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## Time to revitalize ties with Mexico

By Bill Graham

President Felipe Calderon's bilateral visit to Canada today, soon to be followed by his G20 attendance, provides a good opportunity to reflect on the nature of the Canada-Mexico relationship and consider how it may be improved.

Mexico's place in North America, supposedly anchored in the benefits that free markets and development would bring it through NAFTA, today is difficult to assess.

On the negative side, violence in the border states fed by drugs and American weapons, the chilling deaths of people massacred at innocent parties, the ineffectiveness of the judicial system, the death and intimidation of journalists, the problematic use of the army and even navy because of the unreliability of corrupt local police forces have led to speculation in both Ottawa and Washington that it is on the verge of becoming a narco-state.

And more recently, of course, the imposition of a visa requirement [<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2009/2009-07-13.asp>] on Mexicans visiting Canada, the result of an abuse of Canada's refugee system has - in spite of extraordinary efforts by the Canadian Embassy in Mexico - caused bitterness in Mexico and the loss of tourism revenues in Canada.

The positive is much less talked about but nonetheless more important: a substantial increase in bilateral trade since NAFTA's inception; major investments in Mexico by firms seeking to establish competitive advantage for both the U.S. and global markets; increased mineral investments; a growth in university and cultural links; and the fact that 1 million Canadians choose to spend significant parts of the winter months in Mexico.

All this has resulted in increased ties between selected provinces and states, as is evidenced by Alberta recently opening an office in Vera Cruz; British Columbia in Baja California, and Québec in Jalisco.

One concern for policy-makers in all three countries is the question of how to maximize the trilateral nature of the relationship.

Mexicans still cite president Porfirio Diaz [<http://www.nndb.com/people/504/000097213>]'s lament, "poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States." The effect of NAFTA on Mexican agriculture; the failure of the United States to implement key provisions; the fate of 30 million Mexicans in the United States, many of them illegal; the violence at the border fed by U.S. weapons, hang over Mexican perceptions of working with the United States. But Canada can work with Mexico, as it has effectively done on election reform and policing, free from these prejudices.

Americans, for their part, watch with concern the level of violence and the flow of drugs and people across the border. Some Canadians, concerned about the hardening of the Canada-U.S. border and the effect that American attitudes toward Mexico are having on border management, have recently pushed for a Canada-U.S. relationship that ignores Mexico.

This is a mistake: it ignores the gains and promise that is NAFTA; the close collaboration between Canada and Mexico on many important foreign policy issues in recent years; Mexico's pivotal role in Latin America (now a priority for our government) and a growing entry point for Canadian investment in the region.

These and other factors suggest that this is not the time to ignore Mexico, but rather to embrace the opportunity it presents. In the end, ignoring Mexico when dealing with the U.S. also ignores the political significance of the large Mexican presence in the U.S. And our mutual concern over drug-related criminality originating in Mexico but now reaching into Canada must, to be effective, be addressed together.

In short, we should be exploiting ways where our Mexican relationship gives us leverage in Washington, rather than downplaying it.

Let us also not forget that Mexico matters more and more for the provinces. Quebec's representation in Mexico City goes back 20 years and it now has a presence in four states where it sees significant interests - cultural and academic as well as economic. Alberta, British Columbia and Nova Scotia have followed its example and Ontario, with its interest in the automotive industry and itinerant labour in our economy, would be wise to consider their example.

Let us hope that the Prime Minister takes advantage of coming events to "reset the button" on Canada-Mexican relations to develop the extraordinary potential which unites us in partnership in the Americas.

*Bill Graham is a former foreign and defence minister of Canada and is co-chair with former Mexican foreign minister Senator Rosario Green of an initiative led by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) and Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales (COMEXI) in Mexico to revitalize the Canada-Mexico relationship.*