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### The Prime Minister's passion for the L20

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Last Saturday, despite a bad cold, Paul Martin spoke with conviction to a small gathering of foreign-policy experts from around the world about his dreams for the L20 club of leading nations.

The Prime Minister also recently submitted an article to Foreign Affairs magazine, making Canada's case for convening an annual meeting of heads of government from both the developed and developing world.

And although support for the new organization has been noticeably lacking from some world leaders, people in a position to know say that progress, though tentative, has been real. Optimists even hope for an inaugural L20 meeting as early as September. The unanswered question is whether President George W. Bush can be coaxed to attend, or whether the Americans will kill the idea in the cradle.

The geopolitical reasoning behind the L20 is essentially identical to that which created the European Union. In that case, the nations of Europe, having been ravaged by two world wars, chose to "smother Germany with love" by enmeshing it within a multilateral framework that would promote democracy and economic integration within that first, and worst, of rogue states.

Today, economic growth in China is accelerating beyond all expectations, with India and Brazil following close behind. The Group of 8 and the United Nations Security Council are inadequate forums for encompassing the rising superpowers of the Third World.

But if the major developing states were to join with the G8 in a global association, both developed and developing nations would have a stake in co-operating to solve global challenges. In particular, enveloping China within an L20 could help constrain an emerging global power whose current commitment to international stability, free trade and the rule of law is uncertain at best.

In his many travels, Mr. Martin has pitched the L20 concept to world leaders, with more success than has thus far been publicly acknowledged. Within the G8, Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Jacques Chirac are solidly onside. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has offered lukewarm support, while Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is sold but his bureaucracy is resisting. Germany and Italy have yet to be heard from.

As might be expected, China, India, Mexico and Brazil are strong supporters of the Canadian proposal, to the extent that Beijing might even act as co-host of the inaugural meeting with Canada.

And the Americans? "Show me" was the essence of Mr. Bush's response when Mr. Martin pitched the idea during the President's December visit. Hawks in his administration are suspicious of any new forum that, as they see it, would give smaller nations an opportunity to gang up on the Americans.

But Mr. Bush is promising a new era of co-operation with traditional allies. If the Canadians can come up with a topic for an inaugural meeting that engages all sides, and if everyone else agrees to attend, the Americans will be hard-pressed to stay away.

One idea being floated is a meeting to develop a global strategy on pandemic diseases, which affect both developed and developing nations. Better yet would be a gathering to discuss energy security, though opinions are sharply divided on that subject.

More than 100 heads of government are expected to attend meetings at the UN in September to discuss reforms to that moribund institution. If Mr. Martin can maintain the momentum, Canada (or Canada and China) could play host to the inaugural meeting of the L20 as part of that gathering.

There is still strong opposition, especially from conservative think-tanks and politicians in Washington. The L20's fate, like so much of Canada's foreign policy, remains uncertain. But on this file, at least, the Prime Minister appears to be both focused and determined. If he can pull off an L20 meeting in 2005, the Liberal government will have taken a major first step toward re-establishing Canada as an honest broker among nations, and a friend to the developing world.