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STEPHEN HARPER

A Resolute Ally in the War on Terror

Canadians are with us in Afghanistan. We should be with them on free trade.

By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY

"If we as the major countries of this hemisphere cut an ally off at the knees we will pay a tremendous price for it."

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been fielding questions for more than 30 minutes in a meeting with the editorial board at The Wall Street Journal's New York office. Up to now his answers, on everything from war to how to confront an economic tsunami, have been delivered in the low-key monotone of a plainspoken Western Canadian conservative.

But the mention of Canadian and American political opposition to free-trade agreements with Colombia has sparked a change in the PM's unflappable manner. For a fleeting moment, what sounds a lot like frustration emerges. "I'm not going to say it's a perfect government, but we have a government in Colombia that is democratically elected, that has increased democratic norms, that has taken on the insurgency, that is moving that country forward economically and politically. And it is in a hemisphere where we have an increasing number of real serious enemies and opponents."

Then he adds what is the cornerstone of Harper foreign policy: "If you don't support your friends," he says, looking around the room and turning up the volume every so slightly, "you . . . are . . . not . . . going to have many friends."

Mr. Harper says he has come to New York because the visit to Ottawa by President Barack Obama last week, his first outside the U.S., drew rare media interest to the North. "We thought we would follow up by trying to cash in on the opportunity," the prime minister dryly jokes, as Canadians often do, about how their country gets ignored by Americans. But not long into our meeting, I begin to get the feeling that the Canadian prime minister may have another reason for his road trip.

Since establishing a minority government in January 2006, this prime minister and his Conservative Party have restored Canada's international prestige by increasing military funding and tenaciously supporting Canada's dangerous NATO mission in the Afghan province of Kandahar. No NATO ally has put more on the line against the Taliban, and Mr. Harper seems to sense not just the opportunity but the need for Canada to capitalize on it. There is a vacuum in conservative leadership in North America and on the world stage, and Mr. Harper is stepping into it. His objective would appear to be the restoration of liberal-democratic resolve against tyranny.

Afghanistan is on the PM's mind. Even the most patient electorate tends to wear down through long wars, and Canadian troops have been slugging it out in this one since 2002. "When we went into Kandahar province in late 2005, before I took office, I think very few Canadians were aware of the implications that would have on our level of involvement. Since that time we have tripled our troop commitment. I don't even want to calculate how many times

our budget has increased as a consequence."

Mr. Harper secured a parliamentary resolution last year that commits the Canadian military to the Afghan effort through 2011, and he maintains that "for the most part Canadians remain supportive of the mission, that we went in there for the right reason and that we are trying to do a good thing." But he warns that "we have become increasingly aware of the cost of it and of the difficulty of long-run success in a country like Afghanistan. What Canadians are looking for is some sense that we will be successful and that we will pass off responsibility at some point."

After all, he says, it is a country that has been "in some state of war or insurrection for a large part of its existence." And the opium trade doesn't help. "I thought from my first visit to Afghanistan that the dependence of the economy on drugs was probably a far greater complicating factor for security in the long term than even the insurgency, and I think we've seen growing evidence that the two are increasingly linked."

What would seem to set Mr. Harper apart from numerous other NATO leaders is that he cares deeply about achieving results. But he is no Pollyanna. "We are not going to 'defeat' the insurgency. The best we can do is train the Afghans so that they are able to manage the insurgency themselves and create, not a Western liberal democracy, because Afghanistan is not going to look like that any time soon, but at least a government that has some democratic and rule-of-law norms that is moving in a positive direction."

What will it take? For starters, he says it needs a return of U.S. focus which has been lost because of Iraq. He is encouraged by President Obama's decision to increase troop numbers in Kandahar. But he also believes the U.S. strategy needs rethinking. "I would encourage the [Obama] administration to really assess what its objectives are and to make sure they are realistic and achievable."

The implications of failure there would be large. "Afghanistan is a serious test for NATO," he warns. "NATO has taken on a United Nations mission and NATO must succeed or I do think the future of NATO as we've known it is in considerable doubt."

The disjointed effort in Afghanistan has exposed cracks in NATO. He praises allies who have delivered more than their fair share, "the East European countries, the Danes, Australia -- not even a NATO member." France has also "stepped up its contribution" since Nicolas Sarkozy became president. He skillfully sidesteps a question about Germany. But there is no equivocating on the risk of failure. "We have to get our act together . . . or NATO will not be able to undertake these kinds of missions in the future. There may be some around the NATO table who don't think it should. But if that's their position, that's not what they are saying."

An unreliable NATO has implications for Canada not least because Russia is once again becoming a menace. The Kremlin's claim to the Arctic seabed can be discounted, he argues, because it is being pursued through the United Nations Law of the Sea Treaty. But other provocations are worrisome. "They are testing our airspace more frequently than they have been doing in a long, long time," he says. "It's the aggression in the Arctic, aggression more generally, an aggression that is increasingly troublesome just to be troublesome."

You're not supposed to say such things in public these days, even when they are known to be true, which is one reason why hearing Mr. Harper say them is so refreshing. His assessment of the Iranian government borders on the Reaganesque. "It concerns me that we have a regime with both an ideology that is obviously evil, combined with a desire to procure technology to act on that ideology. . . . My government is a very strong supporter of the state of Israel and considers the Iranian threats to be absolutely unacceptable and beyond the pale."

The global economy is also a hot topic for Mr. Harper. Canada is connected at the hip to the world's largest market, and collateral damage coming from the housing and financial meltdown in the U.S. can't be ducked. Tax cuts in 2007 softened the blow and kept Canada out of recession. "We had net job creation until November [2008]," Mr. Harper says. And the tax cutting is continuing. "We are moving our national corporate tax rate to be the lowest in the G-7 [15%] and we will achieve that by 2012." If the provinces cooperate, he says, the total corporate rate will get down to 25% -- a full 10 percentage points below the U.S. rate. Did I mention that the prime minister seems fiercely competitive?

Mr. Harper was once viewed as a messianic small-government reformer sent to slay monster Ottawa. That was before

his minority government late last year faced the threat of an overthrow, and the economy began to take on water. Now Canadians are getting ready to eat a rather large stimulus bill -- and conservatives there are sore. He won't tell us how much of an economic jolt he expects the bill to deliver. But he does admit that the bailout of the auto sector is a "second best" option and only came about when the U.S. decided to intervene in Detroit. We concluded, he says, that if "we did not put our 20% skin in the game, we would end up with an industry that didn't exist in Canada. It would simply be restructured to the United States." Some analysts think that is going to happen anyway.

What is really worth worrying about, in the PM's view, is a return to global protectionism. Though the G-20 in November produced ample rhetoric against it, he predicts that "there will be substantial political pressure, especially as the recession continues in all major countries, whether developing or developed, to widen protectionism as a way of responding. It's an enormous risk," he cautions, and if it happens it "will without a doubt make this recession far deeper and far longer than it would be otherwise."

The U.S. is not the only danger zone, but it's the one Canada has to worry about the most. "We are your biggest trading partner by far and biggest supplier of energy products, which are pretty critical." (Canada is the U.S.'s largest supplier of crude oil and natural gas.) Despite that, he says, the North has experienced a "thickening of the border" since Sept. 11, 2001. The American pretext is "security." Canada doesn't buy this explanation. Its incentives to keep out the bad guys are as big as they are for the U.S. and "enormous investments" have been made to deal with the problem. Regrettably, the Canadian effort has not prevented the U.S. from adopting "purely protectionist measures" in the name of security. One example: "Additional inspection fees on agricultural products. That's just not a security measure," Mr. Harper says flatly.

Does the PM think Mr. Obama will become part of the problem? His conversations with the president, Mr. Harper says, have "convinced me that he and his administration get how dangerous protectionism truly is."

But then there is Mr. Obama's opposition to the Colombia free-trade deal. Has Mr. Harper spoken to the president about that matter? Yes. "I'm not going to tell you that the president said anything different than what he said publicly," says Mr. Harper, smiling. We'll take that as a sign of hope.

Ms. O'Grady writes the Americas column for The Wall Street Journal.

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