

Canada-US frictions intensify after Ottawa balks at joining missile defence

Keith Jones
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Relations between Canada and the US have chilled markedly since the federal Liberal government announced late last month that Canada will not participate in the US's anti-ballistic missile defence program (BMD).

Although Canada is often touted as Washington's closest ally, US President George W. Bush waited a week and a half to return the phone call that Martin placed to the White House on February 24 to explain why Canada had spurned US entreaties that it join BMD. Late last week, Canadian government officials admitted that the US president was so miffed that they didn't think he would ever deign to return the prime minister's call, and that they expected Martin and Bush would next speak at a Canada-US-Mexico summit in Waco, Texas, March 23.

Canada has been pressing for high-level talks on its complaints about the US's refusal to abide by NAFTA trade-panel decisions, but it was announced this week that the issue has been excluded from the agenda of the upcoming "three amigos" summit.

And last Wednesday, the US Senate adopted a resolution aimed at blocking Bush administration efforts to partially lift the ban on Canadian beef and cattle imports that Washington imposed after the spring 2003 discovery of a Canadian animal infected with mad cow disease.

US government officials deny that they intend to retaliate against Canada for its BMD decision. They have done nothing, however, to mask their annoyance with Paul Martin's Liberal government. Paul Cellucci, the US ambassador to Canada, said he was "perplexed" by Canada's decision. By refusing to join BMD, Cellucci contended, Canada is renouncing its sovereignty, since the US military will now decide unilaterally how to respond to missiles that are in, or heading, for Canadian air space.

The Bush administration did not ask Canada to contribute financially to BMD or to accept the stationing of anti-ballistic missile sites on Canadian soil. What it expected from the Martin Liberal government was strong political support for BMD, so as to help counter criticisms over BMD's cost and effectiveness and its potential to trigger a new arms race. (To move forward with the deployment of BMD, Washington was legally obligated to renounce the Cold War anti-ballistic missile defence treaty, which, in keeping with the doctrine of "mutually assured destruction," outlawed defences against nuclear missiles.)

Adding to the Bush administration's anger with Martin was its strong expectation that he would deliver Canadian support for BMD. Both before and since becoming prime minister, Martin has

proclaimed mending relations with Washington, which were strained when Canada refused to join the US invasion of Iraq, a top priority. During the past two years, Martin repeatedly signalled that he favoured Canadian participation by arguing, like Cellucci, that Canada needed to have a seat at the missile-defence table to uphold its sovereignty. Declared Martin in April 2003, "If a missile is going over Canadian airspace, I want to know. I want to be at the table."

US press reaction to the Liberal government's decision was not circumscribed by diplomatic convention. The *Wall Street Journal* was especially scathing. In an editorial titled "Canadian free riders," it accused Ottawa of shirking its responsibility to defend the continent, adding that Canada "stands alone among America's close allies in its outright rejection of missile defense."

"Of course," declared the *Journal*, "the reason Canadians can indulge their moral afflatus against 'weaponizing space' and in favor of maintaining 'Canadian values,' is because they know their proximity means the Americans will always come to their rescue. It's a classic example of what economists call the 'free rider' problem."

The Martin Liberal government's decision against participating in BMD—the angry reaction from the US establishment notwithstanding—is less than meets the eye

Canada's incoming ambassador to the US, Frank McKenna, let the cat out of the bag when he told the House of Commons Foreign Relations Committee that Canada is for all intents and purposes already participating in BMD. In support of his claim, McKenna pointed to the agreement Ottawa reached with Washington last summer under which NORAD, the joint Canadian-US North American aerospace command, is sharing information with the US missile defence program. The monitoring of North America's airspace is one of NORAD's principal responsibilities.

Most of the press has treated McKenna's remarks as a faux pas, since they came just 48 hours before the Liberal government publicly announced that it would not be joining BMD.

But there is good reason to believe that McKenna's remarks were aimed at placating elite opinion in both Canada and the US. After all, McKenna is a seasoned political operator, hand-picked by Martin because of his high profile in Canada and close ties to the Bush administration. A former New Brunswick premier, McKenna is a personal friend of George Bush senior and has served on the advisory board of the Carlyle Group, a US company with close ties to the Bush family and neo-conservative politics.

Liberal spokesmen have themselves conceded that the government tied the timing of its announcement on BMD to its February 23 federal budget. The budget unveiled a five-year, C\$12.8 billion plan to expand and strengthen the Canadian Armed Forces—the largest cash injection into Canada’s military in a generation.

Martin and other Liberal spokesman were quick to point to the military spending boost as well as recent Canadian troop deployments to Afghanistan and Haiti as proof that Canada is a full partner with the US in continental defence and in upholding order internationally.

“These military expenditures,” Martin told a Liberal Party policy convention, “show clearly that Canada is ready to assume its responsibilities in terms of North American defence. We are also ready to assume our responsibilities everywhere in the world.”

Washington has long been pressing for Canada to increase its military spending, as have the most powerful sections of Canadian business.

Cellucci did laud the Liberals’ military build-up, but he and other Bush administration officials made clear that it in no way compensates for Canada’s failure to support BMD.

When Bush visited Canada late last year, he surprised his Liberal hosts, who apparently had been assured that he would not raise the BMD issue, by his aggressive push, both in public and private, for Ottawa to embrace missile defence. This push reportedly included a private dressing down of Conservative leader Stephen Harper for failing to press the Liberals to support BMD.

Much as Martin wanted to accommodate Bush on BMD, he ultimately calculated it would be too politically damaging for his government to defy public opinion, which polls have repeatedly shown is strongly against Canadian participation in BMD and the Bush administration.

The Liberals were reduced in last June’s election to a minority government, and Martin’s own Liberal parliamentary caucus was badly divided over the BMD issue, with some MPs opposed to Washington’s plans out of fear missile defence will destabilize world geo-politics and others because they feared being publicly perceived to be endorsing the Bush administration’s militarist policies.

While the popular hostility to Bush is frequently laced with a politically regressive Canadian nationalism, there is no question that there is deep-rooted opposition to the US’s predatory global agenda, especially the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and to the neo-conservative and Christian fundamentalist politics personified by Bush.

Martin hoped that Harper and his Conservatives would mount a campaign in support of Canadian participation in BMD and thereby allow the Liberals to claim that they had been prodded by domestic and international political realities to embrace BMD.

The Conservatives have close ties to the US Republican right and have frequently fanned US government and right-wing criticism of the Chrétien and Martin Liberal governments. But such is the popular hostility to Bush and the Iraq War that Harper refused to unequivocally commit the Conservatives to supporting a Liberal government decision in favour of BMD, just as he equivocated during last year’s election campaign on his 2003

stand in favour of Canadian participation in the invasion of Iraq.

There are many parallels between the Martin government’s long-drawn out decision not to join BMD and the Liberal government’s last-minute decision in 2003 not to deploy the Canadian Armed Forces in support of the Iraq War. Then too, the decision was largely hypocritical since the Canadian military was in fact doing much to support the US war machine—considerably more, as Cellucci himself admitted, than many members of Bush’s “coalition of the willing.”

There is, however, one significant difference. In 2003, much of Canada’s corporate media supported the decision not to join the invasion of Iraq, reflecting elite concerns over the US’s trashing of the system of international law and alliances that had for decades helped sustain the world capitalist order and that formed the cornerstone of the Canadian elite’s own efforts to constrain Washington’s power. By contrast, only a few media voices were raised in support of the Liberal government’s decision on missile defence, which is seen as damaging corporate Canada’s drive for a closer economic and geo-political partnership with the US.

Canada’s two national dailies, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, were at least as critical as the US press, and were quick to tie their complaints over Martin’s BMD “fumble” to wider criticism of his government for failing to show leadership—by which they mean his failure to impose policies opposed by the majority of the population. The *Post*, which is an unabashed promoter of the Bush administration and neo-conservatism, titled its editorial “Shame on both of them”—a reference to both Martin and Harper.

“A stronger prime minister would have faced down the critics,” declared the *Globe*. “He would have said to his caucus: Look, you may not like the idea of joining a US defence program, but our friendship with the Americans is crucial and they are not asking very much here. I’m signing us up, so get on board....”

“This is not a strong prime minister. Canada will pay the price.”

The Liberals’ decision on BMD was not taken in retaliation for US trade policies that have adversely affected Canada and Canadian business. But both McKenna and Liberal Trade Minister Jim Peterson argued last week that US trade practices—in particular the US tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber and the ban on Canadian beef—made it more difficult to argue in favour of BMD. Said Peterson during a visit to Washington this week: “The main trade instrument that governs our trading relationship is coming unravelling. The [NAFTA] dispute resolution process that we’re supposed to rely upon is being ignored by the United States. That doesn’t make for a very healthy trade relationship and it’s starting to spill over into other areas.”



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