

CANADA'S GLOBAL CALLING

Since assuming office as Prime Minister of Canada in 2006, Stephen Harper has adopted a more proactive foreign policy stance that has raised the profile of Canada's role in post Cold war international relations. International headlines in recent months have focused on Canadian overtures in Afghanistan, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the scramble for the Arctic.

This week Presidents George W. Bush, Felipe Calderon of Mexico, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper met in Montebello, Quebec, Canada for their third annual summit to discuss North American integration. The main purpose of the summit was to advance the second phase of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), called the “Security and Prosperity Partnership” (SPP).

Since it was officially launched by the leaders of the U.S., Canada and Mexico in March 2005, the SPP deals with some of the most important contemporary cross border security issues nations are facing. The SPP negotiations deal primarily with refining rules and standards for trans–border transactions, extending even further legislation that was passed under NAFTA. They include extraterritorial rights over natural resources, extension of the Bush administration's security agenda to Mexico and Canada, and also discussion about a billion–dollar counter–narcotics aid package to Mexico.

Canada's foreign policy shifted into high gear earlier this month when Prime Minister Harper ought to assert his nation's claim to the Northwest Passage through the Arctic. The race to secure subsurface rights to the Arctic seabed heated up when Russia sent two small submarines to plant a tiny national flag under the North Pole. The United States, Denmark, and Norway also have competing claims in the vast Arctic region, where a U.S. study suggests as much as 25% of the world's undiscovered oil and gas could be hidden.

Canada believes much of the North American side of the Arctic is Canada's, but the Americans have argued that the thawing Northwest Passage is part of international waters. Energy–rich and blessed with the ability to draw energy from numerous sources, Canada is among the top 10 producers worldwide of all energy sources except coal, and the number one producer of hydro–electric power.

The rising price of oil has had a major positive impact on the Canadian economy. In 2003, energy from all sources contributed \$62.8 billion to the economy—about 5.6% of the country's gross domestic product. Several provinces have benefited from the rising price of energy. More than one–sixth of the Albertan economy draws on the energy sector. Alberta's oil sands deposits contain an estimated 1.7 to 2.5 trillion barrels of oil—one–third of the known oil reserves in the world, and second only to Saudi Arabia's established reserves. In 2003, more than one–third of all the oil produced in Canada came from the oil sands. With diminishing world reserves of fossil fuels and growing economies worldwide, the oil sands are likely to be an increasingly important energy source

During a three day visit to the Arctic this month Prime Minister Harper announced Canada's plans to increase its military presence in the region. More than three billion dollars have been earmarked for the construction of eight patrol vessels capable of breaking through much of the Arctic ice. Harper also announced that the Nanisivik mine, on the northern tip of the Baffin Islands, would become home to a deep-water docking facility by 2012. This multi-million dollar project will complement the opening of an army training centre in Resolute, Nanavut.

Another sign of Canada's determination to bolster its global influence further than it already does through the G8, the United Nations and the Commonwealth was the decision to join the Middle East Quartet in its efforts to push for a new round of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Canada renewed its financial assistance to the Palestinian Government led by Mahmoud Abbas last month earmarking 8 million dollars in immediate assistance with several additional millions also being planned to help improve the situation in the West Bank.

One of the most controversial foreign policy issues dominating Canada is the continued role of its military in Afghanistan. Canada currently has 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, fighting against the Taliban in the violent southern parts of the nation. Prime Minister Harper has indicated that Canada's military mission in Afghanistan will not be extended beyond 2009 without a consensus in the country and the Parliament. As Prime Minister of a minority government, this is certain to be one of the main political issues in Canada's forthcoming election, which may take place in the near future.

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