

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada and an Exchange With Reporters

September 16, 2009

President Obama. Hello, everybody. Prime Minister Harper and I have just had an excellent conversation, reiterating the extraordinary friendship and bond between the American and the Canadian people. We discussed both our bilateral relationship on issues of energy, our borders, issues of trade, and how we can continue to strengthen the already excellent relations that we have.

We also have discussed a range of international issues. Obviously, we've been partnering with Canada on improving the global economy. We both agree that although we are not out of the woods yet, that we have seen signs of stability and that both Canada and the United States are on the path to positive economic growth. We both agree that coordination still needs to continue at the international level and are looking forward to the G-20, where we can both discuss how to sustain efforts to kick-start the economy, but also make sure that we're starting to look at exit strategies and what a sustainable growth model would be long term.

We had discussions about some of the international threats that continue to exist out there. We discussed climate change and preparations for the Copenhagen conference, Afghanistan and the need for us to move forward in a clear direction over the next several years, and the situation with Iran and the potential development of weapons and how we respond to the potential development of nuclear weapons in Iran.

So overall, I just want to again publicly thank Prime Minister Harper for being an outstanding partner to the United States. We appreciate his excellent work. We very much appreciate the Canadian people. And we are looking forward to seeing them next week in both the United Nations context and the G-20.

Prime Minister Harper. Well, thank you very much, Mr. President. First of all, Barack, let me just say I really appreciate—this is our seventh time, I think, in some form or another we've had a chance to discuss some of these issues, and we appreciate your time and, of course, both your and your country's alliance, neighborliness, and friendship. It's our most important relationship in the world. We're always delighted to sit down and talk.

[At this point, Prime Minister Harper spoke in French, and no translation was provided.]

Once again, we discussed three major subjects, as I indicated we would yesterday. First of all, the economy, the recovery is happening, but it is fragile, and we really must redouble our efforts to apply stimulus measures, get those out the door, as we're doing in Canada, to make sure we continue to fix internationally the problems of financial institutions. And I noted the President's speech this week in Wall Street in this regard, which I think was an important message for everyone.

We're planning for the G-20; we're looking forward to that. I think that's well in hand. I think we're going to have very useful and productive meetings there. And we discussed some of these irritants that arise in our trade relationship. Particularly, I do want to mention this question of the charter flights, the NHL charter flights, which has been a difficulty in recent months. We think we're very close to resolving that in the next very little while. I think we have

some kind of a tentative agreement in principle, and we're working to finalize that in the next few days.

We discussed energy security and climate change. I remind all our American friends that Canada is by far the largest supplier of energy to the United States. And we are determined to be a continental partner in dealing with the joint—with the very linked problems of climate change and energy security. Our two Ministers, our respective Ministers have provided us with a report on the clean energy dialog, which I think shows some great progress in identifying areas of joint action. I think the next step will be some specific projects that we can pursue.

Today Canada is announcing a major hydroelectric project, a big transmission line in northwestern British Columbia, which has the capacity down the road to be part of a more integrated North American hydroelectric system that will be, obviously, part of dealing with both these problems of energy security and climate change.

And finally, as I said, we would discuss international peace and security. And as the President mentioned, we discussed the great challenge the world has in Iran. But we also did discuss, of course, Afghanistan. We have a joint mission there, and we certainly have very much welcomed the renewed engagement of the United States in that country and always, particularly in our sector of the country. And of course, we always value joint cooperation with the United States on defense and security matters. And our two militaries and our civilian people are working tremendously in southern Afghanistan, and we look forward to some of that work continuing.

President Obama. Good. All right, Ben Feller [Associated Press].

Military Operations in Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask both of you: At this point, are U.S. and NATO forces winning the war in Afghanistan?

President Obama. You know, I think that what is clear is that we have lacked as clear of a strategy and a mission as is necessary in order to meet our overriding objective, which is to dismantle and disrupt and destroy Al Qaida and prevent it from being able to project violence against the United States, allies like Canada, our bases and operations around the world. So that has not yet occurred.

When I came in, I had to make a series of immediate decisions about sending additional troops to ensure that the election could take place during the fighting season. But I was crystal clear at the time that postelection, we were going to need to do an additional assessment. General McChrystal has carried out his own assessment on the military strategy, but it's important that we also do an assessment on the civilian side, the diplomatic side, the development side, that we analyze the results of the election and then make further decisions moving forward.

My determination is to get this right, and that means broad consultation not only inside the U.S. Government but also with our ISAF partners and our NATO allies. And I'm going to take a very deliberate process in making those decisions. And so I just want to be absolutely clear, because there's a lot—been a lot of discussion in the press about this, that there is no immediate decision pending on resources, because one of the things that I'm absolutely clear about is you have to get the strategy right and then make determinations about resources. You don't make determinations about resources, and certainly, you don't make determinations about sending young men and women into battle, without having absolute clarity about what

the strategy is going to be. And so we are going to proceed and make sure that we don't put the cart before the horse.

Prime Minister Harper. Just very quickly, I—to try and answer that question directly, I certainly don't think, notwithstanding the continued problems and the—in many parts of the country, the fierce efforts of the insurgency, I don't think the Taliban in any way constitutes an alternative government or any immediate threat to replacing the Government of Afghanistan. So I think in that sense, you know, we can see the progress that's been made. Obviously, though, we are concerned about the strength of the insurgency. We, as I say, welcome the renewed American effort and effort of some NATO countries.

Our emphasis in Canada for some time now, particularly since we extended our mission, has been really the necessity of seeing the Afghan Government accept and be able to handle greater responsibility for the day-to-day security of that country as we move forward.

Afghanistan is a very difficult country, I think. All of our militaries—Canadian, American, British, those who have been highly engaged—I think have done a tremendous job moving the ball forward. But in the end, we have to be clear that the security and sovereignty of Afghanistan can in the long term only be done by Afghans themselves. So I think whatever we do on both sides of the border and with our NATO partners has to have that as its long-term objective.

President Obama. Your—

Prime Minister Harper. Oh, I had. Was it—Eric. Yes.

Military Operations in Afghanistan/Trade

Q. Mr. President, Prime Minister, in contrast to that smart, brief question, I have a double-barreled question under the umbrella of security.

Canada and other NATO allies have set deadlines to leave Afghanistan. Mr. President, are you worried that the U.S. will be left to carry the burden in Afghanistan? What role would you like to see for Canada beyond 2011? Prime Minister, do you have any advice for the President, exit strategy or otherwise?

And then on economic security, Mr. President, despite assurances not to worry, U.S. protectionism is hurting Canadian businesses, according to Canadian businesses. And I just—we wonder if there is anything more you feel you can or that you should do about that.

And, Mr. Prime Minister, your views at this stage now that we've seen "Buy American" play itself out?

President Obama. Well, let me start with Afghanistan, and I'll just reiterate what I said earlier. We are in the process of making a strategy—a series of strategic decisions that will be sustainable, and we'll be doing so in close consultation with our allies and our partners.

We are tremendously grateful for the extraordinary sacrifices of the Canadian military. They have fought. They have had staying power. They have absorbed losses that we all grieve for.

And so I'm not worried about what will happen post-2011. I want to make sure that given the commitments that have already been made and that are continuing, that we make sure that the Canadian presence there fits into a coherent whole and that it's accomplishing our goals. And our goals are to eliminate Al Qaida as a threat, and, as Prime Minister Harper mentioned,

I think it is important to recognize that ultimately Afghan security has to transition onto the shoulders of Afghan—the Afghan Government and Afghan security forces. And so the degree to which we are training them and building capacity, that's something that I'm certain will be part of any broad, long-term strategy, sustainable strategy.

On the economic front, the issue of "Buy American" in the stimulus package, I'm glad to hear that Canadians see this as—that the recovery package as being so significant. I've been trying to persuade the American public of precisely that fact, that we're actually creating jobs and putting people back to work.

The "Buy American" provisions that were there, as I noted at the time, we made sure that they were WTO compliant. That doesn't mean that they're not a source of irritation between the United States and Canada. Prime Minister Harper, I want to emphasize, has brought this up with me every single time we've met, so he's been on the job on this issue. And our teams have been working together. It appears that there may be ways to deal with this bilaterally, but also potentially multilaterally.

The Provincial governments in Canada, my understanding is, are not signatories to the WTO government procurement agreements that would have preempted any of these "Buy America" agreements. That might be one solution. But in addition, we're pursuing, on a bilateral track, efforts to make sure that these sources of tension diminish.

But I do want to keep things in perspective. U.S.-Canadian trade continues to be robust. Canada continues to be a huge trading partner to the United States. Businesses in the United States and Canada both benefit from that trade, as do consumers. There is no prospect of any budding trade wars between our two countries. These are legitimate issues that have to be concerned—have to be raised, but I think it's important to understand that on the scale of our overall trading relationship, these aren't the—these shouldn't be considered the dominant element of our economic relationship.

Prime Minister Harper. Eric, first of all, on Afghanistan, I think it's important to rephrase your question, which is, Canada is not leaving Afghanistan; Canada will be transitioning from a predominantly military mission to a mission that will be a civilian humanitarian development mission after 2011. That transition is already in place.

As you know, Canada has had a very robust engagement for some time. We've actually, over the course of the last 3 or 4 years, as a consequence of that, increased our troop levels. I think you said—you heard what I said earlier, that what's essential is that whatever we in NATO and our U.N. allies are doing, that we make sure that eventually this country can stand on its own two feet, particularly on the security side, where they have their primary responsibility, so we can help more and more on the development and humanitarian side.

On "Buy America," we, obviously, had the discussions the President indicated. We have negotiators who are looking at a range of options. We talked about some of those today, and we'll be giving more detailed direction to them in terms of the kinds of options they should look at.

As you know, I agree with the President's assessment. We shouldn't lose the forest for the trees. These are important irritants; they are having some real impacts. But they are relatively small compared to the overall scale of Canadian-American trade. But I would emphasize that it is critical at a time where we're trying to see a recovery in the global economy, where forces of protectionism are a very significant threat, that we continue to demonstrate to the world that

Canada and the United States can manage trade relations in a way that's extremely positive and a model for other countries.

[Prime Minister Harper spoke in French, and no translation was provided.]

President Obama. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:49 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, USA, commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan. Prime Minister Harper referred to Minister of Natural Resources Lisa Raitt of Canada; and U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu.

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