

## Canada still America's BFF despite rising isolationism

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WASHINGTON—Hard times have hardened attitudes in the United States, according to a trove of new research that suggests a record number of Americans see their country as a waning superpower that should mind its own business and let the world fend for itself.

Yet Canada remains overwhelmingly popular in the eyes of Americans, topping the list of all foreign countries with an 84 per cent favourability rating in the U.S.

Together with surprising new data that points to rising U.S. support for free trade even in a time of recession, analysts in Washington say Canadians should not be jarred by the developments: If Americans are in a mood to hibernate, they say, Canada has a special place in their den.

"Canada is the country Americans hold in the highest esteem. There is not any pent-up American animosity toward Canada," said James Lindsay, director of studies with the Council on Foreign Relations, which partnered with the Pew Research Center on the study titled, *America's Place In The World*.

The project, which surveyed 2,000 U.S. citizens on a broad range of global issues, amounts to a snapshot of the uncertainty and apprehension coursing through the country as acute joblessness takes hold.

Among the findings, a deepening pessimism on Afghanistan and a rising recognition of China's ascendance on the world stage. Today, 44 per cent of Americans regard China as the world's leading economic power, while just 27 per cent say the United States, a reversal of opinion from the beginning of last year.

But rising isolationism – 49 per cent of respondents said the U.S. should "mind its own business internationally" and let other countries get along on their own – was particularly striking.

The figures suggest Americans are undergoing the sharpest inward turn since Pew began asking the question in 1962. And they awaken memories of the 1930s, when press baron William Randolph Hearst lorded over an acute era of American isolationism that endured until the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sparked the U.S. entry into World War II.

"It is not surprising when you look at the number of American jobs lost, the still anemic retail sales figures and the state of the manufacturing base," said former Canadian diplomat Paul Frazer, now a Washington consultant specializing in Canada-U.S. relations.

"People are turning inward. But at the same time, Americans don't see Canada as part of that outward world. More and more, people in individual U.S. communities are taking on the notion of economic integration – they are seeing the direct linkages in the commercial relationship that flows both ways."

In the context of the furor over Buy American-style protectionism, the CFR-Pew survey results do not add up to a resounding endorsement of free trade, with just 44 per cent of U.S. respondents offering a positive view of the North American Free Trade Agreement. But even that number was a surprise to pollsters, in that it represents a jump from 33 per cent in 2008.

"It was one of the most amazing things" to see support for open trade rise during an era of economic crisis, Pew Research Center president Andrew Kohut told the *Star*. "While the American public is not head over heels in love with the idea of free trade, it is not nearly as dramatically bad as you might have thought. The idea that all business is good business has settled them down a bit, I think."

But NAFTA, said Lindsay of the CFR, remains a politically loaded acronym for many Americans, who see the term as "a proxy for vague, ill-defined unease" about job losses to Mexico. "When you talk to people on the street, you don't find people equating NAFTA with cars coming from Ontario across the bridge to Detroit," he said.