

Balancing Security with Broader Priorities in a Turbulent Threat Climate

OVERVIEW

Wave 7 of the **Security Monitor** 2005–6 Study

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Overview

Transformation of the security outlook

Canadians increasingly find themselves being defined by forces outside their borders. Be it the relationships with the United States, globalization, or geopolitical instability emanating from the Middle East, Canadians are convinced that external forces are the salient factors shaping their future. This increased global sensitivity has moved from being seen through a largely positive and optimistic lens at the close of the last decade to a decidedly darker lens as the external world has increasingly become seen as hostile, dangerous and intractable.

The sense of relative insulation that Canadians felt from global threats is dissipating. For the first time in recent history it is not only the external world which is seen as becoming more dangerous. There has also been a dramatic rise in the belief that Canada itself has also become more dangerous. It was only a little over one year ago that roughly as many Canadians thought that Canada was becoming safer as thought it was becoming more dangerous. Today, those who see it as more dangerous outstrips the safer view by nearly five to one (the highest we have observed since we began tracking).

Mounting concerns about external threats have been reinforced by a cascading series of shocks, some of which are now seen as interdependent with internal threats such as the arrest of 17 alleged terrorists in Toronto earlier this summer. For example, the recent hostilities in the Middle East have coalesced with other events to reinforce the sense of global threat that has evolved in recent years. There is an overwhelming view that solutions to problems in the Middle East, if they even exist, lie in the distant future. This, in turn, has led to a diminution of Canadian enthusiasm for engagement in this and other “foreign” problems. Most Canadians still believe we have an important role to play, but the enthusiasm is much lower than in the recent

past and the conviction of a successful outcome is much gloomier. Put in a broader context, we may be seeing an important transformation of Canadian outlook on the external world. This may reconfigure our sense of global responsibility, our preference for balancing domestic and foreign focus, and, less obviously, have profound and unexpected implications for our relationship with the United States.

Before considering these potential impacts and their implications for the Government of Canada, it is worth considering a few alternative interpretations of the new outlook as it reflects recent events. Has the rapid succession of spectacular stories of imminent threats (e.g., the arrest of suspected terrorists in Canada, mounting casualties in Afghanistan, ongoing carnage in Iraq, unprecedented red alerts in the U.S. and the latest air terror plot emanating from Britain) produced elevated fears, or has the sheer repetitiveness made it banal and “normal”?

Media commentators¹ have suggested that press response and public reaction has moved from fear to cynicism and outrage (e.g., “Don’t mess with my flight plans!”). Others² have gone so far as to suggest that, “five years after 9/11, fear has finally struck out as a political force.” This may be what is occurring in other countries, but to date our evidence does not support the view that fears have been eclipsed by outrage and cynicism in Canada. Canadians seem largely unblinking in their staunch commitment to security and its costs. The balancing with civil liberties, economics, and convenience does, however, bear careful monitoring.

¹ See David Olive in *The Toronto Star* (August 13, 2006).

² See Frank Rich in *The New York Times* (July 20, 2006).

It is also the case that, despite the overall lean to a strong security ethic, there are profound and growing fissures developing in Canada. Most notably, there is a very strong generational divide over the importance of security and risk, and the tolerance for various measures and costs in the service of security. Younger Canadians are much less persuaded by the security agenda and are sharply less supportive of recent shifts in foreign policy (which they see as much too closely aligned to the United States). Quebeckers are also increasingly offside on these issues.

Recent impacts on public expectations and preference for government approach

Many western governments are struggling with increased public opposition to their security agendas and foreign policies. It is important not to confuse dissatisfaction with the perceived effectiveness of security policies and the residual conviction that security is the new yardstick by which governments will be evaluated. So, contrary to some interpretations, it is not that fear has vanished as a political force, but rather the public are increasingly flummoxed and angry that many security measures (particularly foreign policy) have had the ironic impact of heightening the very problems they were intended to reduce. Concern with the core problems, however, has not diminished expectations that the governments will employ all practical means available to reduce these threats.

For the most part, the Government of Canada has been much less battered by these concerns than governments other Western countries. Broadly speaking, the public approve of the government's approach to security and its current balancing of security with other concerns. Canadians also trust key agencies and federal organizations responsible for the stewardship of security. There are nonetheless some caveats and emerging tensions.

First, there has been a rise in uncertainty at the expense of approval of broad federal direction (particularly in Quebec and amongst younger Canadians). Second, there has been an alarming decline in the already low levels of awareness of what government is doing to ensure public security. This is unfortunate since awareness is positively associated with confidence and approval of federal direction.

The issue of Afghanistan is excluded from these comments. Public fluency on the mission is very high and there has been a sharp and steady rise in awareness that this is not a traditional blue-helmet peacekeeping mission. Majority support is still in place, but there has been modest and steady erosion in soft support. Strong support, on the other hand, remains stable and entrenched at 27 per cent. The sharpest decline in support is in Quebec and amongst young Canadians.

Civil and personal liberties

Despite anecdotal evidence from the blogosphere and media commentators, our data have yet to show any significant swing backwards toward the civil liberties and freedoms side of the security-rights equilibrium. Freedom, rights, and liberties remain highly important but clearly subordinate to security considerations.

Notably, some of the reviews of web activity and blogs following the latest British arrests and subsequent restrictions on fluids and other personal items aboard airplanes suggested the dominant expressions of cynicism were much less obvious in Canada than in Britain or the U.S. Perhaps Canadians are more docile or respectful of authority? It is puzzling that conformance remains strong here because we know that terror risk appraisal is significantly lower in Canada than in the U.S. Our fieldwork concluded just as these latest events transpired and it will be important to see if the public have passed a tipping

point and are now saying, “Enough is enough.” Our conjecture is that this has not happened yet and that this is unlikely to happen in the near future.

This is not to say, however, that Canadians are not extremely regretful about the sacrifices to civil and personal liberties and there is a widening chasm opening up on this issue across generational lines. It nevertheless remains the case that security continues to trump personal freedoms in the “new normal”.

Immigration, multiculturalism and xenophobia

One of the more important trends to watch is the impact of security concerns on attitudes to other races and cultures – particularly to Islam. The so-called “clash of civilizations” thesis has found increasing resonance in many parts of the Western world. A generalized sense that the world has become more hostile and dangerous has fuelled sharply diminished support for both immigration and multiculturalism among the American and European publics.

Although Canadians are not immune to this recent backlash against tolerance and cosmopolitanism, the expression has been much more restrained here. Notably, the rise in opposition to both immigration and visible minority immigration that we saw in the immediate aftermath of the 17 arrests this past summer has all but disappeared. It seems that cosmopolitan attitudes and values are more firmly entrenched in Canada and are displaying a different trajectory than in Europe and the United States.

On the other hand, we may also be seeing some evidence of creeping isolationism in the Canadian public. Although muted vis-à-vis the United States, there is clear evidence that Canadians are less internationally adventurous, more pessimistic about prospects for world peace and stability, and generally more fearful of the external world than they were even a few

years ago. Whether this is a contagion effect from the U.S. or driven by internal dynamics, it is a potentially profound shift which merits monitoring. These forces also have important implications for the U.S.–Canada relationship.

Canada-U.S. relations

Canadian attitudes towards the U.S. are turbulent and ambivalent. On the surface, unfavourable outlook on the U.S. is rising and there is increased criticism of the closeness of relations (e.g., there is a perception that our policies are becoming too close and increasing our risk of exposure to threats). The belief that we are becoming more like the U.S. has risen to an all time high, as has the sense that this is not desirable. At the same time, however, there has been a sharp rise in the belief that the relationship is improving, something that nearly 95 per cent of Canadians told us was at least a somewhat important goal for government. So what are Canadians really saying?

One read of the data is that Canadians increasingly hold the U.S., particularly its administration and foreign policy, in contempt and they want to distance themselves. This is an easy interpretation and, certainly at the level of rhetoric, Canadians do not want to be seen as pursuing a path of obsequious accommodation. Recall that opposition to U.S. foreign policy and its administration is also remarkably high within the U.S. and even higher in Europe than in Canada.

The deeper significance of the trends and forces at play is that, for better or for worse, Canadians see themselves being drawn into closer congruence with the United States. The twin exigencies of increasingly shared economic and security interests coupled with geographic propinquity are overwhelming the more superficial narcissism of difference which colours top-of-mind

attitudes. Canadians may not want to be explicitly reminded of it, but in a more hostile world where American impulse is to pull up the drawbridge, it is almost certain that Canadians will opt for being inside the walls of a North American haven.

Within this context, the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) is an important test. In Canada, there is an unusually high level of attention to this issue and Canadians' resistance to the requirement of having a passport to enter the United States has been rising. While this is commensurate to the general downturn in outlook on the U.S., there also seems to be increased recognition of the potential negative consequences of this policy.

The trend suggests that a growing fraction of the Canadian public will either choose not to travel to the United States, or be incapable of doing so because of the proposed measures. While these are not likely to be key travelers, there is still potential for serious negative impacts on the American tourist industry if even a fraction of the one in three Canadians who says they will not go to the U.S. if a passport or a new travel document is required remain steadfast on this issue. Unfortunately, the economic impact on Canada will likely be even greater, given that far fewer Americans currently possess a passport (approximately one in three).

Apart from the economic impacts of this policy, there are also the symbolic implications to consider. What does it mean for North American integration if citizens of these countries cannot benefit from freedom of movement? Likewise, what about the prospects for a North American haven if Canada and the United States do not cooperate on their shared goal of security? We consider this a hot button issue that will require close monitoring as Canada contemplates its response to these requirements.