

Canadian Foreign Policy And Latin America Morality or Pragmatism?¹

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Photos by Dante Barreira

Toronto's most visible landmark, the CN Tower.

In recent years, Canada has emphasized the role of morality in the formulation of its foreign policy. This morality, referred to as human security, is broadly defined as “safety for people from both violent and non-violent threats. It is a condition or state of being characterised by freedom from

pervasive threats to people’s rights, their safety, or even their lives.” More precisely, Canadian foreign policy decision makers understand human security as an alternative way of seeing the world, in other words, “taking people as its point of reference, rather than focusing exclusively on the security of territory or governments.”²

Canada’s role is to serve as a model political-economic system for other less developed states in the international

system. Canadian decision makers argue that the country’s democratic institutions, its excellent human rights record, its ability to integrate peoples and cultures from different parts of the world make it an example for others to follow. And as others and I have argued in different contexts, this makes Canada a post-national state.

Post-nationalism places emphasis on the idea that the international system has changed dramatically since the end

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of the Cold War and that the classic definitions of national and international security (defense of the territory and sovereignty of the state) are less than useful constructs upon which to base policy. States need to redefine these concepts in order to take into account less traditional threats such as human rights violations, the global environment, international organized crime and corruption, just to name a few. Second, in order to resolve these new security threats, states need to cooperate, not compete. State competition in the area of security is considered not only outdated in the post-Cold War world, but dangerous. Third, this cooperation may require a pooling of resources—what is often referred to as collective security. In turn, to make collective security function properly, states must be more flexible in their definitions of sovereignty.

Policy-makers and academics alike have extensively criticized this reorientation in Canadian foreign policy as being either idealistic—and therefore unworkable—or interventionist—and therefore a violation of the principle of state sovereignty. The purpose of this article is to examine the first criticism by suggesting that human security has and will continue to serve Canadian interests in the post-Cold War period.

HUMAN SECURITY, COMPETING AND COMPLEMENTARY EXPLANATIONS

Three explanations can be employed to understand the motivations and interest Canada has in human security. The first emphasizes the fact that civil society groups and public opinion inside Canada agree with the policy. Partly correct, this perspective suggests that human security buys votes. A second

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perspective argues that human security gives Canada international prestige and serves as an important tool to distinguish the country culturally and internationally from its more powerful cousin to the south, the United States. A much more practical third perspective suggests that human security directly affects Canada’s economic interests. This political-economy approach links human security to Canada’s global trade policy.

To understand this final and extremely practical explanation for human security one needs to look at Canada’s historic relations with the Europeans. As argued by Sberro, the common perception of Canadian-European relations is that they are essentially peaceful and mutually prosperous.³ Canada and Europe enjoy a common history and culture, and Canada maintains strong political ties with Great Britain and France. Canada was the first American nation to participate in World War I, and later in World War II; along with Great Britain and the United States, it was instrumental in liberating large parts of Western Europe. During the Cold War, Canada maintained a large

military contingent in Europe under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and with the end of the Cold War, Canada still maintains its presence in Europe by participating in collective security operations throughout the region.

However strong the political-cultural-security linkage between Canada and the Europeans may be, the same cannot be said with respect to trade. The value of Canadian exports to Europe is minuscule when compared to total European Union imports (2 percent in 1997) and is expected to get even smaller.⁴ Canada has lost significant market share in Europe over the last 30 or so years, leading Sberro to argue that Canada is the country that apparently maintains the least far-reaching and far-seeing relations with the European Union in the whole Western Hemisphere.⁵ The most obvious reason why this has occurred is that Canada is too small economically to be of interest to the Europeans. Canadian governments throughout the twentieth century have implicitly recognized this fact, which is why they have emphasized the cultural and common historical links to continental Europe and Great Britain. In essence, the argument for why the Europeans should pay attention to Canadians is that in some important ways, Canada is European. To demonstrate this, Canadian governments have historically been very active in political-security matters in Europe.

As mentioned before, Canada participated actively in World Wars I and II and was instrumental in designing and implementing Cold War security structures, namely NATO. Part of this, of course, has to do with genuine cultural ties to the continent, but a more

cynical observer could argue that Canada's historic participation in Europe is the result of an effort to gain political and, more importantly, economic favors from the Europeans. In brief, NATO as a security institution was designed not only to help defend against possible Soviet aggression but also to keep Canada in Europe. However, throughout the Cold War, "Canada started to become increasingly disillusioned with the Europeans precisely because it did not see any kind of economic benefits from active political-security participation."⁶

Given this perspective, the end of the Cold War was not the best event as far as European-Canadian relations are concerned. With no obvious role for NATO (and therefore Canada), Canadian decision-makers began to realize that the country needed to diversify its relations (both economic and political). The response to this new post-Cold War reality was Canada's opening up to Latin America and joining the Organization of American States (OAS).⁷

So where does Canada find itself now with respect to its relations with Europe? Canada still has a very strong interest in keeping NATO alive because it guarantees Canadian access to Europe. Therefore, when its members were able to redefine the purpose of the security institution in the 1993 Treaty of Rome, Canada breathed a temporary sigh of relief. The problem does not end there, however, because more and more, the Europeans are talking about what they call a Common Foreign and Security Policy (or CFSP), which is a political-security union designed to complement economic association. The CFSP, of course, would necessarily exclude Canadian and U.S. participation. Thus, the closer the Europeans get



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to a CFSP, the more nervous Canadian decision-makers will become.

However, what makes Canada even more nervous is the prospect for the expansion of the European Union (E.U.) into Eastern Europe. A growing E.U. poses a triple problem for Canada:

1. Canada will continue to lose its already small market share in Western Europe, which will become increasingly autonomous and self-sustaining with the inclusion of Eastern European states.

2. Canada will lose its market share in Eastern Europe, as it will no longer be able to maintain autonomous trade relations within an enlarged E.U.

3. Canada is in a weak bargaining position in comparison to the Europeans; a larger E.U. will make that problem even worse.⁸

Given the likelihood of the E.U. expanding geographically as well as in its functions and roles, Canada is likely to place much more attention on Latin America in the future. And as Nossal has argued, Canada in the post-Cold War period has finally become a "coun-

try of the Americas." However, given the fact that many Latin American states have a long way to go in terms of democratization, economic partnerships with these countries will be questioned domestically. In other words, Canadian public opinion will not readily accept economic linkages with countries with high levels of corruption or that systematically violate human rights. In that sense, human security serves an important public opinion purpose within Canada: it demonstrates that Canadian foreign policy is not only trade policy and that, therefore, Canada will condition future economic cooperation with Latin America on how successful these countries are in modernizing their political and social systems.

A second possible and practical explanation for the emphasis on human security in Latin America stems from the Canadian belief that in order to establish a successful economic relationship with a country, that country must be a political success as well. Pressure around issues such as human rights, electoral reform, social justice

and the emphasis on collective security questions like peacekeeping and peacemaking are considered necessary in order to assist Latin American countries in achieving political stability. Ultimately, this political success will ensure economic success, which in turn directly benefits Canadians. Indeed, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien highlighted this linkage recently when President-elect Vicente Fox suggested that a priority for the new Mexican government will be the eradication of poverty. Chrétien's response was that this was good for Canada because Mexicans will now be able to buy Canadian products.

APPLYING HUMAN SECURITY IN THE AMERICAS: THE OAS⁹

Over the last decade, Canada has pushed the human security agenda within the context of the OAS. Since joining the organization officially in January 1990, Canada has seen itself as taking on a "leader's" role, pushing forward consensus on issues such as landmines, institutional renewal, human rights and drugs. According to statements by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), Canadian human security priorities include eight specific areas.

The first priority identified by DFAIT for the General Assembly is promoting the concept of human security itself. DFAIT statements repeatedly explain the importance of the concept, arguing that globalization and the changing nature of the international system necessitate a redefinition of our understanding of security. The second priority area for the OAS General Assembly from the Canadian perspective is the

illicit trade in drugs. However, rather than framing the issue as a challenge to legal systems and state sovereignty, Canada has attempted to bring the states of the region to look at the issue in the light of human security. The third and fourth priority policy issues have been landmines and firearms. Largely due to Canadian initiatives, the organization has signed agreements to eliminate landmines in the hemisphere in the long term and to control manufacturing and trafficking of firearms. The Canadian government argues that each of these issues has an obvious human security aspect, though other states in the region again associate these two areas with questions of national sovereignty and traditional security. Human rights and the promotion of democracy are the fifth and sixth priority areas for Canada in the OAS in the 1990s. These two issues demonstrate the truly radical nature of Canada's redefinition of security, for human rights violations and non-democratic systems can be included under the heading of violent and non-violent threats. The eighth area that reflects the influence of the human security paradigm is Canada's drive to strengthen civil society throughout the Americas. The influence of civil society in the Canadian foreign policy process is largely responsible for the human security agenda, and now Canada seems to want to bring about similar social and policy structures throughout the region.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The greater the pressure within Europe to expand the roles, functions and geographic scope of the E.U., the greater the emphasis Canada will place on

Latin America. Canada would have preferred strong links to Europe given cultural and political similarities. However, Canadian access to Europe is less than certain, and Canada is searching for new partners in Latin America in order to guarantee its economic success.

The emphasis on human security within this context can be explained by the fact that many of Canada's new partners are still developing politically. In the minds of Canadian decision makers, human security is a way to help Latin America become a stable and reliable trade partner. Ultimately, human security may be an attempt to make Latin America look a little more like Europe. ■■

NOTES

¹ The author would like to thank the Mexican Association of Culture for its ongoing financial assistance.

² <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca>.

³ Stephan Sberro, "Canadá y la Unión Europea: una relación posmoderna," *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Canadienses*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2000).

⁴ <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca>.

⁵ Sberro, *op. cit.*

⁶ B.W. Muirhead, *The Development of Canadian Trade Policy: The Failure of the Anglo-European Option* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992), p. 176.

⁷ Kim Nossal, *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1997).

⁸ <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca>.

⁹ The OAS-human security discussion presented here borrows heavily from Duncan Wood and Athanasios Hristoulas, "Pragmatic Idealism in Canadian Foreign Policy? Human Security and Latin America," *Comercio Exterior* (forthcoming, 2001).