wide consensus among parliamentarians from a broad range of parties that a substantial increase of the defense budget is long overdue. There is also considerable public receptiveness for this idea, as expressed in numerous opinion polls.⁷ Even with a multi-party consensus and a sympathetic public, an effort of the magnitude that is envisioned by those who wish to see Canada retain an important role in international security would require that political leaders be willing and able to step up to the platform and articulate clearly why they are asking for such sacrifice from ordinary citizens and taxpayers. This type of leadership, however, has been notoriously absent in recent years on the part of Canada's top political leaders. As Kim Nossal noted a few years ago, Canada has been conducting what amounts to "pinchpenny diplomacy,"⁸ always willing to "talk the talk" in various international forums, but increasingly unable to "walk the walk." In sum, even if there would be distinct

⁶ See : Daniel Leblanc, "Keep Troops at Home, Senators Say: Impoverished forces need \$4-billion and time to shape up, committee reports," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, November 13, 2002), p. A4.

⁷ In the most recent poll on this issue, three out of four Canadians (75%) agreed that the defense budget should be increased, although few are willing to identify another valued program that should be cut to pay for this increase. See: Doug Saunders, "Canadians Split Over Future Role of Military," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, November 11, 2002), p. A1.

⁸ Kim Richard Nossal, "Pinchpenny Diplomacy: The Decline of 'Good International Citizenship' in Canadian Foreign Policy?" *International Journal* 54 (Winter 1998-99), p. 88-105.

foreign-policy benefits in narrowing the gap between Canada's ability to talk and its ability to act, few seem willing to risk the domestic political consequences of moving forward.

The Next Hard Choice: Ballistic Missile Defense

The issue of ballistic missile defense has been dormant in the bilateral security relation in the past year, but it is bound to resurface. Moreover, when it does, it is unlikely that the Bush administration will be in much of a mood for compromise. Although the military tend to be rather receptive to this option, and government officials studiously avoid to taking a clear position on it, the public is at best lukewarm and at worst squarely hostile to it. If the public was indifferent to calls by nationalists to resist participation in NORTHCOM, the issue of ballistic missile defense involves two very different factors: powerful symbols and high costs. Given the strong resistance to this option in public opinion and its overtones of subservience to U.S. demands, Canadian politicians may be faced with a much harder choice on BMD than on most other areas of security policy. Moreover, if the large costs that the BMD program might entail for Canada are factored into the debate over increased funding for the military, public support for the latter could be much harder to sustain than otherwise.

Conclusion

In the coming years, Canada will most probably find ways to say "No" to the United States on some issues, but it is no more in its interest to relinquish its option to say "No" some of the time than it is to give its principal partner the impression that "No" is always the starting point in any bilateral negotiation.

Some have proposed to strike a more favorable balance in the bilateral relationship by entering into "strategic bargains" with the United States and establish linkages between security policy and other areas of central interest for Canada. In fact, such linkages are not a sound foundation on which Canada's relationship with its dominant neighbor should rest. If Canada is to move closer to the U.S. position in some policy area, it should do so on the basis of that policy's intrinsic value, and not on the basis of a possible exchange for advantage in some other area.

On the whole, regardless of the level of effort deployed by Canada in the foreseeable future, it will still have the problem of being rich and weak in a dangerous world, and thus vulnerable and dependent on its dominant neighbor for both physical and material security. Using the United States as a foil to promote a sense of "psychological" security and to provide some semblance of a secure sense of identity will no doubt continue in spite of the sympathy inspired by September 11. There is a great deal of risk involved, however, if this strategy becomes the only way, or even a predominant way, of achieving these goals.