

CANADA-U.S TIES PROMPT MUCH DEBATE



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Now that President Bush has returned home to warmer climes, this is a good time for us to give further consideration to our ongoing relations with the United States.

A week ago, on the eve of Mr. Bush's trip to Ottawa and Halifax, 100 Canada-U.S. experts and observers, under the watchful eye of CBC Newsworld, met in Victoria to discuss the future of our relations with our southern neighbour. The conference on "Canada and the New American Empire," was organized by the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria and supported financially by Newsworld and some federal government departments and agencies. Its purpose was to "engage the public in promoting awareness of global issues."

The rationale for this remarkable conference was relatively simple: The

United States has become the world's only superpower, and recent events such as the tragedy of Sept. 11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2003 power blackout remind us of our common interests. In addition, there is a growing recognition in Canada that we have become a more confident and competitive country. This project was also propitious with the federal government undergoing a policy of Canada's current policies on foreign relations, international aid, defence and trade.

The conference divided itself into four working sessions: economic integration, water, energy and security. Thirty-five experts were invited to submit policy position papers and to provide an oral summary of their positions to the plenary sessions.

At the end of the two-day conference, it became obvious that consensus would be elusive. The views of participants reflected a deeply held set of convictions based on careful consideration of the issues. One typical view was Canada acted as a "disempowered power, in an abusive relationship with the U.S.," while another argued that the anti-U.S. sentiment in the room was simply "narcissism of small differences."

Yet despite these differences, a number of common observations emerged that might guide readers in their thinking about our future relations with the United States.

- A consensus seemed to emerge that global economic and political shifts would have a significant impact on our bilateral relations with the United States. In particular, under current conditions, North America will become more economically integrated as trading blocs consolidate around the world.

- Like all developed countries, Canada and the U.S. will be forced to accommodate themselves to the emerging economies of India and China.

- In the next decade, there will be more multilateral international institutions to deal with emerging global issues.

- The most significant threat to world peace continues to be in the Middle East, where anti-western sentiment is gaining momentum.

- Canada likely will enter into a free trade agreement with a number of South American states, such as Brazil, adding to the notion of an American trading bloc.

- There will likely be a significant re-balancing of global financial markets as the world adjusts to rising Asian currencies and increased trade.

There were also a number of unresolved policy issues for Canada:

- Should we take a comprehensive approach to our relations with the "New American Empire," or adopt a more incremental (and under the radar screen)

approach that does not draw as much attention?

- Should our foreign policy toward the New American Empire encompass our relations with the United States, or should we develop a separate policy for our U.S. neighbour?

- Given that we have more than 300 agreements with the U.S., should our approach look at our relations on a sector-by-sector basis, or should our approach be holistic?

- Canadians are continually surprised by how ignorant Americans are of the extent to which our economy is integrated with that of the United States. Is there any advantage to communicating the nature of our economic ties, given that the U.S. Congress is in a protectionist mode and our trade relations are very favourable to Canada?

- How do we develop a negotiating strategy that reinforces our sovereignty, but ensures our access to economic markets?

- And finally, how are decision makers going to engage the average Canadian, as well as parliamentarians, in this vital and crucial policy decision?

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CBC Newsworld's special series on "Canada and the New American Empire" airs tonight through Thursday at 8 p.m.