

Issues to Watch in an Otherwise Stable Security Landscape

OVERVIEW

Wave 5 of the **Security Monitor** 2005–6 Study

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Overview

Continued evidence of public confidence, but with some growing strains and hot spots to watch

The public opinion landscape for security issues continues to evolve in some important ways. Generally speaking the Government of Canada continues to enjoy renewed confidence in both the direction of government and the country. There are, however, some slight wobbles evident and much of the previously registered indecision about how direction is unfolding is translating into newly negative views. This leaves a largely positive, but somewhat more polarized public. A few hot issues emerge from this research which will bear careful monitoring.

Robust public security ethic continues

The current wave reinforces the view that the public are continuing to place enormous emphasis on security as a response to a myriad of perceived threats confronting citizens in Canada and North America. Some of the more notable recent evidence is the strong support for a more coordinated intelligence-based partnership with the United States. Our interpretation is that, despite highly mixed views on the American administration, Canadians are extremely mindful of the need to strengthen the relationship and remove barriers based on a perception of Canada as a security threat to the United States.

We also find little evidence that successive years of a more visible and vigorous security agenda have produced a public backlash. On the contrary, confidence in state stewardship of civil liberties issues remains high, as does confidence in key security agencies. This is not to say that Canadians are unconcerned with human rights and civil liberties, but rather that neither the impacts on individual citizens nor more highly publicized cases of potential

abuse have disrupted the overall lean to at least support the current balancing of security and civil liberties.

There is other evidence supporting this view. For example, when asked if Canada should follow the lead of other countries (like the United States) and relax regulations banning certain items such as wrenches or scissors from flights, they say no. In fact, the public seem to near universally approve of virtually any measures with a plausible linkage to security.

Despite tensions, there is a bilateral public consensus on the need for Canada-U.S. cooperation on security

Both Canadians and Americans demonstrate a desire to focus more inwardly in a time where the external world is seen as increasingly hostile and dangerous. Although this tendency is considerably stronger in the United States, there is evidence in both countries of a growing desire to create a continental haven in North America (if not an outright fortress). Indeed, it appears that both Americans and Canadians are strongly stressing the need for a continental (or at the very least Canada–U.S.) approach to security with greater cooperation, particularly in areas of shared intelligence and data. All this occurs in a context where, notwithstanding an eroded mutual outlook, clear majorities of Canadians and Americans approve of the need to strengthen the overall relationship between their two countries.

The desire for a continental framing of security coexists with desires to strengthen internal borders. Although Canada is clearly seen by Americans as the most benign of all foreign countries, there is still strong support for strengthened, less porous borders. This may be reinforced by the fact that Americans are less likely to acknowledge Canadian security efforts to secure the border. This poses a considerable challenge for Canada, particularly given

that Canadians are much more likely to feel that they are doing their share of the work in this area.

The most obvious recent example of American efforts to secure their borders is the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI). This initiative produces extraordinarily high awareness in Canada, and while there is a significant and slightly growing fraction of Canadians who will resist this requirement, a clear majority says they will comply. The data suggest that cooperative approaches which utilize newer technology and data sharing to ease this transition will be far more effective than attempting to forestall or avoid the initiative.

The new immigration outlook: contrary currents in North America

Despite broad concurrence in many areas of values and interests, Canada and the United States are tracking in opposite directions on immigration issues. While normally a matter of sociological curiosity this may well constitute the basis for a major future policy collision when these contrary trends (and policies) are set in the context of America's security imperative.

It is notable that in an era where debates about multiculturalism, immigration, and ethnic tensions are confounding the advanced Western World, Canadians are showing the lowest levels of opposition to immigration in recent history. Declining opposition to immigration should not be confused, however, as confidence in the immigration system. On the contrary, the "system" is seen as porous and disconnected from Canadian interests. Nor are Canadian preferences for immigration source countries neutral. A clear ethnic-cultural hierarchy emerges in random testing of source countries, with the most culturally-similar countries favoured and Islamic-majority countries least favoured. Instructively, India and Pakistan,

although neighbouring countries, are rated in starkly difference terms as preferred source countries (with India viewed much more favourably).

Further, Canadian outlook on “illegal” immigration is less intensely charged when compared to the U.S., where this is currently a pinnacle issue. Canadian outlook blends pragmatism and compassion in an ad hoc outlook which rejects rigid principles over flexibility.

Defence and Afghanistan: continued public support but growing stresses as awareness rises

Awareness of issues related to the Canadian Forces continues to climb dramatically. This is accompanied by stable and extremely positive impressions of CF personnel. Rising awareness, however, has led, in a very short period of time, to a profound transformation in the public’s understanding of the CF’s role in Afghanistan. Canadians are increasingly knowledgeable that this is not a traditional peace-keeping mission, but a more dangerous and forceful peace-support role. While remaining supportive overall, there has been some softening of support (particularly among conditional supporters).

There are some interesting regional patterns emerging with respect to the CF’s role in Afghanistan. We find that Westerners, particularly residents of Alberta, tend to be paying more attention to the issue, have more positive assessments of CF personnel, and show more support for the peace-support role overall. Quebeckers, on the other hand, are more critical: they are more likely to have a negative impression of people who serve in the Forces (16 per cent compared to nine per cent overall); they would strongly prefer the CF to participate only in peacekeeping operations (54 per cent compared to 46 per cent across Canada); and, more pointedly, the majority of Quebeckers now oppose the current mission (50 per cent compared to 37 per cent overall).

In sum, a supportive public are generally approving of federal efforts to deal with their elevated concerns in the security arena. The public are providing a stronger than expected mandate to strengthen the relationship with the United States and to create an integrated North American security partnership. There are, however, profound potential contradictions in U.S.-Canada outlook on immigration and cosmopolitanism. Finally, a much more attentive Canadian public are continuing to provide support for the Afghanistan mission, but support is eroding as attention rises, particularly in Quebec.