

To relief of Canada's elite

Obama makes Ottawa his first foreign stop

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Barack Obama visited Canada's national capital, Ottawa, for six hours Thursday, his first foreign foray since becoming US president.

On stepping onto the world stage, Obama claimed that the US is ready to assume world leadership. But he insisted that this will be done in close collaboration with allies like Canada.

The corollary was meant to differentiate his administration's stance from that of his predecessor, George W. Bush. In an attempt to baldly reassert US hegemony under conditions of a steep decline in relative US economic power, the Bush administration ran roughshod over the inter-imperialist alliances and system of international law that Washington had, in an earlier period, championed as a means of exerting its global predominance.

"The United States," proclaimed Obama, "is once again ready to lead, but strong leadership depends on strong alliances, and strong alliances depend on constant renewal."

Obama's claim to US world leadership was echoed by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. "One of President Obama's big missions," Harper told a joint press conference of the two leaders, "is to continue [international] leadership, but in a way that is more collaborative and I am convinced that by working with our country he will have no greater opportunity to demonstrate exactly how that model can operate over the next four years."

The trumpeting of the US's readiness to lead was belied, however, by the issues that were the focus of Obama's discussions with Harper—how to salvage the world financial system and avert a global depression, the bailout of the North American auto industry, and the crisis confronting the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Both leaders were determined to showcase the strength of the Canada-US military and economic partnership. Harper declared that there is a "strong" Canada-US "consensus on important bilateral and international issues." "Threats to the United States," said Canada's prime minister, "are threats to Canada. There is no such thing as a threat to the national security of the United States which does not represent a direct threat to this country."

Obama repeatedly noted that Canada is the US's biggest trade partner and largest supplier of energy. He declared his "love" for Canada and said America "could not have a better friend and ally."

These affirmations of the Canada-US partnership notwithstanding,

underlying tensions between the two countries on a host of issues, especially trade, kept bubbling to the surface.

Harper's claim that any threat to US national security is a threat to Canada was made in the context of a complaint about the "thickening" of the Canada-US border. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Washington has imposed a vast array of new border controls and regulations that, to the consternation of Canadian big business, have significantly increased the time and cost of cross-border trade. This has not only resulted in increased costs for Canadian exporters, it has disrupted cross-border production chains in a gamut of industries.

In the weeks preceding the presidential visit, the Canadian government had voiced its strong opposition to the "Buy American" provisions in the US economic stimulus package and while Harper said he is confident that Obama will ensure that the US lives up to its international trade obligations, he also suggested that the jury is very much still out: "Based on what the president has told me ... the United States will do just that [sharply curtail the impact of preferential domestic purchasing policies.] But I can't emphasize how important it is that we do that."

While Canadian officials have waved the free trade banner in opposing the "Buy American" clause, they have signaled that their real concern is that Canada be within any Fortress America, that "Buy American" be amended to "Buy North American."

Harper revisited this idea when addressing Obama's call for NAFTA to be amended, ostensibly to address labor and environmental concerns—a call the US president reiterated at Thursday's press conference

Obama said he hopes "there's a way of" reopening NAFTA "that is not disruptive to the extraordinarily important trade relationships that exist between the United States and Canada," adding that his aim is "to grow trade and not contract it."

Harper, while saying Canada was "perfectly willing to look at ways we can address some of these [US] concerns," was emphatic that NAFTA and its predecessor, the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, "have been nothing but beneficial" for both Canada and the US. Harper's paean to the benefits of NAFTA—a huge increase in Canada-US trade underpinned the Canadian economic expansion of the 1990s—concluded with the suggestion that the two countries combine against their European and Asian rivals. "Quite frankly,"

declared Canada's prime minister, "... the trade challenges we face in North America are common trade challenges ... not problems between our countries."

Shortly after Obama's election, the Canadian government floated the idea of a "Canada-US climate change and energy security pact." The aim of this proposal is to ensure that US action to limit carbon emissions does not impede development of the vast oil reserves of Alberta's tar sands. Although many projects have now been delayed or cancelled as a result of the financial crisis and subsequent plunge in world oil prices, some \$150 billion in investments in the tar sands were announced in recent years. Moreover, the Canadian elite see the tar sands as central to its ambition to make Canada "an energy superpower."

But Obama made clear that US policies on climate change will be determined by the economic interests of US big business, although this does not necessarily preclude taking up Harper's offer at a later date. His proposal having been rejected, the Canadian prime minister was forced to concede that ultimately Washington will play a determining role in his government's own clean air policy. "We will be watching what the United States does with a lot of interest," said Harper. "[W]e'll be looking ... for our sake at opportunities for harmonization, to make our policies as effective as they can."

Obama told the joint press conference he held with Harper that he had not requested Canada extend beyond 2011 the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan.

Canada, which currently has more than 2700 troops in Kandahar Province, a center of opposition to the US-installed government in Kabul, has been playing a leading role in the Afghan War since 2005. Last year, the minority Conservative government and the Official Opposition Liberals combined forces, in the face of massive popular opposition to the war, to pass a parliamentary motion extending the CAF's combat role in Afghanistan from Feb. 2009 through 2011.

Said Obama, "I did not press the prime minister on any additional commitments beyond the ones that have already been made. All I did was to compliment Canada on not only troops that are there, the 108 that have fallen as a consequence of engagement in Afghanistan, but also the fact that Canada's largest foreign aid recipient is Afghanistan."

Although Obama benefited electorally from the enormous antiwar sentiment in the US, he has long been an advocate of the US and its NATO allies waging a more aggressive war in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan. Earlier this week he approved the sending of an additional 17,000 US troops to Afghanistan and this "surge" will undoubtedly be vastly expanded once his administration completes a 60-day review of its Afghan strategy.

In other words, while Obama did not ask Canada to increase its contribution to the Afghan war this week, undoubtedly such a request will be made in the near future. The Canadian elite, mind you, has embraced the colonial-style war in Afghanistan with enthusiasm, viewing it as a means of reviving the CAF as an instrument of Canada's geo-political strategy and asserting a leading role in the policing of the capitalist world order.

And both the Liberals and Conservatives have sent clear signals in recent days that they would be amenable to a further extension of the CAF presence in Afghanistan.

At the conclusion of a 25-minute meeting with Obama, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff told reporters that he had told the US president that NATO's role in the Afghan War needs to be clarified. "What I said to the President very directly is, 'You can't get us to [re-enlist] in a situation of strategic incoherence' ... and he heard what I was saying."

Last week Defence Minister Peter MacKay told the Montreal daily *Le Devoir* that hundreds of Canadian troops could continue to be deployed in Afghanistan after 2011 to train Afghan troops and police. Typically such training involves participation in combat missions.

The Canadian corporate and political elite was immensely gratified and relieved that Obama chose Canada for his first foreign visit. In recent decades US presidents have made a practice of visiting the US's northern neighbour before any other country, but in 2001 Bush first visited Mexico.

If the Canadian ruling class places such stock in its "special relationship" with the US, it is because it calculates that it can best assert its predatory interests on the world stage through a close alliance with Washington and Wall Street. The increasing division of the world into regionally-focused economic zones, the rise of new powers like China and India intensifying great power rivalry, and Canada's own shrinking share of world trade and investment only cause the Canadian bourgeoisie to clutch more tightly to Washington's coattails. It is one thing, however, to attach oneself to a rising power, as the US was in the 20th century, quite another to a power whose manufacturing base has shriveled, whose economy is weighed down by gargantuan debt, and that is intent on maintaining its predominance through the assertion of military power.

Obama and Harper have proclaimed a "new era of cooperation" between the US and Canada. But relations between the US and Canadian ruling classes will invariably be filled with friction and acrimony in the years to come.



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