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## Canada could use China to get the U.S. to listen

It's encouraging that Prime Minister Stephen Harper is spreading Canadian resistance to U.S. trade protectionism beyond President Barack Obama to congressional, state and business leaders. It's discouraging that the strategy didn't include a Toronto stop en route to Washington.

Even a cameo appearance at this week's Canada China Business Council forum would have added a hint of threat to the message the prime minister wants Americans to hear. Just a nod in the Dragon's direction by Harper or one of his senior ministers would serve the useful purpose of reminding the U.S. that Canada has attractive trade options, that Ottawa grasps China's importance as a diplomatic lever as well as a beckoning market.

Canada's problem is that it's a perpetual Washington wallflower. It can't get Uncle Sam's attention by vamping its charms as America's largest trading partner and energy pump. Heck, the Yanks hardly notice this country's blood and money Afghanistan sacrifice or the federal government's roughshod ride over human rights to prove security is a shared priority.

There's nothing easy about attracting the attention of a neighbour buckling under recession or of a president watching health care reform drain his political capital. It demands a determined and extended Canadian effort to demonstrate to Americans the current importance and future potential of the North-South relationship not to Canada but to America. It puts relentless pressure on the prime minister, premiers and chief executives to explain the benefits of capillary cross border connections to their U.S. counterparts.

Strengthening that relationship, keeping those capillaries open, is now and will be for the foreseeable future Canada's guiding objective. New trade alliances with Europe, the Americas or even Asia are no substitute for privileged access to the U.S.

But it's now self-evident that access is vulnerable to the vagaries of narrow U.S. economic and political interests. Instead, using hard times as the catalyst to take NAFTA to the next level, to create a more globally competitive trade bloc, the Obama administration is using exaggerated security fears to justify thickening the border to commerce while states and cities raise blatantly protectionist Buy American barriers.

Harper is right to forcefully confront those challenges in the U.S. just as his government is wisely, if belatedly, broadening its trade options by pursuing new pacts in Latin America and with the European Union. But there's a missing link in that strategy and it is China.

As is often the case with Conservative foreign policy, Canada's relations with China are being twisted out of shape by partisan political considerations. Harper, after sorely testing party patience with ideological reversals, isn't keen to be seen backing away from his commitment not to barter Canadian values for the almighty Yen.

Whatever the merit of the prime minister's position, the result is Canada's relegation to China's margins. Along with failing to take full advantage of a resource-appetite growing as fast as China's economy and world influence, that denies Ottawa an effective way of reminding Washington that there is another potential dance partner waiting to sweep this wallflower off its feet.

Waltzing with the U.S is still Canada's first choice. But China is too hungry a trader and too useful a lever not to be used by Canada to shift the U.S. focus from protecting itself to maximizing North America's international competitiveness.

James Travers covers national affairs.

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