



Canada-US Security Issues J.L. Granatstein

Introduction

The security of North America--as opposed to Canada's historic concerns about its security against the United States--has been a Canadian-American problem since 1917. Once the US entered the Great War, the two countries began to cooperate militarily, mounting naval and air patrols against the U-boat threat. For the first time, American equipment and personnel were based in Canada, and cooperation was ramping up when the Armistice of November 11, 1918 brought the war to a close. In the 1920s, both North American nations turned inward, and military planners in Ottawa and Washington or Carlisle, PA, prepared schemes to attack the other in event of an Anglo-American war. Such plans grew ever more fantastic as the old enmities along the border faded and new threats overseas arose.

Nothing was done to spur military cooperation, however, until 1936, when President Franklin Roosevelt, a man who summered on Canada's east coast and knew it well, became concerned about the Dominion's military weakness which he saw as a potential threat to the US. Confidential staff talks followed, and in 1938 in a speech at Queen's University, Kingston, Roosevelt pledged the US to protect Canada. "The people of the United States will not stand idly by" were Canada to be threatened by any other empire, he said. A few days later, Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who had not known of Roosevelt's intentions, reciprocated by promising that Canada would always recognize "our obligations as a friendly neighbour" and so act to ensure the US was not menaced by any nation from Canadian territory. Canadian self-respect demanded no less. The US was a great power with its own interests and responsibilities, one of which was to ensure that Canada was neither hostile nor a base for any southward attack; Canada too had its national interests and responsibilities, the primary ones being to assure Washington that it was protecting both itself and the US' northern frontier. The bargain of 1938 has been in effect ever since.

It was the Second World War and subsequent events that entrenched it in a web of boards, committees, and agreements. The Permanent Joint Board on Defence, created while the US was still neutral, made plans for the defence of North America in the event of a British surrender or a Japanese attack. The PJBD continued after the war and soon turned its attention to the defence of North America from Soviet attack. The North American Air Defence Agreement of 1957-58 integrated the USAF and RCAF air defence commands; similar, if less formal arrangements, prevailed at sea. Overseas, the two countries cooperated in NATO and during the Korean War, and an array of hundreds of agreements and memoranda of understanding tied the two countries' defences closely

together. Over time, the Canadian Forces adopted more US equipment and looked to the American military as its exemplar.

The arrangements generally worked well for the militaries; however, they troubled the Canadian public and politicians on left and right who feared that Canada was being dragged behind America's chariot wheels and in danger of losing its sovereignty and independence. The debate over putting Distant Early Warning Line radars in Canada in the mid-1950s was marked by anti-Americanism; so too was the discussion over NORAD and the question of nuclear arms for Canada in the early 1960s, and the heated arguments over the US role in Vietnam and a dozen other Cold War and post-Cold War flashpoints. At the same time, Canada and the US became each other's best trading partner, and Canadians' economic prosperity increasingly hinged on access to the rich market to the south. Canada needed the US economically, but it was a restive military partner, and the nation's endemic anti-Americanism regularly blew into epidemic proportions. After the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, the United States increased its security measures and focused on the defence of its territory while carrying the war to terrorist entities abroad. The response to these events in Canada was muted, with some sympathy for American losses but a large and growing governmental and public concern over the ways in which the US was responding.

Key Issues

For Canada, the key issue was and is how best to act to deal effectively with Washington in an era of increased threat to the US and, indeed, the Western democracies. The Canadian Forces, their regular effective strength now only 53,000, their equipment largely obsolescent, had been allowed to atrophy over several decades and were essentially incapable of operating abroad in strength or providing timely effective aid in civil emergencies at home. This did not please the Pentagon which was unhappy that Canada had been able to provide only a handful of ships, a few transport aircraft, and an infantry battalion to the Afghan War in 2002 and had loudly refused to participate in the Iraq War of 2003. At the same time, American deployment of Ballistic Missile Defence met with substantial opposition in Canada, and by mid summer 2004, no decision on Canadian participation (or non-participation) had been made. Canadian anti-terrorism activities had been stepped up after 9/11, but civil libertarian and multicultural activists in Canada protested regularly at increased security efforts, and there were enough bungles to keep the government's efforts under persistent scrutiny. As many Americans believed that Canada was an easy entry point for terrorists seeking access to the US, this disturbed Congress and the Administration. Complicating matters, immediately after 9/11 the US had temporarily put tough border controls in place that slowed the flow of trade to a trickle; such measures could bring the Canadian economy to its knees in a week if applied again.

The problem for Canada thus was clear. The United States perceived Canada as a near-vacuum militarily, a nation strategically located to its north that had allowed its military to decay into obsolescence, was ordinarily unable or unwilling to contribute to coalition efforts abroad, and was slow to act against terrorists or potential terrorists at home.

The Americans might be willing to accept a Canada that did not participate in every foreign adventure; they have other allies and, while they would prefer Canadian

participation and political support, they can usually live without it. They cannot, however, tolerate a nation of high strategic importance to them that makes no effort to defend its own territory or contribute effectively to continental defence. Such neglect constitutes a threat to American security. The US similarly cannot tolerate a nation that is perceived as treating terrorists benignly; such a state of affairs can threaten the US directly. As the US Ambassador to Canada noted in a letter to the *Globe and Mail* on July 1, 2004, “it is abundantly clear that the U.S. cannot safeguard its homeland without the help of our Canadian friends and neighbours.”

The US is a democracy, and obviously it would prefer this help to be offered willingly. But it is important to realize that great powers *will* act to protect their interests. Even such a good friend as Franklin Roosevelt made this clear when he met with Mackenzie King in August 1940 to craft the PJBD. King had said that Canada would not lease or sell bases in Canada to the US, which quickly led the President to talk of the bases in the West Indies Britain was still reluctant to lease to the US. “That as a matter of fact, if war developed with Germany, and he felt it necessary to seize them to protect the United States, he would do that in any event,” or so King recorded FDR as saying. “That it was much better to have a friendly agreement in advance.” [This is based on my “Mackenzie King and Canada at Ogdensburg, August 1940,” in J. Sokolsky and J. Jockel, eds., *Fifty Years of Canada-United States Defense Cooperation* (Lewiston, NY, 1992), pp. 20-21.) The rules for superpowers are never the same as those for ordinary states, and it was likely significant that when the US asked to build the Alaska Highway through Canada soon after Pearl Harbor, Ottawa gave permission in days.

Given Canada’s total dependence on the US market for its exports (85% to or through the US) and given the importance of these exports for Canadian jobs (one-third of jobs are dependent on exports to the US) and GDP (some 40% of GDP is derived from exports to the US), the critical problem for Canada is how to change American perceptions before the United States feels obliged either to exert economic pressure to persuade Canada to upgrade its defences or to move itself to fill the vacuum to its north. In American eyes, by taking its peace dividend for the last three decades Canada has unquestionably permitted the Roosevelt-King bargain of 1938 to slip into abeyance. Canadians ought never to assume that *in extremis* the US will not act as it sees fit to protect itself. Nor should they assume that the Bush-Cheney Administration is any less determined to protect American security than FDR was more than sixty years ago.

Choices for Canadians

The choice for Canada seems stark: either increase its military expenditures and strength and improve its control over its own territory or *de facto* see this pass to the US. This problem, however, is complicated by the fact that many Canadian nationalists see any cooperation with the United States as threatening Canadian sovereignty. Many also view increases to defence spending as stealing funds from urgent domestic priorities and making the Pentagon’s future calls for Canadian troops for overseas adventures more certain. Most fail to recognize that cutting Canada adrift from the US—if such were possible, which it manifestly is not—would oblige Canada to spend far more to ensure its defences and, if it failed to do so, guarantee that the US will be forced to act to protect itself. What then of sovereignty?

If Canada acts to modernize and expand the Canadian Forces, the costs will be high. An increase in strength toward 80,000 regulars will be required, as well as the expansion of the reserves to be both a homeland defence first-responder force and a reinforcement for the regular forces. Much new equipment is essential, most notably destroyers, supply ships, long-range heavy- and medium-lift air transport, and a wide range of armoured vehicles and army equipment. The present percentage of GDP devoted to defence would likely need to double toward 2.2 percent (the NATO average).

Such an expanded, updated CF would be able to play many roles: to defend Canadian territory and sovereignty and to contribute credibly to continental defence; to operate abroad in coalitions or peacekeeping/peacemaking roles; and to provide adequate aid to the civil power in domestic emergencies such as earthquakes, forest fires, and floods. These are roles that Canadians historically have wanted the CF to play and that Canadians have adjudged as serving their national interests.

The option of doing nothing is not really a choice. It involves turning the defence of Canada over to the United States with grievous consequences for sovereignty and, dare we say it, pride. The option of minimizing relations with the United States and ensuring Canadian defence of its own air, sea, and land space is possible but even more expensive than the option of cooperating with the US. Both of these options likely threaten the continuance of trade with the US; both certainly threaten the possibility of amicable relations with our superpower neighbour.

Potential Flash-Points

Forecasting is not something historians feel comfortable doing. It is hard enough understanding what happened let alone trying to determine what might occur.

However, we might hazard a guess that there will be more terrorist attacks on American—and, likely, Canadian—targets. Such attacks will increase the demand for greater security in both countries and be all but certain to precipitate greater state intrusion into Canadian life. If an attack on a US target is proven (or even suspected) to have been made from Canadian soil or by terrorists who entered the US from Canada, the consequences for the Canadian economy will surely be severe. If the US Administration believes that laxity by Ottawa contributed to such an attack, the consequences for Canadian sovereignty could be serious as well.

Any terrorist attack would demand US retaliation against state sponsors, and the pressure on Canada to join in would be heavy. The unhappy Iraq experience would not lessen the pressure.

There is also some possibility of a missile attack against American targets from either an accidental launch—by Russia or China—or a rogue state such as North Korea or, soon, Iran. Such an attack would cause huge casualties, unless BMD worked, and precipitate a major crisis. Ottawa would certainly want to join in retaliatory measures.

Finally, there remains the possibility of a major war (China? The Islamic world? a revived, rearmed Russia?) with attacks on North American targets and the possibility of large expeditionary forces fighting abroad for lengthy periods. It is highly unlikely Canada could be neutral in such a conflict; it is also unlikely that the Canadian public would want such neutrality.

Options/Recommendations

Canadians need to consider their national interests in deciding on their security policies. Stating matters as simply as possible, the first national interest is surely the need to protect Canada's territory and the Canadian people. The second is to protect the continent we share, the third to enhance our economic well-being, and the fourth is to work with our friends for the advancement of democracy and freedom. Balancing these interests at any time is the task of government, but their permanence has been demonstrated by our history and will certainly be crucial to our future as a nation.

Our national interests demand that we abide by the 1938 bargain made by Roosevelt and King. Canada needs the United States to be the ultimate guarantor of its security in a dangerous world just as much as Canadians need Americans to be the best market for their goods. But we have obligations as a good neighbour, and these demand that we protect our air, land, and sea space and control terrorism in Canada in such a way that our neighbour is reassured by our efforts and feels no need to do the job itself. This will enhance our independence and sovereignty and buy us goodwill in Washington.

At the same time, it serves Canadian interests to cooperate in continental defence, again doing so in such a fashion that we merit a share in the decision-making that inevitably must affect us. The US, for example, is now deploying BMD. That decision was taken unilaterally whether or not some Canadians might judge it to be the right one. If any defence question was an issue in the June 2004 election, it was BMD. The question for Canada, however, was never a moral one, as some portrayed it, but a political one: how best could we get some influence on the ways in which this weapons system might be directed and employed? If we did not join in, we would have no say at all; if we did sign on, even at a late date, we might achieve some, and to have a seat at the table at least raises the possibility that, if we play our cards skillfully, we might be able to enhance our influence and possibly protect our sovereignty.

Similarly, Canadian governments can decide whether or not to participate in coalition or UN or other international organizations' operations; those are choices that should be determined by particular circumstances, and certainly the importance the United States attaches to a particular operation must be weighed carefully by planners and politicians in Ottawa. Without an efficient, effective, well-equipped Canadian Forces, however, those choices will be foregone in advance.

Very simply, a renewed and capable CF offers choices to Canadian governments and policymakers; the present decayed CF forecloses them. I believe in having the choices an effective, efficient Canadian Forces offers us in managing Canadian-US relations primarily because I fear the hard decisions not having a CF will impose upon us.

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