The People of the United States Need Canadian Independence

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Undoubtedly, the present Administration in Washington, D.C., has extraordinary unilateralist tendencies. President George W. Bush and many of his most senior associates often appear to be so convinced of America’s overwhelming power and their own righteousness that they act in ways readily regarded as arrogant. More fundamentally, several leading figures in the administration believe in a doctrine of ‘American dominance.’ Their commitment to this doctrine predates September 11, 2001, but the attacks of that day became justifications for it and were used to speed its implementation.

The readiness to characterize other countries as evil, to undertake preemptive wars, and to mislead citizens about what is being done constitute great dangers. All this is worrisome for many Americans and also for people everywhere, including friends of the United States. This depiction, however, can be overdrawn and there are ways that friends in Canada and elsewhere can help improve the picture.

Despite the great military, economic, and cultural power of the United States, obviously its highest officials cannot determine all events everywhere. Indeed, in this increasingly integrated world, the United States is greatly impacted by economic, ideological, and political developments originating outside of the United States and beyond the U.S. government’s control. Of course, the U.S. government and society have
immense effects throughout the world, but the effects are also shaped by the responses of the people living in each society. Social interaction is necessarily a two way process.

Furthermore, the United States not a unitary entity. The national government cannot act for all Americans, even in foreign policy. Americans engage in foreign policy as corporate managers, as members of nongovernmental humanitarian, activist, and religious organizations, as consumers of goods and services, as producers of movies, songs, and books, as members of various Diaspora communities, and as persons of innumerable other identities and memberships.

More importantly, the militant unilateralists who seem so dominant in Washington these days do not represent or reflect the prevailing views of Americans. Certainly, in previous administrations, the U.S. government took the lead in establishing major international organizations, including the United Nations, NATO, and the World Trade Organization. These organizations have generally received widespread American popular approval. Even in waging war, such as the 1990-91 war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi annexation, the U.S. government acted in accord with UN resolutions in cooperation with a very broad coalition of other countries.

Despite various critiques of the United Nations by many political figures, the population as a whole recognizes the value of the United Nations for the United States. Thus, in a July 1999 national survey by Pew Research Center, conducted by Princeton Research Associates, respondents were asked, “Would you say your overall opinion of the United Nations is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?” The responses were: 19 percent very favorable, 57 percent mostly favorable, 14 percent mostly unfavorable and only 4 percent very unfavorable.
So there are mighty forces that constrain and counter the implementation of the extreme ideological preferences of the neo-conservatives. In the context of American society and the realities of the rest of the world, the neocons cannot succeed in acting as unilaterally as they would like. Trying to do so has painful consequences. Consider the U.S. war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, which was launched with UN and general international legitimacy. In waging the war and in the aftermath, the UN and NATO have played a part, but the U.S. has set the overall policy direction. The U.S. policy has focused on military operations to destroy the remnants of al Qaeda and Taliban forces. The U.S. has not worked energetically with the central government, headed by President Hamid Karzai, to build a national society, reconstruct the country’s devastated infrastructure, and create national political institutions. Consequently, the drug production has become high again, the Taliban and al Qaeda are regrouping and American and Afghan solders are increasingly being attacked.

Consider U.S. relations with North Korea. In the early 1990s, the U.S. administration of president William J. Clinton had become deeply concerned about North Korea's nuclear program and tensions rose dangerously. However, assisted by former president Jimmy Carter’s meeting with Kim Il Sung, North Korea's leader, the U.S. and North Korean governments negotiated the 1994 Agreed Framework. According to this Framework, North Korea would roll back its nuclear arms program and the United States would gradually normalize political and economic relations, help replace nuclear reactors, and supply heavy fuel oil. Some problems in implementation arose on both sides, but any idea of negotiating the matter was rejected when George W. Bush became president. The South Korean president, Kim Dae Jung, who had long pursued a policy of
dialogue and reconciliation toward North Korea, visited the new American president in March 2001. President Bush roughly dismissed this policy and subsequent rhetorical attacks against North Korea culminated in the president’s March 2001 State of the Union address, in which he included North Korea in the “Axis of Evil.” The North Korean government has engaged in a series of announcements of progress in its nuclear weapons program alternating with offers to make a deal. With a military attack on North Korea not seen as a viable option, the U.S. has urged North Korea’s neighbors, China Russia, South Korea and Japan, to induce North Korea to abandon any nuclear program. This may seem to be a multilateral strategy, but the goal may be to bring about a regime change in North Korea. That would make a negotiated closure of the nuclear weapons program unlikely and the consequences of an abrupt collapse of the North Korean government is likely to have immensely costly and dangerous consequences.

Relations with Iraq are the most salient instance of would-be empire building. The grandiosity of making war on Iraq to transform the Middle East is an unfortunate example of the fallacies of the Administration’s approach to international relations. It weakens the efforts to build an Afghan government and society that is able to police itself and not provide a haven for anti-American organizations resorting to terrorist actions. It generates widespread antagonism and interferes with giving appropriate attention to many other acutely dangerous situations in the region and the world. Belatedly and grudgingly, the U.S. government is seeking more international involvement, but it still seems reluctant to work collaboratively with major countries with interests in Iraq and the Middle East.
The American public is beginning to react against the highly militarized and unilateral approach taken by the present administration, as indicated for example, in a national public opinion survey conducted August 26 – September 3, 2003 by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. To the question, “Do you think that the US military presence in the Middle East increases or decreases the likelihood of terrorist attacks against the US?” 64 percent replied increases and only 32 percent responded decreases. Asked, “What do you think is the more important lesson of September 11?” 81 percent chose, “The US needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism,” and 16 percent chose, “The US needs to act on its own to fight terrorism.” Significantly, when the same question was asked in a survey for the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, in June 2002, 61 percent chose the first option and 34 percent chose the second. Support for a more multilateral approach was large before the war on Iraq, but it has greatly risen with the war and its aftermath.

The foreign policy approach of the present U.S. government has had some undesired consequences. Many actions are proving to be counterproductive in providing safety for Americans, increasing American influence in the world, or benefiting the American economy. The approach seems to be undergoing some modifications. But in any case, it is not likely to survive the Bush administration.

Many aspects of the U.S. administration’s domestic policy also have grave international implications, such those relating to the environment, foreign trade, population growth, and the establishment of a Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Some policies can and will be changed in another administration, but their consequences
will not be easily reversed. Other programs, embedded in the government as is the DHS, will be difficult to correct when that is needed.

In the light of this analysis, it seems to me, Canadians should not put aside their own values and interests to support U.S. policies that they believe to be misguided. The bonds between the United States and Canada are broad and deep, Americans have good regard for Canadians. This gives Canadians the opportunity to get a hearing for more constructive strategies to counter terrorist attacks than the highly unilateral militarized ones that come so readily to mind and hand of the neocons in Washington.

In any case, Canadians should increase their contributions to building a more secure, prosperous, and democratic society and world. I do not think Canada needs to be a major military power or have specialized military units that fill a niche for U.S. military forces in order to be heard in American circles and to help reach goals shared by the American and Canadian peoples. Of course, certain military cooperation is imperative given the geography of the two countries, as may be seen in the operations of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Before September 11, 2001 NORAD was focused on threats coming toward Canada and the United States; now that focus has been expanded to include possible domestic airspace terrorist attacks.

I think Canadians should build on their notable international experience and their special position and take a more active international role. Thus, the work in peacekeeping and in training peacekeepers (as done in the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre) is widely recognized. The training might be further developed, perhaps to provide joint military and civilian training and to include training for police interveners and for the local police in countries in transition to a democratic system. Significant research and
teaching in international relations have been conducted at major universities such as Carleton, McGill, and Dalhousie. In addition, peace studies and conflict resolution have been done for many years in Canada and new programs are developing, for example at the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba. Furthermore, the Royal Military College of Canada has developed courses on conflict resolution and information about them is shared with many other military institutions in Europe and North America. These various activities also should be strengthened and studies undertaken to develop realistic strategies for dealing with terrorist actions, intractable conflicts, and recovery afterwards.

More intermediary work should be done by official and nonofficial groups serving as mediators and bridge builders between countries and between communities that are locked in destructive conflicts. As Norway has illustrated in the Israeli-Palestinian and Sri Lankan conflicts, a small country can offer intermediary services that a major power or international governmental organization could not do as well. The Canadian diplomatic and the nongovernmental infrastructure might be strengthened to support the sustained engagement so necessary in peacemaking and peacebuilding as well as in preventing destructive conflict escalation.

It might be well for Canadians to give particular attention to a few of the many troubling situations in the world today. Since Canada is a member of the UN, NATO, the Commonwealth, La Francophonie, the Organization of American States, the World Trade Organization, and many other organizations, Canadians are well situated to provide useful linkages. Official and nonofficial Canadian groups might expand their help in
building bridges that cross antagonistic lines and in providing assistance in the difficult process of transition now underway in so many countries.

Of course, as an American, I accept that overcoming the excesses of U.S. official policy is basically the responsibility of U.S. citizens. Serious and widespread discussions questioning the course taken by the present administration have finally begun in the United States. Furthermore, in the ongoing presidential and congressional election campaigns, current policies are debated and alternatives are presented. Such discussions hopefully will foster consideration and adoption of more constructive ways to respond to today’s challenges. We Canadians and Americans live in dangerous times and we must be careful not to make them more dangerous by our own actions or inactions.