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Foreign policy based on U.S.

Full-blown review not needed, Graham contends

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Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham says Canada does not need a white paper on foreign policy to establish the primacy of the relationship with the United States in virtually all decisions made by Canada.

Saying the foreign policy review promised in September's throne speech will, in fact, be a "dialogue process with Canadians" that will get started next month, he notes that some things are obvious when plotting Canadian policy.

"I've always said that the United States is our primary foreign policy focus," said the former university professor who took over the foreign affairs post in January after chairing the Commons foreign affairs committee for six years.

He says the rise of the U.S. as the pre-eminent global power, the growing terrorist threat and the changes in the Islamic world require a tweaking of Canadian policy, but insists the basic parameters are "pretty good" and, therefore, a full-blown policy review is not necessary.

He admits that his first year as minister has been a learning experience and has driven home just how important the United States is to Canada.

"Not even as chair of the committee was I aware of the incredible complexity of our relationship with the United States and how it has to be managed," he said in a year-end interview with the Citizen.

"Practically every single ministry in this town is directly engaged in matters in Washington ... The list just goes on and on.

"The role of foreign minister and foreign policy is so linked now to domestic policy in all these areas that one does not craft an independent foreign policy. You don't go out and say, 'This is what the foreign policy should be.'

"You have to take into account all these other considerations and the needs of all of these other departments and then ultimately the needs of provinces that have to deal with the states that are contiguous to them and then the municipalities that have to deal with municipalities."

He says the coming "dialogue" with Canadians will look at questions of deeper integration with the U.S., as advocated in a report sent to him earlier this month by his old committee, but says he remains open-minded.

"My experience tells me that if you're going to have in-depth economic integration, you have to have an institutional framework to manage that relationship, otherwise the most powerful partner calls the shots."

He says he supports, in theory, Mexico's desire to build on the North American Free Trade Agreement to create a more deeply integrated continental relationship, perhaps even a customs union, but is skeptical that the Americans will buy into the idea.

"I don't think we're going to persuade Congress to do that. In fact, we've never seen their willingness to give up even anti-dumping and countervailing duties. In fact, they've made them stronger lately ... so I think it would be a mistake for us to go into something with an assumption that they're going to make fundamental decisions which will constrain their ability to act.

"Recognizing that, we have to find other ways to go about negotiating with them," he said, pointing to the Smart Border agreement negotiated by Deputy Prime Minister John Manley and Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge as a model that might work better than the NAFTA approach favoured by the Mexicans.

Mr. Graham came into the job with a reputation as an idealist, more in the mould of left-leaning Lloyd Axworthy who served as foreign minister from 1996 to 2000 than the pro-American Mr. Manley, who was minister until earlier this year, but he has emerged as a staunch supporter of the U.S. in their war on terror and their hard line against Iraq. He backs away from suggestions he is a "pro-American" foreign minister, but says there are some basic, common-sense judgments that come with the job.

"I wouldn't like to say pro-U.S. particularly. I think it's a realistic appreciation for where we are and how we have to manage our affairs. To ignore the United States would be a fundamental error on behalf of a Canadian foreign minister. It wouldn't be in the interests of Canada or of Canadians so, of course, I'm focused on the U.S."

Given a choice, he says, he might have been inclined to pursue the "human security agenda" that was being pushed by Mr. Axworthy, but the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. changed foreign policy emphasis. "What has happened since Mr. Axworthy was foreign minister is that Sept. 11 happened and the fact of the matter is that there is a preoccupation for our security that is there and it is the role of the foreign minister to respond to that."

He says 70 per cent of the foreign ministers' meetings at the G8 summit and at least half of the time at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation conference and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations meetings were dedicated to security and counter-terror issues.

"Maybe this is not what I would have chosen to do when I became foreign minister, but you play the cards that get dealt out of the pack. You don't just make them up."

He says Canada will continue to work with "like-minded" nations on human security issues, saying that it remains a "highly legitimate" agenda despite the change of focus post-Sept. 11.

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