

Canada stakes hopes on new border deal with U.S.

BRUCE CAMPION-SMITH (feat. COLIN ROBERTSON)

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WASHINGTON—An ambitious overhaul of Canada-U.S. relations that boosts border security and speeds trade?

Or a one-day White House wonder that is quickly overshadowed by the distractions of a U.S. election year and a president fighting to win a second term?

Prime Minister Stephen Harper meets with President Barack Obama for a cursory 30 minutes on Wednesday to sign a border pact billed as the biggest change in trans-border relations since the two countries inked their free trade deal in 1988.

The “Beyond the Border” initiative is expected to boost information-sharing between law enforcement agencies, commit new spending on border infrastructure, reduce red tape for shippers, all in a bid to speed trade and travellers across a border that has become increasingly bogged down by security measures.

But for all the hype, experts say it will be years before its success can be truly measured.

Indeed, for it to succeed at all will require the ongoing support of the president and his administration. That might prove a tall order for Obama, who is already in campaign mode for a tough election less than a year away.

“It has the potential to be transformative,” said former Canadian diplomat Colin Robertson, who cautioned that campaign fever was already bogging things down.

“Most of this can be done administratively but even administratively we’re into that period where . . . things go slowly,” said Robertson, a former free trade negotiator who is now a senior strategic adviser at McKenna, Long & Aldridge.

Fen Hampson, director of Carleton University’s Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, said such meetings are important but so, too, are tempered expectations.

“Every time we’ve gone for a smart border, it’s died a bureaucratic death,” Hampson said. “The Americans don’t see a problem and that’s our problem.”

Canada is barely on the radar screen in this town, even less so in an election year. Indeed, in a White House briefing Sunday with reporters on Obama’s week ahead, neither Harper’s visit nor the border pact was even raised.

Yet for Canada, the border deal is a big deal. It’s expected to dramatically expand Canada’s cooperation with U.S. security officials. That includes entry and exit records to track the movements of people who leave either country, a provision that’s already sparking privacy concerns.

But in return for giving in on that U.S. priority, Ottawa is hoping to get some cooperation on its own demand for smoother, more efficient access across the border.

That requires a high-level signal of support on the U.S. side. The Canadians rejected the offer of a signing ceremony involving U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano and Public Safety Minister Vic Toews.

Instead, they pressed for a high-profile event with the president to sign the border pact, hoping his words will send a signal throughout government that trade is a priority.

Harper and Obama will meet privately about 30 minutes before holding a joint media availability at the White House at 3 p.m.

In Obama, Canada may have a distracted champion.

"This is a president who is playing politics and is fighting for his political survival," Hampson said.

Obama's recent decision to put off approval of the controversial Keystone XL oil pipeline until after the 2012 election made clear his election-year focus on a domestic agenda.

"As we saw on Keystone, he's going to be bowing to U.S. domestic interests and pressures and he's not going to be making any big deal that is going to create flak for him," Hampson said.

"It's made worse by the fact that you have a very large, self-serving bureaucracy whose existence depends in part on building walls and digging moats on the north and the south border."

One Canadian here familiar with border issues conceded the challenge of U.S. election-year politics but is more upbeat about the potential success of the border pact. Still, he said it needs to be "trim," not laden with "bells and whistles" so it that can produce tangible results in a short period.

"It must be doable and practical," said the official, who spoke on background. "The 'doables' will be essential because people will need to see results."

Robertson is confident that in his efforts to spur the economy, Obama — who has promised to double U.S. exports by 2015 — can't ignore the upsides of increased trade across an unclogged border.

"He wants jobs. There is a very rational . . . case that this will help improve the situation on both sides but particularly for the Americans," Robertson said Tuesday.