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Canadian-American Relations in a Turbulent Era

Current Challenges and Opportunities in Canadian-American Relations

On September 11, 2001, the turbulence that is characteristic of the post-Cold War international system came to bear fully on the Canadian-American relationship. Rumors that the hijackers entered the U.S. from Canada put Canadians immediately on the defensive. Though erroneous, these rumors reflected a willingness on the part of Americans to see the Canadian border as a source of vulnerability. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, American officials intensified their criticism of Canada for the laxness of the latter's immigration and refugee policies and for their failure to adequately police the country's borders.

These perceptions, in turn, stalled the momentum that had been building over the past decade or so for a less intrusive border separating Canada and the U.S. For example, in a poll taken before 9/11 and released in a special issue of Canada's weekly newsmagazine *Maclean's* (December 20, 1999) entitled "The Vanishing Border," 32% of Canadians and 19% of Americans expected that the border separating the two countries would be dissolved within 25 years. The Bush

administration's initiative requiring passports or other special-purpose identity cards for all visitors from Canada beginning in 2007 reveals how far the situation has changed in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. "Security trumps trade" is the American response to Canadian efforts to revive the lost momentum toward a more open border (see Cellucci 2005, Ch. 7).

Other developments exacerbated and accentuated Canadian-American tensions in the wake of 9/11. Canada's decision not to join the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" that attacked Saddam Hussein's corrupt Iraqi regime in March 2003 was by far the most important contributor to the deterioration of relations. The decision in 2005 by Prime Minister Paul Martin to keep Canada out of the U.S. plans for Ballistic Missile Defense also irritated Washington. These concerns joined the list of less high-profile but longer-term irritants in Canadian-American relations such as the softwood lumber issue, fishing disputes, and acid rain. Other new difficulties surfaced. Four Canadian paratroopers serving in Afghanistan were accidentally killed by American "friendly fire" in April 2002. In September of that year a Canadian immigrant

from Syria, Maher Arar, was detained at JFK airport where he was in transit from Europe to his home in Canada. He was interrogated by American officials about his supposed links to al-Qaeda, before being deported to Jordan. He was eventually moved to prison in Syria, where he was tortured and held until late in 2003.

A number of Canadian developments further raised the irritation level in Canadian-American relations. A series of highly public and unusually inflammatory remarks critical of President George W. Bush and the U.S. by Canadian politicians and officials exacerbated the difficulties (these are described by the then-ambassador of the U.S. to Canada, Paul Cellucci 2005, 131–46). Liberal legislative proposals to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana (the bill died with the fall of Paul Martin's minority government), the opening of safe injection sites for heroin addicts in Vancouver, and the move to recognize the legality of same-sex marriages in 2005 contributed to the popular impression that Canadians were out of step with their more conservative neighbor to the south. Following the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004, the media devoted considerable attention to a possible exodus to Canada of liberals from the so-called blue states. All of these incidents gave Canada an unaccustomed level of visibility and notoriety in the U.S., and rare signs of an anti-Canadian backlash, on some American talk radio for example, were also in evidence. The pre-9/11 discussions of "deep integration" between the two countries seemed a distant memory.

Restoring Good Relations—The Harper Government

The election in January 2006 of Stephen Harper's Conservatives to form a minority government in Canada is widely expected to mark the beginning of a new, less contentious, era in Canadian-American relations. Harper was first elected to Parliament in 1993 as a member of the Reform Party, but decided not to run in the 1997 election. For the next three years, he served as president of an Alberta-based, right-wing think tank, the National Citizens Coalition (NCC). Among other things, the NCC promotes themes such as free markets and fiscal prudence and accountability. Harper is a social and fiscal conservative with a deeply religious orientation—all characteristics that should endear him to President Bush.

In the past, Harper has openly advocated closer relations across the border, drawing criticism in Canada for his tendency to do so in front of American audiences. During his tenure

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with the NCC, for example, Harper provoked considerable controversy in a speech in the U.S. with his harsh criticism of Canada as a “North European welfare state in the worst sense of the term.” Moreover, as leader of the Canadian Alliance, Harper (along with his immediate predecessor, Stockwell Day) wrote a controversial letter to the *Wall Street Journal* (March 28, 2003) critical of Canada’s decision to sit out the Iraq War and saying: “The Canadian Alliance—the official Opposition in Parliament—supports the American and British position because we share their concerns, their worries about the future if Iraq is left unattended to, and their fundamental vision of civilization and human values.”

Accordingly, the Bush administration had reason to be pleased with the outcome of the January 23 vote in Canada. Not only was Harper pro-American, but his reform agenda for Canada promised to move the country in a more market-oriented direction. Signs that relations across the border were warming were not long in coming. Less than two months after winning election, Harper’s appointment of Michael Wilson to the critical post of Canadian ambassador in Washington was widely hailed to signal his government’s objective of warming up to the U.S. Wilson was a former Conservative minister of finance during the 1980s and early 1990s who, upon retiring from politics, became an influential investment banker. He was part of the Mulroney government that negotiated the original Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. in 1988. For his part, in a speech to the Canadian Association of New York in New York City in May 2006, Wilson described the cross-border relationship in glowing terms: “Ours is truly an uncommon partnership. We have much to celebrate. A shared heritage. A shared outlook. Neighbours, friends, family. A continent rich in resources, people, ideas and initiative. Partners abroad and at home. In security and commerce. Together, there is little we cannot achieve.”

These are the kind of fine words we expect from a diplomat. However, a quick review of the first six months of Harper’s tenure as prime minister suggests that some of the promised improvement in the bilateral relationship appears already to have been forthcoming. Shortly after taking office, Harper announced that he would increase Canada’s military presence in Afghanistan to over 2,200 troops, and Canadian forces assumed greater responsibility for the dangerous Kandahar region. Responding to long-standing American criticisms of the erosion of the country’s armed forces (Cellucci 2005), Harper’s first budget, introduced in May 2006, promised \$1.4 billion (U.S. \$1.26 billion) in additional spending on policing, border security, and public safety, and another \$1.1 billion (U.S. \$0.9 billion) over the next two years in increased defense spending. Also propitious was the resolution in late April of the long-festering and seemingly intractable conflict over American import tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber.

As promising as the first six months of Harper’s government may appear, there are likely to be challenges ahead on this front that should be appreciated. Harper’s predecessor, Liberal Paul Martin, came to power with a business background, a continentalizing economic vision, and a widely-proclaimed desire to heal wounds in the relationship that had opened up under his predecessor, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (see Barlow 2005). As such, to more fully appreciate the constraints facing Harper’s Conservative government, a quick review of the terrain on which Canadian-American diplomacy is conducted is in order.

Sources of Continental Amity and Discord

It is well-known to Canadians, if not to most Americans, that the two countries share what is almost certainly the closest and most intimate bilateral relationship in the world. There are numerous sources of interdependence, and it has been a long time

in the making. Geographic contiguity across over 5,500 miles of shared border, a common political and cultural heritage, and almost two centuries of peaceful relations have knit the countries together. Following the war of 1812, the border separating the two countries has been undefended and, until less than a hundred years ago, was relatively permeable for migrants heading in either direction.

For the past half century, the cross-border relationship has become increasingly regularized and institutionalized through a host of bilateral (and multilateral) institutions. Canada’s location as a geopolitical buffer between the protagonists of the Cold War was largely responsible for Canada’s joining both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, but especially for the establishment in 1958 of the joint U.S.-Canada “North American Air Defense” (NORAD) command (renewed by both sides in May 2006, and extended to include maritime security). Economic interdependence has long been fuelled by cross-border direct and indirect investment flows. Integration was formalized first in the auto sector (with the signing of the Canada-U.S. Automotive Products Agreement, or Autopact, in 1965). These forces of integration culminated in 1988 with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA, which was extended to the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, in 2004 with the inclusion of Mexico). As a result of all these developments, the destinies of Canada and the U.S. have become hopelessly intertwined. Today, over \$1.2 billion (U.S.) in trade crosses the border each day, and annually more than 200 million people cross the border.

In light of the impressive history of cross-border cooperation and the heightened progress since 1988 of economic integration, it is easy to overlook some underlying sources of tension in Canadian-American relations. Friction among neighbors is inevitable, particularly when they are as closely interrelated as are Canada and the U.S. Some of this can be traced to Canada’s concern—evident in the “defensive expansionism” in 1867 and beyond as the country was founded—to safeguard its independence from the U.S. S. M. Lipset (1990) traces lasting cultural residues from what he described as the founding triumph of counter-revolution in Canada as contrasted to America’s revolutionary origins. Subsequently, these institutional and historical differences have contributed to the emergence of liberal democracies that exhibit quite distinct political profiles with citizens who manifest different—and perhaps divergent—sets of political values (Adams 2003). Certainly there has been a greater willingness to embrace state intervention in a host of economic and social realms in Canada than in the U.S.

Beyond these enduring commonalities and deep-seated differences, the very asymmetry in the size of the two countries, and therefore the different level of influence that each country exerts on the other, imparts a complexity to cross-border relations. A closer look at the trade numbers reveals this essential difference. On the one hand, Canada ships 85% of its exports to the U.S. and receives 59% of its imports from that country. Despite the high level of economic integration, Canada does not occupy a comparably prominent position in the American economy. Only 23% of America’s exports head north to Canada, and 17% of its imports originate north of the border.¹ This reflects the fact that America is by an order of 10 larger than Canada whether considered in population or Gross Domestic Product terms. This ensures, to paraphrase former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, that Canada will be the nervous mouse sharing a bi-national bed with the sleeping American elephant.

This fundamental asymmetry complicates the diplomatic task for politicians, and particularly Canadian politicians. From the American perspective, demographic preponderance contributes in normal times to a kind of benign indifference toward Canada that is characteristic of both citizens and many policymakers.

The very closeness of historic ties makes it relatively easy for Americans to assume that the interests of both countries are complementary, and that Canada is simply an unofficial 51st state to the north. The well-intended assumption makes the periodic discovery of difference the more unpleasant for its unexpectedness. From a Canadian perspective, however, the enormity of living next to a global hegemon heightens the sensitivity of all Canadians to such assumptions of continental consensus. North of the border, it is politically important to continuously underscore differences rather than commonalities. Assertions of Canadian national interest are more likely to take on anti-American tones. Emphasizing the many shared values, projects, and interests can be unfashionable in many Canadian circles (for evidence from the 2000 Canadian election campaign, see Brooks 2006b). How far is the unusually fractious public opinion environment on both sides of the border since 9/11 likely to constrain Canadian and American leaders as they manage the cross-border relationship?

Public Orientations to Aspects of the Canadian-American Relationship

Public opinion is a well-known influence on a country's foreign policy. In normal times, however, attitudes toward the bilateral relationship play a fundamentally different role in Canada and the U.S. Reflecting the underlying differences in the size, there is much greater salience attached to Canadian-American relations by citizens of Canada than by American citizens (Sigler and Goresky 1974, 667). As such, Canadians know much more about their neighbor to the south than vice versa. Relatedly, it is also well known that attitudes toward the bilateral relationship are held more intensely by Canadians than Americans (Holmes 1974, 611). These qualities provide a strong incentive for Canada's nationalist political elites to galvanize support by cultivating the strain of anti-Americanism that has run through the country's political culture since it was founded in 1867 (Brooks 2006a, 140–1). As a result, Canadian foreign policy toward the U.S. is likely to be more constrained by public opinion than American foreign policy toward Canada. Yet, the wave of anti-Canadianism that manifested itself in recent years among some Americans illustrates the potential for comparable domestic public opinion constraints on American policy-makers and diplomats.

Unfortunately, efforts to monitor the public pulse of the bilateral relationship are hindered by a lack of reliable measures regularly administered in parallel surveys of representative samples of residents of each country over extended periods of time. There is, for example, no North American equivalent of the Eurobarometer which has collected data on the opinions of representative samples of all member states of the European Union since the early 1970s.² The result is that it is much easier to monitor the public pulse of European integration than in North America, where depictions of public orientations are available on an *ad hoc* basis only. And reflecting the underlying asymmetry in the relationship, the attitudes of Canadians about Americans are more frequently studied than are analyses of American attitudes toward Canada.

With the materials at hand, however, we can begin to piece together a general picture of how Canadians and Americans are viewing one another and their relationship since 9/11. Existing surveys suggest that the highly public disputes and verbal sparring among the elites responsible for managing the relationship have some resonance at the level of mass publics on either side of the border. For example, an Ipsos-Reid poll of 1,000 Canadians and 1,000 Americans released in May 2005³ revealed a decline in the percentage of Canadians who cite the U.S. as

"Canada's closest friend" from 60% in 2002 to 53% in 2005. Similarly, the proportion of Americans saying the same about Canada declined 4 points over the same period, from 18% to 14%. Sixty percent of Americans said in 2005 that Britain was the U.S.'s closest friend, up 4% from 2002. Despite these changes, however, there is considerable warmth across the border. The same poll revealed that 60% of Canadians "like and admire" Americans, whereas 85% of Americans felt the same about Canadians.

Another survey ("The Niagara Report") of Americans and Canadians from the summer of 2005 found some potential cracks in the cultural support for continental economic integration. For example, one of the driving forces for continental integration is the intensive trade and business links between the two countries. When asked to pick the top two countries from a list of the seven largest trading partners (the list is identical for both countries, and includes Britain, Japan, China, France, Germany, and Mexico) in terms of the closeness of their business values, two-thirds of Canadians picked the U.S. as their first choice.⁴

However, this perception was not reciprocated by Americans. For the latter, Japan was the first choice (ranked first by 39% of respondents), with Britain coming second in terms of first-place rankings (only 18% of Americans ranked Canada as closest to them on business values). This survey also reveals some evidence of mistrust across the border. When asked to rank the top two countries whose visitors should be questioned most closely when attempting to enter Canada (for Canadian respondents) or the U.S. (for American respondents), most in both countries chose Mexico as their first choice (32% of Canadians, 50% of Americans). However, the second most frequently mentioned country among Canadian respondents was the U.S., chosen by 30% of respondents.

Like the Ipsos-Reid survey, the Niagara Report surveys also revealed a great deal of common ground between Canadians and Americans. For example, substantial majorities of both countries support increased cooperation on national security, border security, and anti-terrorism measures. More than three-quarters of respondents on both sides of the border felt that it was "very" or "somewhat" important for the two countries to cooperate on energy policy in order to reduce dependence on Middle Eastern oil. When looking at the attitudes of Canadians and Americans, then, policy-makers and diplomats seeking to ameliorate relations across the border need to be careful to draw upon the considerable common ground that exists in public attitudes but equally to be aware of potential trouble-spots.

Looking Ahead

Looking at the record of the first half year in office, Canada's new prime minister seems determined to improve relations with the U.S. Tensions that have crept into the relationship since 9/11 notwithstanding, surveys of public opinion in 2005 reveal that Prime Minister Harper's initiatives in this respect will meet with a warm reception among the mass publics of both countries. Generally close overall feelings toward one another unite citizens across the border and there is widespread agreement on the need for, and benefits of, closer cooperation on a host of important policy sectors.

In advancing his agenda, Harper will need to be careful to avoid appearing that he is too compliant with American initiatives. Several of his recent pronouncements suggest that he recognizes this. For example, in an election campaign speech in London, Ontario last December, Harper qualified his earlier enthusiastic support for the American-led war in Iraq. Similarly, Harper's promise that Canada will invest heavily in protecting its Arctic sovereignty claims (against potential American

challenges) is at least partly intended to pre-empt criticisms of being too pro-American.

There are some looming issues that have the potential to produce cross-border conflict. The Bush administration's failure to fully appreciate that the Canadian and Mexican borders do not present the same type of security and administrative challenges continues to rankle Canadians. More specifically, the U.S.'s Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 established a requirement for all who wish to enter the U.S. (including U.S. citizens) to present a passport or other secure document that indicates the holder's citizenship. Known as the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), the new documentation requirement is to be in place by January 1, 2008. The potential disruptive impact of this requirement on the flow of people across the Canadian-American border is enormous, and its impact on tourism in both countries would be crippling. In 2001, Americans made 15.6 million overnight trips to Canada, and there were 4.6 million Canadian overnight trips to the U.S.

Notes

1. All figures from the CIA World Factbook online.
2. To redress this situation, a partnership has been formed by SES Research (Ottawa, Canada) and the University of Buffalo to conduct annual parallel surveys of Americans and Canadians focusing on the bi-national relationship. We expect to be in the field with the second annual survey in August 2006. Details on this project, as well as the full results of the first

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in that year. The burdensome and possibly costly requirement for documentation to support these crossings is sure to deter many of these visitors. It remains to be seen if the lobbying efforts of the Canadian governments, the travel and tourism industries, and the broad coalition of politicians from American border states will be successful in curtailing the implementation of the WHTI.

The complexities of the deep interdependence of Canada and the U.S., coupled with the frequency and intensity of interaction across the border, makes some level of friction in the relationship inevitable. These structural forces periodically upset the customary tranquility of the bi-national friendship. Yet, the deep commonalities of circumstance and sentiment on many core issues provide enormous ballast for the conduct of cross-border diplomacy. With Harper's good intentions and good will, there seems to be a great opportunity to put the cross-border acrimony of the early part of this decade behind.