

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**President Obama's Visit to Canada**

Peter DeShazo and Jessica Horwitz

February 17, 2009

**Q1: What is the outlook for the Obama visit to Ottawa?**

**A1:** President Barack Obama will travel to Ottawa on February 19 for a one-day working visit. This will be the first foreign trip of his administration and underscores the key bilateral relationship between the United States and its northern neighbor. Canada is the largest U.S. trade partner by far, with a bilateral trade volume equivalent to more than \$1.6 billion per day in 2008 (the next largest trading partner is China at 1.1 billion), and supplies more oil and natural gas to the United States than any other country. After his arrival at the Ottawa airport, where he will be met by Governor General Michaëlle Jean, Obama will proceed to Parliament Hill to be greeted by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and members of the Canadian House of Commons and Senate. The two leaders will then sit down to a private meeting and working lunch, which will be followed by a joint press conference in the afternoon. Adhering to Canadian tradition, Obama will meet briefly at the airport with the leader of the official opposition, Liberal Party head Michael Ignatieff, before departing again for Washington. Canada has been a traditional first stop for U.S. presidents; three of the last four paid their first foreign visit north of the border.

**Q2: What issues are likely to be on the agenda?**

**A2:** The U.S. and Canadian economies are tightly interconnected, and as such, plans for dealing with the economic downturn will surely be at the top of the agenda for President Obama and Prime Minister Harper's closed-door meeting. Beyond that, subjects of conversation will be necessarily limited by time constraints and will likely focus on the top concerns of the bilateral energy relationship, climate change, and Afghanistan, where Canada is a key strategic ally. This could also be a good opportunity for the leaders to review key hemispheric issues, looking ahead to the Summit of the Americas meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in April.

**Q3: What results can be expected from the visit?**

**A3:** This will be the first face-to-face meeting between Prime Minister Harper and President Obama. It will be an opportunity for the two leaders to get acquainted and to begin a dialogue on issues of mutual importance, and for the leaders' staff to meet their respective counterparts. No "deliverables" should be expected from the meeting. The visit and press conference is an important opportunity for President Obama to speak directly to public opinion in Canada, where a recent Ipsos Reid poll has shown approval ratings of up to 86 percent for the new U.S. president. Despite this popularity, there have been lingering concerns in the country over the value that President Obama places on the U.S. relationship with Canada—his campaign statements about reopening the North American Free Trade Agreement and the more recent controversy over congressional "buy American" legislation are two particular sore spots. Though some critics have complained that the brief, six-hour visit with no public appearances could be considered a slight to Canada, others have emphasized that the fact the president wanted this to be a working meeting rather than a gala-filled state visit demonstrates a "get down to business" attitude and willingness to listen to and consult with his key allies.

*Peter DeShazo is director and Jessica Horwitz program coordinator of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

**Critical Questions** is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2009 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.