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The future of foreign policy

Senators offer useful guidance for a post-Chrétien world

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A country's foreign policy is mostly a matter of promoting national interests in the international arena. However, it can also foster national identity at home. How we act in the world reflects what we want to be as a nation.

If so, then a recent parliamentary committee report on Canada's relations with the United States and Mexico offers useful thoughts on how Canada should be handling its most important international relationship without sacrificing too much of its sovereignty. "Canada is a North American nation," the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade concludes in its 340-page report released this month. "Getting North American relations right is therefore a key policy imperative for Canada ..."

We could not agree more. "Living with Uncle Sam," as Canadian diplomat John Holmes once characterized Canada-U.S. relations, is the constant reference point of Canadian foreign policy. To get this relationship "right" must be the top item on the federal government's foreign-policy agenda. Unfortunately, this has not always been acknowledged by the Chrétien administration.

In this light, the committee's report, *Partners in North America: Advancing Canada's Relations with the United States and Mexico*, is a welcome corrective and could serve as a blueprint for a post-Chrétien foreign policy.

The report addresses everything from a "NAFTA-plus agenda" to fix trade irritants and improve ties with Mexico, to the idea of a North American "community" along the lines of the European Union. (The committee says, however, that such an idea is neither politically nor economically feasible "in the foreseeable future.") But the most salutary aspect of the report is its recognition that if the federal government hopes to protect the Canadian economy, it has to convince the Bush administration that Canada is not a weak link in the war on terrorism.

Accordingly, many of the report's 39 recommendations address security. For example, the committee recommends the government "commit itself to substantially increased and stable multi-year funding for the Department of National Defence." The idea of a special cabinet committee on North American relations, and a permanent cabinet committee on national security, are also worthy. So, too, is the recommendation that the government produce an annual report to Parliament on the status of the "smart borders" process. Finally, the committee urges the formalization of annual summits between the heads of governments of Canada, Mexico and the U.S. All these measures would go a long way in demonstrating that Canada shares American security concerns.

The report is not without flaws. For example, the committee was short-sighted in saying that Canada should effectively ignore the U.S. plans for a missile defence system until it is workable. The committee was also naive in thinking "bilateral security co-operation" between Canada and Mexico is feasible. For reasons of history, culture and geography, Canada will never have the same close defence relationship with Mexico that it has with the U.S. And, finally, while the committee talks of "promoting Canadian foreign policy objectives in North America," it strangely offers no specific suggestions on how to get members of the U.S. Congress to keep Canadian interests in mind.

Nevertheless, the committee offers a sensible, forward-looking consideration of where Canada should go in

its North American relationships. Consequently, it offers us a better sense of ourselves at home, too.

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