

## Responsible Foreign Policy: The Questions that Frame the Debate

By Laura McGee

In 2005, Prime Minister Paul Martin declared that Canada would not participate in the American-initiated Ballistic Missile Defense program (BMD). Rather than publicly questioning the effectiveness of the program, Martin used the familiar rhetoric of anti-Americanism to appeal to a largely uninformed public. “[The Americans] were told we would not participate,” he stated. “It is a firm no.”<sup>[1]</sup> Martin’s position invoked the image of a small actor taking a stand against an aggressive neighbour, a portrait that appealed to fellow opponents of BMD in both politics and academia. The missile defense program, a relic of American imperialism, would challenge a cherished conception of Canada as a middle-powering, peacekeeping nation dedicated to disarmament and anti-aggression. Martin’s “firm no” acted as a proverbial chest-thump as the belittled Canadians stood their ground.

The basis of our foreign policy is defense cooperation and involvement in multilateral organizations; the irony of this is that the most significant of these organizations are considered an extension of American authority. Founded in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a crucial part of our defense strategy and a comfort to many security-minded Canadians. On October 11 2010, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen set the agenda for the upcoming Lisbon Summit and the direction of international defense. “The new Strategic Concept must reconfirm NATO’s core task – territorial defence”, he claimed. But it must also “modernize how we do it, including cyber defence and missile defence.”<sup>[2]</sup> If we value our participation in NATO as a sign of global involvement, but at the same time remain committed to disarmament and “sensible solutions”, what does NATO commitment to the controversial BMD program mean for our national identity? According to academics like J. Marshall Beier and Ann Crosby, our position on BMD represents a choice between continental solidarity and national distinctiveness. If we cater to American defense whims, so the argument goes, we somehow lose a sense of “self” that is based on the rejection of qualities we deride in the United States. Chief among these is the extremism and aggression we see through the American media we choose to expose ourselves to.

Supporters of an “independent foreign policy for Canada” claim that unmitigated support of American defense policy is detrimental to our self-image. Not only does it complicate our moral superiority to the U.S., it commits Canadian resources to that which is already being procured by our southern neighbours: North American security. With their much larger defense budget and a political culture that endorses large military expenditures, the Americans will protect us no matter what. It is this sense of security that allows us to make grand overtures like Martin’s rejection of BMD. These (largely toothless) overtures point to a fundamental hypocrisy innate to anti-Americanism: we may disagree with the measures taken for continental security, but we certainly don’t object to America’s role in its attainment.

The BMD is a perfect example of such a disagreement, especially for the contradiction between political rhetoric and governmental action. Not only are we de facto implicated in a program to which we ostensibly issued a “firm no”, but the reasoning behind our criticism of BMD emphasizes ideology over informed decision-making. There have been convincing arguments forwarded from both Canadian and American sources that criticize the missile defense program on tactical and military terms: it is expensive, ineffective, and irrelevant to the War on Terror. Yet these arguments are often cited as secondary to the detriment such a program would have to our own self-conception. In other words, the inefficiency of such a

program is not as important as the idealistic concern of what our endorsement would *mean*. The very act of rejecting this initiative becomes significant in itself: it is a futile and toothless attempt at building a national mythology that differentiates us from the United States. In this regard, our attempt to build a foreign policy based on “independence” comes across a lot like political petulance.

So where does this preoccupation with identity leave us in terms of effective foreign policy? To this question we must ask if, how, and whether we can really influence American foreign policy. If the U.S. is the undisputed military hegemon, how can the actions of a nation like Canada affect the international security paradigm? Our ambivalent actions regarding BMD seem to point to the obvious: in most ways that count, we really can't. The American agenda will go ahead as planned whether or not Martin uses defense strategy as an opportunity to prime a nationalist campaign. What's more, the anti-Americanism evident in such instances of “sovereignty-assertion” make it that much easier for the United States security apparatus to ignore the more relevant concerns of effectiveness and feasibility, issues that we as a smaller power are obliged to bring to the table. When our academic evaluations understate these issues, what incentive is there to pay attention to Canada's evaluation of foreign policy?

This preoccupation with national identity leads to redundancy in the construction of foreign policy. Our position on major international concerns becomes circular, directed by and to ourselves. By making nation-building a top priority in foreign policy, we subsume the international to the domestic in the pursuit of a shamelessly political agenda. While national solidarity is a concern for any modern state, it should never set the terms of a debate about the security of our homeland. Furthermore, blatant anti-Americanism limits our ability to contribute to the international security debate. The declaration that we will not “pander” to the U.S. does not in itself constitute a policy alternative, nor will it cause the U.S. to re-evaluate its own position. Politicians and academics jockey for a “seat at the table”, but we sacrifice our most valuable tool of influence (criticism and evaluation) to an ideological domestic concern. And then we complain that Canadian voices go unheard.

Not only is this counter-productive, it belies a good deal of hypocrisy. We freely criticize American defense strategy, but we support the fundamentals of American security because it entails the protection of Canada. The same breath we use to castigate the War in Iraq is exhaled in a sigh of relief that at least someone is doing something, and not at the expense of our budget or global reputation. The dark side to this identity preoccupation, then, is a free-rider complex that contradicts our moral superiority. This all points to the same consideration, something that should be on the forefront of our concern with foreign affairs: When did identity become more important than security in foreign policy deliberations? How did the ideological take precedent over the material? And most importantly, how did we allow a mythologized self-construction to become our fundamental national goal? This is not to say that we should mindlessly support American incentive on military matters. Rather it is to say that the deliberation over whether such proposals are viable should focus on whether they are effective in achieving international stability, not whether they stabilize an imagined self-conception.

[1] Chossudovsky, Michel. "Canada and America: Missile Defense and the Vows of Military Integration" GlobalResearch.ca, February 23, 2005. <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=442> > accessed 19 October 2010.

[2] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "New Strategic Concept, missile defence and reform on NATO ministerials' agenda" 11 Septemeber 2010, <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-42C5A727-4669C5A3/natolive/news\\_66768.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-42C5A727-4669C5A3/natolive/news_66768.htm?selectedLocale=en)>