

Summary of the eDiscussion Policy Position Papers on Demographics and Geopolitics

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From January 24 to March 31, 2006, college and university students were invited to submit policy position papers to Foreign Affairs Canada on the issue of global demographics and geopolitics. Webcast interviews with various experts on the topic were hosted on the site to stimulate and inform debate. Overall, three policy papers were received from three political science classes at Lakehead University, Simon Fraser University (SFU) and Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).

Below is a summary of some of the major questions, disagreements and recommendations that emerged in the policy position papers:

Shift in balance of power

The papers highlighted the rising geopolitical and economic status of countries in the Asia-Pacific region and emphasized the importance of strengthening Canada-Asia economic ties. As with the eDiscussion, the policy position papers predicted that burgeoning Asian populations would prompt an increase in immigration flows from Asia to Canada. In light of this, one paper suggested that Canada will have to recognize the educational qualifications of new immigrants in order to ensure immigration is able to address emerging gaps in the Canadian labour force. The papers also underlined the need for adequate security measures to screen candidates upon entry.

The contribution from Lakehead University explained that Canadian expertise in First Nations and Inuit issues could prove valuable for countries such as China. Sharing this expertise constitutes a potential avenue for reinforcing China-Canada relations.

Finally, UQAM's paper noted that Canada would face challenges in promoting values such as individual rights and sustainable development in India, where civic values and the conception of the individual are different.

Resource shortages

Significant attention was paid to the challenge of resource depletion, as papers discussed how increasing population growth and changing demographics would strain resource supplies (especially water and energy).

It was suggested that rising resource competition would fuel inter-state conflict. The paper from UQAM argued that violent conflict resulting from resource scarcity would arise in developing countries, which, lacking the money and political clout of their western counterparts, would be unable to forge viable systems of resource management cooperation. UQAM students also warned that privatizing resource extraction and management could further marginalize the poor by raising the costs of the basic survival resources. SFU's paper noted that the global distribution of resources (water, in

particular) is uneven in relation to economic activity and population concentrations. This disparity will grow as consumption in Asia rises and will increase the potential for resource-based inter-state conflict.

Papers also expressed concerns about the environmental impact of this rising competition. UQAM students explained that it would be difficult for countries such as Canada to convince India and China to adopt sustainable resource consumption strategies, given that western countries themselves have not done this. However, SFU students were confident the international system would be able to address these challenges. They suggested that treaties and international law could help to mitigate and even prevent violent conflict over scarce resources. Canada could play a leadership role in this regard, by promoting and enforcing the efficient use of resources. According to SFU's paper, this agenda should be pursued through binding international arbitration procedures managed by the United Nations, existing institutional mechanisms for resource management and, where necessary, the creation of new multi-lateral institutions. In addition, they suggested that Canada could support research on ways to curb the global consumption of water and oil as demand from increasing populations in Asia rises.

Canada-US relations

Participants at Lakehead University noted that the demographic weight of visible minorities in the US is set to grow tremendously in the coming decades. Their paper predicted that a growing Hispanic population in the United States would create greater impetus for English-Spanish bilingualism in both the private and public spheres. As this occurs, the US could use Canadian language policy as a model to manage and institutionalize this linguistic duality. However, Lakehead's paper predicted that the predominant demographic profile (white, male, middle-aged) of the political decision-makers in the US would remain the same despite these changes. They surmised that this would support continuity in the US-Canada relationship, and hence that demographic changes over the next few decades would not significantly alter relations between the two countries. Similarly, UQAM's contribution did not foresee major changes in the Canada-US relationship as a result of demographic change. This contrasted starkly with corresponding statements made in the eDiscussion, which saw potential for demographics to have a dramatic influence on future relations between Canada and the US.

Students at Simon Fraser University called for all three NAFTA signatories to strengthen the Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC) for water management by associating it with binding powers, consistent with other enforceable NAFTA mechanisms. They also pointed to the Canada-US Joint Water Commission as a model institutional arrangement for ensuring responsible cooperative resource management.

New face of Canadian foreign policy

Discussion here focused on the impact Asia's demographic profile will have on Canadian foreign policy. Participants at UQAM stated that growing Diaspora communities from countries such as China would facilitate stronger bilateral economic and diplomatic relationships with the home countries of large Canadian Diaspora communities. Lakehead's paper recommended increasing the intake of Asian immigrants to support

stronger ties with China and India and advocated further opening Canadian markets to investors from this part of the world. Students from UQAM also supported a proactive foreign policy regarding China and India. In their view, Canada should encourage the participation of these countries in multilateral dialogue, strengthen economic ties with the Asia-Pacific region and emphasize the importance of environmental cooperation and individual rights in their dealings with these countries.

Official response by Foreign Affairs Canada

This summary of the policy position papers received during the eDiscussion on demographics and geopolitics is currently being reviewed by policy planners within Foreign Affairs Canada. Their response will be posted on the Canadian International Policy site in August 2006.