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What the USA Expects from Canada as a Reliable Ally

by Peter Van Praagh
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Like many riddles, the answer to what the United States expects from Canada as a reliable ally is found in the question itself. In short and quite simply, the United States expects Canada to be a reliable ally.

Understanding what the United States considers reliable, however, is not always simple or straightforward, even at the best of times. At any given moment, and sometimes with little or no notice, the United States can make large or small political requests of Canada that have to do with anything and everything, including the environment, trade and commerce, crime prevention, or diplomatic coordination in any region of the world. Or, indeed, the request might have to do with global peace and security.

At times of political certainty in the United States, there is always a healthy give and take and no serious American official expects Canada to surrender its sovereignty and say yes to every request. At the same time, the relationship with the United States is by far Canada's most important and the economic well-being of Canadians fundamentally depends on it. As a result, each request needs to be understood, weighed and considered seriously.

This paper, however, is written not at a time of political certainty in the United States. Anger among voters has allowed populist political candidates from both mainstream parties to succeed with anti-establishment platforms. Long-time Independent Bernie Sanders exceeded all expectations when he challenged Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Businessman Donald Trump actually won the nomination of his adopted Republican Party. Both candidates campaigned strongly on economic protectionism and criticized the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a fundamental pillar of North American economic stability.

It is difficult to understand exactly what is driving massive political support for Trump and Sanders. Maybe it is impossible to know for sure. What is now unquestionable, however, is that their emergence as significant political leaders in the United States, whether or not Trump actually becomes President, has given voice to a real dissatisfaction. As American leaders do their best to identify and address this discontent, politics – and indeed government policy – will no doubt be affected. Guessing exactly how US policy will be affected is impossible, and suggesting otherwise at this time is foolish.

To emphasize the point, this paper is not written at a time of political certainty in other parts of the world, either. Slow economic growth has led to dislocation that in turn has diminished confidence in traditional economic and political institutions. Russia is challenging borders in Europe while at the same time entire borders in the Middle East are being completely redrawn amid a rise in sectarianism. On one side of the Eurasian continent, China is growing more assertive. On the other side, the United Kingdom voted to retreat from these mounting challenges, pack up and go home.

In short, the post-Second World War institutions are being tested, and potentially being pulled apart. This is specifically significant because following victory in the war, it was the United States, with solid political support from Canada and its other allies, which built and maintained this global architecture. Now, as it unravels in real time before our very eyes, long-time and reliable American partners, such as the United Kingdom, are questioning the relevance of the very institutions that they fought so hard to build not that long ago.



The focal point of American strength comes from the nature of its alliances and as increased and unprecedented stress mounts on post-war institutions, American strength itself is tested. Unlike other global powers in history, the United States attracts states to its side not through military intimidation or coercion, but through the power of its ideas and what they represent. Indeed, experience shows that without strong alliances, US power is limited. As one of the closest allies of the United States, the UK's decision to leave the European Union demonstrated clearly that the UK can no longer be relied on to act in sync with the United States politically.

Moreover, uncertainty about the future strength of the British economy, and whether Scotland will choose to leave the Kingdom altogether, leaving a rump England behind, casts doubt on the UK's potential to maintain its traditional role as a significant military partner for the United States. In many ways, Britain's 23 June 2016 vote to *Brexit* the European Union leaves Canada as the United States' most reliable ally.

This role for Canada is not new. But at this time of uncertainty in the United States and in the wider world, it is as important now as at any other time in history. At this specific moment, it is vital that Canada not guess what the United States expects from it as a reliable ally politically – and risk getting the answer wrong. Instead, it is crucial to its own security that Canada reinforce its fundamental support to traditional American efforts and, in the first instance, that means maintaining and enhancing military-to-military cooperation.

Often misunderstood by civilian policy-makers, true military-to-military interoperability and cooperation ensures like no other national mechanism can that the countries' relationship tolerates and endures any political uncertainty. Indeed, military-to-military cooperation is the single best way to meet expectations as a true partner. And at this time of significant global uncertainty, there is no better way to signal to the United States that Canada is ready to continue its part as a predictable and reliable ally.



Perry Aston/U.S. Air Force



First, the United States expects continuity with Canada as its partner at the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). As threats increase in other parts of the world, North America itself is increasingly vulnerable to evolving threats from highly capable nation-states to disaffected individuals acting in response to violent propaganda. It is likely that many of the crises that originate as regional conflicts in other parts of the world have the potential to manifest themselves in North America.

Russia, with its strategic nuclear forces, remains the only existential foreign military threat for Canada and the United States. Russia continues to test Western defences in Europe regularly but has also tested NORAD by flying long-range bombers close to sovereign airspace as a strategic demonstration of its military capability. Joining efforts with the United States to counter Russian adventurism both in North America and in Europe is important to curb the risk of Russian leaders misinterpreting intentions in a crisis, leading to inadvertent escalation.

Other specific threats to the North American continent come from China, North Korea, Iran, radicalized Islamic terrorists and transnational organized crime. The potential for military conflict in the Arctic is low in the short term but climate change, and the receding polar ice cap resulting from it, is leading to increased economic activity as Russia and China – and others – increase their human presence. Finally, but not least important, Canada should play a strong supporting role, if not a leadership role, in coordinating disaster response. In short, the United States expects to meet these challenges to the continent together with Canada.

As global investors search for predictable and stable destinations to move their capital, cooperating with the United States to modernize NORAD and enhance interoperability between the militaries of the two states are investments that will pay dividends for Canada.

Second, the United States expects continued contributions from Canada to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While the level of interoperability necessary to operate effectively at NORAD is fundamental to continental defence, it is important for it to translate to operations outside North America. Although populists have recently questioned NATO's relevance, the trans-Atlantic link will remain vital to the American economy and to its security, and as one of only two NATO states outside of Europe, Canada's contribution to European security will continue to be well received by Washington.

Europe is suffering several nearly simultaneous blows including territory snatching and regular saber-rattling from Moscow, pressures on the Eurozone from southeast Europe, and stress from migrants fleeing the Syrian civil war and other unstable places. And to top it off, there are all the economic, political and military consequences of the UK leaving the EU. In this situation Canadian contributions to NATO have the added benefit of being appreciated not only by the United States, but by European allies as well.

Productive Canadian contributions to NATO include ensuring interoperability with the United States, maintaining troop commitments, including training, and coordinating Canada's political and military stance with its NATO allies with regard to Russia. The political and economic benefit of contributing heartily to NATO's overall mission allows Canada to help shape end-of-mission efforts as well as shape next missions, and is always economically rewarding.

Third, the United States expects Canada to participate in global coalitions where it is leading. Canada's military contribution is usually significant to global efforts, but not game-changing.



Politically, however, Canada's good name and its global reputation for fairness, combined together with its first-class military are a vital mix that the United States appreciates and values a great deal when it is building regional or global coalitions. Canada is currently an important part of the American-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and in Syria, an effort that is clearly in Canadian interests every bit as much as it is in American.

Related, if not directly, the United States values Canada's significant role in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance and expects it to maintain if not increase its contribution to it. Finally, as cyber has already become a domain – both a place and an enabler – that has continental and global consequences, the United States expects Canada to keep up its cyber capabilities so as not to be weakened in cyber by its close cooperation with Canada.

American and Canadian interests merge more often than not. But the relationship between Canada and the United States – between Canadians and Americans – is about much more than shared interests. As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during his meetings with President Obama at the March 2016 State Visit to Washington: "Canada and the United States are siblings."

During this period of global uncertainty, the best way for Canada to meet American expectations as a reliable ally is through enhanced military-to-military cooperation. In so doing, Canada will be in a stronger place to help out its big brother politically on the global stage, should it come to that. And that is no riddle.



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► Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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