

Will the U.S. Cut Canada Loose?

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The Conservative government in Ottawa is obviously more friendly toward the United States than its immediate predecessors. Thus far, however, nothing the Harper government has done has eased Washington's growing concerns that Canada's defence weaknesses threaten the U.S.'s own continental security.

There are two factors at play here. The first comes from the United States military's view that the capabilities and equipment of the Canadian Forces have atrophied so much that the CF is no longer interoperable with US forces. Given that, why should the United States share command with Canada in the North American Aerospace Defence Command? As Bernard Stancati writes in the current issue of Parameters, the journal of the U.S. Army War College, "The reality of the situation...is this: if Canada permits doubt to continually creep into the Canada-US defense and security partnership in the post-9/11 environment, it may find itself slowly being ushered out."

The second factor is political will. A former U.S. Air Force staff officer at NORAD, Dr Stancati writes bluntly that doubts about Canada could drive the United States to question "whether its northern partner has the political will to pull its share and to do its part to secure the continent from attack. Historical and recent events demonstrate a willingness on the part of the United States to take unilateral action on the continent if it believes such is necessary to protect its own interests. In terms of either a

ballistic missile or maritime attack, the possibility exists that the United States would consider defecting from the partnership if Canadian policymaking causes the United States to lose confidence in its partner's willingness, resolve, or ability to take action.”

It is not in Canada's national interest to have the neighbouring superpower harbour such doubts. Nor is it in the national interest to lose the cooperative relationship in defence because that means one of two things: either Canada pays the full cost of providing its own defence to a standard that does not cause concern in the U.S. or Canada cedes its defence to the United States. The first course will be ruinously expensive in cost. The second will be completely destructive to Canadian sovereignty and nationhood.

Canadians have always assumed that the United States will protect Canada in extremis, and this is surely true. In their own interest, Americans can never accept that any hostile power will entrench itself on Canadian territory. That is legitimate and reasonable, not aggressive and overbearing, and Canadians should thank their lucky stars that they live next door to the United States and not Germany or Russia. We might have been the Poland of North America, subject to the ruthless demands of aggressive neighbours.

But what if, as Stancati suggests, American national interests some day force the United States to pull out of the defence partnership? That will likely mean that the U.S. assumes full responsibility for the defence of Canadian territory--with or without Ottawa's consent. If Canadian military incapacity is such that the existence of a vacuum to the north poses a threat to American national interests, then the U.S. will be forced to act, no matter what Ottawa says and no matter the violation of Canadian sovereignty such a policy would entail. This is not a course the United States would follow lightly, and

obviously it would always prefer to have Canadian concurrence in any actions it might take on or over Canadian territory. But necessity knows no law, and it is entirely possible that, under threat, the U.S. might believe itself forced to act. Indeed, it is all but inevitable. If the United States defends us, then our independence will be a sham and our sovereignty will have disappeared. We truly will be a vassal state.

How can such an eventuality be prevented? There is only one way: Canada must genuinely have the military capacity to be able to tell Washington truthfully that the Canadian Forces can stop any threats from reaching the United States from, through, or over Canadian territory. This means that our military must be of sufficient size and have the right equipment to be able to counter any possible incursion or to deal with any terrorist threats from the sea, by air, or over land. Obviously, such capacity will protect Canada's population and territory at the same time as it meets the concerns of the United States. The protection of our people is the first priority of every government, and it is one that Ottawa historically has shrugged off. This was never desirable or acceptable. Now, in the age of terrorism, it is no longer possible. Being a sovereign state carries responsibilities with it, and being capable of mounting your own defence is a basic requirement.

The Harper government has begun the process of re-building the military. If Stancati's article is any guide to present U.S. thinking, Ottawa needs to speed up the process.

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