DEFINING AND DEFENDING A PLACE IN THE WORLD:
Canada's Vital Interests in International Affairs

BY Hector Mackenzie

IN THE WAKE OF THE TERRORIST ATTACKS ONE YEAR AGO AND IN LIGHT OF THE MYRIAD OF RESPONSES TO THOSE EVENTS IN NORTH AMERICA AND AROUND THE WORLD, THERE HAS BEEN AN UNDERSTANDABLE ATTENTION IN CANADA AS ELSEWHERE TO WHAT HAS CHANGED IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS. OTHER CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS DISCUSSION SUGGEST THE BROAD RANGE OF IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVENTS OF 11 SEPTEMBER 2001. THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS NOT TO CONTRADICT OR TO QUALIFY THOSE ASSESSMENTS BUT RATHER TO SUGGEST SOME FUNDAMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS THAT HAVE INFLUENCED CANADA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE PAST AND THAT WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO IN THE FUTURE.

CONTEXT FOR DECISIONS: DETERMINANTS OR INFLUENCES

All countries, irrespective of relative power and influence, must take into account various factors that advance or constrain the realization of their national interests in world affairs. Nations measure their commitments and contributions in some relation to such criteria, informed as well by their values. Most countries believe that their situations and roles are unique. Most states, along with international movements and organizations, believe that the world would be a better place if others followed their lead. In spite of similar approaches to external affairs, each country is unique and governments tend to emphasize those aspects that underscore that distinctiveness.

GEOGRAPHY

Canada is surrounded by three oceans and one country. It has a lengthy and sinuous coastline. In spite of a vast territory and abundant natural resources, Canada has a relatively small population, most of which is located in cities in southern regions close to the American border. Its harsh climate plays a key role in both phenomena. Whatever physical challenges it poses to Canadians, Canada's geography has usually been regarded as an asset or advantage in national defence and international affairs. For most of the twentieth century, the country's location was a source of security. Vast oceans kept most dangers and crises distant from its shores. Proximity to the United States has reinforced the myriad of ties that bind Canada to its wealthy and powerful neighbour, so that no other bilateral or multilateral relationship rivals the importance of Canadian-American relations. Though there are regional variations within Canada with respect to the relative significance of other parts of the world – with greater attention to trans-Atlantic ties in the East and to trans-Pacific links in the West – and not all continental influences are seen positively, the United States understandably dominates the world-view of all Canadians.

HISTORY

Diplomacy and international affairs have shaped the character and prospects of Canada, as well as the attitude of Canadians towards the rest of the world. Aboriginal populations had vast experience of conflict and negotiation long before the first contact with Europeans. That heritage played a critical part in Canada's destiny in the northern half of the North American continent. For France and Britain, this land was a destination for exploration, enterprise and settlement, as well as a battleground for imperial clashes. The distinct quality of British North America was determined in part by the impact and aftermath of the Conquest and the American Revolution. At Confederation, the Dominion of Canada combined the legacy of an increasingly democratic parliamentary tradition with constitutional development of a federal system, all within an imperial setting. In the twentieth century, a preoccupation with status and recognition (in North America, in the British Empire and in the League of Nations) gave way to an acceptance of international responsibility. Canada's participation in the two world wars and its active involvement in the United Nations and other international organizations since then have enhanced the country's reputation domestically and overseas. Justifiable or not, Canada's self-image as a positive force for good in the world has been important to its national identity.

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DEMOGRAPHY

The ebb and flow of people to and from Canada (which have often been treated as barometers of national well-being), patterns of settlement, duality of language and diversity of culture have all contributed to the composition of the Canadian population. The myriad of overseas connections of the Canadian people contribute to Canada's attitudes toward other countries and regimes, its reaction to events in the rest of the world and its response to global phenomena. The distinction between refugees and other immigrants is a modern judgment, but Canada has long represented a haven as well as a land of opportunity, to Canadians and foreigners alike. That image and self-image – as well as the diverse population that sustains them – may help to explain why Canada has had a "predisposition to international activism," as Richard Gwyn puts it. Along with other factors, changes in the Canadian population may prompt shifts in international priorities and stances by Canada. In light of these alterations, perhaps more remarkable is the persistent importance of traditional concerns to Canadians.

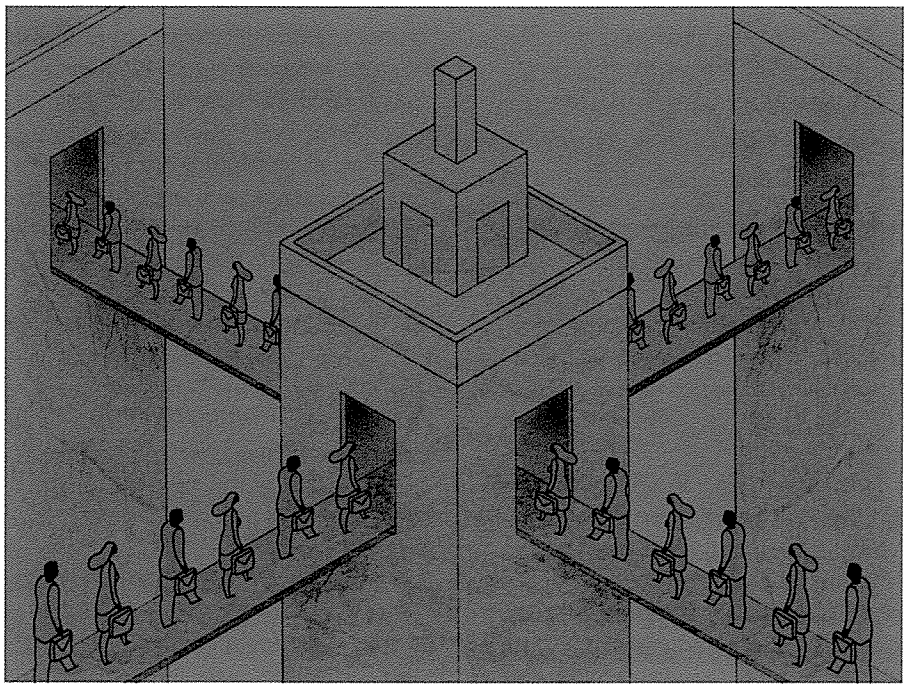
ECONOMY

Canada's economic fate and fortune have always been linked to foreign trade and investment, whether as a colony within an empire or as a nation whose development and prosperity hinged on its economic ties to the rest of the world. National demands (particularly those associated with the exploitation of natural resources, transportation, settlement and communications) have necessitated international inputs. The protectionist impulses of the National Policy of the nineteenth century have been overtaken by events. Since the Second World War, Canada has increased its already significant dependence on international trade and investment for prosperity. The American share of that economic activity has ascended to extraordinary heights in recent years. Diversification of trade and globalization, so often cited in discussions of external economic policy options, have made little impact on the rising tide of Canadian-American financial and commercial transactions.

IDEOLOGY: VALUES OR BELIEFS

Though not universally endorsed, some beliefs are deemed to be sufficiently central to how Canadians collectively view themselves as a country and to how

they relate to the international community, that support for these attitudes may be regarded as tantamount to upholding a national interest. The values themselves and the actions undertaken to implement them have been depicted as fostering national unity. That these principles may not be unique nor original does not diminish their apparent importance (for example, political liberty was stressed during the Cold War in part to highlight its absence in the Soviet Union and other adversaries). On the contrary, a shared set of beliefs has often been seen as critical to key bilateral and multilateral relationships, notably with Britain and the United States as well as other OECD members. Often these attitudes frame the debate over options for Canadian foreign policy, even as diminishing resources challenge Canada's ability to achieve its aims. Most Canadians depict such tenets as aspects of "internationalism," though that virtuous spirit is more nebulous than they believe. At the heart of the Canadian world view are commitments to international order, to the rule of law, to justice and to democracy, along with respect for human rights. Fairness, tolerance and compassion are seen as vital characteristics of Canada's approach to world affairs. Most Canadians take the view that their government and its representatives can and should play an active and constructive role in international relations (analogous to support for government intervention in domestic matters).



ALLIANCES TO BUTTRESS POWER AND INFLUENCE

Over the years, Canada has made a virtue out of a necessity. The need to ally or collaborate with other nations – without whose co-operation Canada's prospects for success would be nil – in furtherance of common objectives in external affairs has often been depicted as a talent or predisposition supposedly derived from an internationalist tradition and disinterested commitment to the well-being of the global community. Except when national prestige is linked to the defence of sovereignty – and even that exception must be qualified – unilateral action is not a viable option for Canada nor is it one likely to be sustained by popular support.

OMNIPRESENT: THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES

What is most noteworthy about the foregoing inventory is how much Canada's relationship with the United States historically and currently dominates all of these considerations. Clashes of interests or differences in values between Canada and the United States, however minor in a global reckoning, understandably attract more attention from commentators and policy-makers on both sides of the border than do the common experiences and perceptions of the countries that are taken for granted. Often it is the exceptional integration of the continent that raises the stakes in disputes over economic and defence matters or questions that Canadians associate with the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Canada. In assessing their position, Canadians must bear in mind not only the interdependence of the two nations but also the considerable disparity in power and influence between their own country and its closest neighbour. Unquestionably, however, the commonalities are much greater than the differences. Moreover, a Canadian policy in international affairs that over-emphasizes differentiation from American policy for domestic political reasons may simply fail to achieve its aims as a consequence of distance or detachment from the critical criteria that link Canada's international relations to its fundamental bases.

WHAT MATTERS? TRANSCENDENT ISSUES AND CONCERNS

NATIONAL UNITY

"The first general principle upon which I think we are agreed," Louis St. Laurent stated in 1947, "is that our external policies shall not destroy our unity." As he noted, the challenges involved not simply relations between English and French Canada, but also regional differences and jurisdictional disputes that frequently arose in a federal system grappling with the notion of one international voice. For most of the first half of the twentieth century, international issues tended to divide Canadians, so that the safest course for Canadian governments was usually to avoid overseas commitments. Since the Second World War, however, an opposite

tendency has preponderated. Ventures such as peacekeeping or humanitarian intervention abroad have usually struck a responsive chord with the Canadian people. However, some cautionary notes should be sounded: international questions are usually not priorities for Canadians, especially if allocation of scarce resources is considered; with the significant exception of Canadian-American relations, political attention and possible advantage on external matters tends to be transitory; public awareness of and interest in world affairs is limited, with media coverage consequently assuming disproportionate if still limited influence; and, national unity can be interpreted variously, so that it can be invoked as a justification in instances that do not withstand closer scrutiny. Even so, the ultimate litmus test for any international or national policy of a Canadian government must be its possible impact on national unity.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Provision for national defence is an essential aspect of sovereignty for a state. Acceptance of overseas military commitments, whether as part of an alliance or within an international body such as the United Nations, demonstrates a sense of shared responsibility for collective security as well as a recognition that there is an overall interest in maintaining world order and limiting conflict, where possible. The debate over Canadian defence policy is less about options than about resources. The impossibility of independent and effective national defence for Canada has meant that the country has relied on informal and formal alliances to protect itself. Defending Canada is inseparable from safeguarding North America. Seen in that light, the obvious interest of the United States in the protection of the continent from foreign threats ensures that Canada will never be defenceless. The attendant risks, however, are that the United States will define its appropriate response or precautionary measures in ways that do not take sufficient account of Canada's distinct concerns and that the Canadian government will lose even nominal shared control over (or input into) decision-making in this sphere. As for overseas contributions, these have raised serious doubts about Canadian capacity for intervention abroad, directly as a result of the budget allocated to national defence. Moreover, there are some issues, such as boundary questions (and matters of territorial integrity generally), maritime transit in the Arctic Ocean (involving both sovereignty and environmental protection) and protection of coastal fisheries, on which Canadian policies vary and Canadian priorities differ from those of the United States. Thus, reliance on its continental partner to bear the principal burden of Canada's national defence poses the threat of undermining its position on matters that Canadians consider important, if not essential, to Canada's national interests. Even the selection of overseas military tasks must take into account the lack of self-sufficiency of the Canadian Armed Forces. Beyond these considerations, there are global dangers to which all like-minded countries, including Canada, must respond co-operatively so as to prevent the emergence of systemic threats to individual and collective security – such as the proliferation and potential use of weapons of mass destruction and the spread of terrorism. These challenges reinforce the need (yet increase the cost) of Canada's traditional commitment to world order.

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PROSPERITY

Foreign investment and trade are vital to Canada's economic well-being, so that it is a cardinal purpose of Canadian external economic policy to concert with other countries to ensure international economic freedom within a reasonable and stable system of exchange. However, Canada's financial and commercial world is so dominated by the United States that Canadian external economic policy succeeds or fails largely on the basis of its ability to ensure fair access to American markets. Thus it becomes a fundamental objective of Canada's international economic policy to safeguard the Canadian economy from deleterious decisions taken in the United States and to attempt to secure remedial action whether through international institutions or by efforts to overturn or qualify American actions that respond to domestic political and economic considerations in that country. In other words, the most important foreign economic concerns for Canada are often domestic economic matters for the United States. Occasional Canadian ambivalence about exemptions or special treatment of Canada by American policy-makers is more than offset by the critical need to maintain constructive and productive relations with the United States. Consequently, a philosophical commitment to multilateralism cohabits with a practical preoccupation with bilateral concerns.

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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Current policy-makers may disdain the traditional image of Canada as a comparatively unspoilt land with abundant natural resources, but that impression has been significant for the national and international identity of Canada. In the past, abundant and inexpensive sources of energy, for example, have been vital to Canada's economic development – though arguably that wealth reinforced com-

placency about questions associated with global scarcity of fuel and with efficient use of non-renewable resources. The ready availability of natural resources has attracted foreign investment and sustained Canadian exports. In keeping with this perception, public opinion polls have suggested that environmental concerns animate and unite Canadians (though political responses to possible signature of the Kyoto Agreement have demonstrated the extent to which such topics can divide Canadians). However, these sentiments are not always measured in relation to choices or commitments that might affect the standard of living or convenience of Canadians. What prompts a deeper public reaction on such questions is often the implication for dealings with the United States – as with issues such as sales of energy and water or transboundary pollution.

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

There are interwoven international policies and programmes advanced intermittently and inconsistently by Canada that complement the country's political values and respond to the avowed humanitarian impulses of its citizens, particularly with respect to the alleviation of poverty and the promotion of good governance and respect for human rights. Though Canadians tend to regard these stances and actions as indicative of Canada's place in the world, most such endeavours can trace their roots no further back than the Second World War, except as private causes advanced by well-intentioned groups or individuals without government support or endorsement. However inspired or even beneficial, the response to these urges may not correspond to any reckoning of Canada's geopolitical interests. Moreover, the humanitarian impulses may be undermined or contradicted by other considerations, such as the quest for markets for Canadian exports. Nonetheless, good deeds – even when intervention abroad may be involved – are seen as appropriate undertakings for Canada in world affairs.

WHO MATTERS MOST?

Not surprisingly, the country that dominates the context for Canadian decision-making in international affairs likewise has the greatest impact on the content and the viability of the options that confront the Canadian government in dealing with the rest of the world. This often takes the form of self-restraint by Canada, rather than direction or dictation of policy by the United States. However, the over-arching influence is unquestionable.

CANADA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD: INTERNATIONAL AND CONTINENTAL RELATIONS

Although most Canadian commentaries on world affairs attend to events or issues far from its shores, Canada's vital national interests in international relations have increasingly become continental rather than global in scope. That is true whether one considers trade, defence or foreign policy. As the foregoing indicates, that trend poses problems for Canada, as the lesser country in power and influence, but it also offers some reassurance about the furtherance of broad Canadian objectives. Often lost in the understandable attention to specific points at issue between Canada and the United States is the remarkable harmony of interests and values of the countries. The commonalities are much greater than the differences, so that any effective advancement of Canadian aims in world affairs will likely fare better in association or partnership with the United States.

What matters most in Canada's external policies – most obviously with respect to trade but also running the gamut of other topics – is often the domestic policy (and politics) of the United States rather than the goodwill and co-operation (or lack of same) of the rest of the international community, whether "like-minded" or not. American farm subsidies and restrictions on Canadian softwood lumber demonstrate the impact on Canada of decisions taken primarily for domestic political reasons in the United States. Defence of the American "homeland" necessarily requires effective co-operation in North America. On foreign policy questions generally, Canadian policy-makers must be mindful of congressional as well as administrative positions south of the border. That tendency is compounded by the cross-border implications of questions formerly regarded as domestic matters, where the lead is often taken by a "domestic" Canadian or American department. Moreover, the international issues that evoke the strongest response in Canadian politics tend to be those that involve relations with the United States.

Canada's preoccupation with the United States is hardly unique in world affairs, nor is it simply a recent phenomenon. Peoples and states pay closest attention, when they look beyond their borders, to their neighbourhood. Canada's location has precluded its acting as a regional power. However, there have been advantages. "We in Canada are particularly fortunate," Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King observed to the League of Nations in 1936, "both in our neighbours and in our lack of neighbours." That observation remains valid today, albeit with less sense of detachment now than then from the rest of the world. Canada's neighbourhood is less isolated and more vulnerable than it was when King spoke. Now even more than then, relations with our closest neighbour dominate our view of the world and our policies in international affairs.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Association for Canadian Studies nor the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.