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Mar. 28, 2005. 07:31 AM

Canadians divided on defence ties

Even support for getting closer, pulling away and status quo
Poll numbers in Quebec, B.C. seen as good news for Liberals

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA - Canadians are split three ways on support for closer ties with the United States on defence issues, says a new poll conducted for the *Toronto Star*.

But the Martin government's decision to stay out of the U.S. missile-defence scheme plays to public opinion in the key political battlegrounds of Quebec and British Columbia, according to the poll, carried out by SES Research for the *Star* earlier this month.

The poll, conducted about three weeks after Prime Minister Paul Martin announced Canada would opt out of missile defence, shows a nation almost evenly divided among those who favour closer defence ties with the Americans, those who want to move farther away and those who are fine with things the way they are.

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Overall, about 31.6 per cent of Canadians would like to see more distance between American and Canadian defence policies, while about 30 per cent would like to get closer to the U.S., according to the poll.

Another 34.2 per cent of Canadians would like to see this country's ties with U.S. defence policies stay the same.

Outside Quebec and B.C., however, public opinion tips in favour of closer military co-operation, the poll's regional numbers show. In Ontario, 35.3 per cent of those polled said they'd like to see Canada and the U.S. working more closely on defence, while only 25.7 per cent said they wanted to see more distance.

Roughly the same ratio is seen in Alberta, the Atlantic provinces and the Prairies, where the proportion of pro-U.S. respondents outweighed those holding anti-U.S. sentiments by 6 to 10 percentage points.

The results may explain why Martin has failed to see any great outpouring of public praise across Canada for his government's decision, announced last month, to stay out of U.S. President George W. Bush's missile-defence plan.

Still, SES president Nik Nanos says that Martin may yet see some strategic political wins when the Liberal stand on missile defence is put against that of the Conservatives in Quebec and New Democrats in B.C. — key provinces where Liberals need to build their support.

"From a tactical perspective, the Liberal position plays well against the opposition parties," says Nanos.

Over the long term, the pollster says, Martin's position blunts any bid by the Conservatives to build on sponsorship-scandal anger in Quebec or attempts by the New Democrats, who oppose the U.S. missile-defence plan, to make gains in B.C.

In Quebec, 44.2 per cent of those surveyed want Canada to move further away from the U.S. on defence issues, while just 19.4 per cent want to get closer. In B.C., 33.7 per cent want more distance while 26.7 per cent back closer military ties.

"Conceding the pro-American position to the (Stephen) Harper-led Conservatives places a clear obstacle to Conservative growth in Quebec and crowds the ballot question. ... Further, in seat-rich British Columbia, the Liberal position inoculates the Liberals from an NDP pickup," Nanos says.

Just last week, Martin and Bush held their first face-to-face meeting since Canada made its missile decision and both leaders said they were intent on moving past that particular disagreement.

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"Look, we've got differences. I don't know if you'd categorize them as differences that would then prevent us from finding common ground," Bush said when asked how he was reacting to Canada's non-participation in the scheme.

Outside Quebec, most media commentary has been negative in the wake of Martin's missile-defence rebuff and people in the Prime Minister's inner circle are said to be baffled about why he didn't enjoy the same surge of support for this refusal that his predecessor, Jean Chrétien, enjoyed when he kept Canada out of the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

SES polled 2,000 Canadians from March 17 to 22, asking the question: "As you know, Canada is not participating in the U.S. missile-defence plan. Would you prefer to see Canada's relationship with the U.S. on defence issues get closer, stay the same or be further away?"

The results are deemed accurate within 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error is higher for regional numbers.

What the figures could also show is that Martin was faced with an electorate outside Quebec and B.C. that was open to a positive decision on missile defence, especially if it had been portrayed as business as usual with the Americans.

Martin, however, is in a minority government, his Liberals widely unpopular in Quebec in the face of the ongoing sponsorship scandal and trailing badly behind the Bloc Québécois, which is adamantly opposed to missile defence.

PMO insiders have said it wasn't the Bloc, however, that tipped Martin's position on missile defence, but rather his uncertainty that the Conservatives would support him. The SES poll shows, though, that Harper almost certainly would have leaned to supporting missile defence to play to his Western core of support.

In Alberta, a full 36.5 per cent want Canada to forge closer defence ties with the Americans, the poll shows, while 26.5 per cent want to move farther away. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, 34 per cent want closer defence relations, while 27.5 per cent favour more distance.

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