

Mexico is in the Third Seat at the Canada-US Table

By Carlo Dade, Executive Director

If recent high-level talks between the US and Canada are any indication, when US President Barack Obama comes to Canada on his first foreign visit, he will likely raise an issue which would take most Canadians by surprise—the conflict between the drug cartels and the Mexican government.

Escalating violence has led some Mexicans to flee and join relatives in the United States. More importantly, the discovery of US\$207 million in cash in a *single* Mexico City drug bust last year highlights the other side of the problem: the seemingly unlimited resources available to the drug cartels to corrupt public officials, law enforcement and democratic institutions on both sides of the border.

It has reached the point where *Foreign Policy* magazine and Reuters newswire have questioned whether Mexico is becoming a failed state. It clearly is not nor does it appear in imminent danger of becoming such. Yet, that the question is even raised is a clear warning that is being echoed by a series of US government officials. Outgoing US Central Intelligence Agency director Michael Hayden ranked Mexico as a challenge of the same importance as that posed by Iran, for instance.

While presidents change, this North American problem remains. So when Obama sits down with Harper, the subject of what Canada can do to help our North American neighbour and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) partner will be raised. The appearance of this issue as such a high priority on the American agenda for talks with Canada has already been raised in high-level bilateral talks. When Obama comes to Ottawa, we will have a critical and unique opportunity to respond.

Though further removed geographically from the situation, the situation in Mexico is important to Canada. There are over 2,000 Canadian businesses operating in Mexico. Over one million Canadians visit Mexico annually. Our exposure, lack of intelligence and lack of involvement are worrying.

More pressing, the fall-out from the hemispheric drug trade has spread inexorably northward and there are signs of growing connections between Latin American and Canadian gangs. Sooner or later the problem will, literally, hit home. Canada lacks significant first-hand experience in dealing with the drug war raging throughout the hemisphere. There is perhaps no better place for us to begin to lend a hand to a friend and ally and become seriously involved than in Mexico and, in so doing, also helping ourselves.

So what can Canada do?

First, Harper can assure Obama of our commitment to both sets of bilateral relationships that define North America. And let's not kid ourselves; given domestic political realities in the US it is the relationship with Mexico that is most important. With the current crisis, any intimation that Canada is seeking to strengthen the US-Canada relationship at the expense of our relationship with Mexico will, to put it mildly, not be seen as helpful. It may also serve Canada well for Prime Minister Harper to mention that, along these lines, now might not be the best time to tinker with NAFTA.

Second, Canada can increase assistance to Mexico by building on and strengthening not only the Canada Mexico Partnership but also some of the newer bi-lateral mechanisms recently put into place. The US has responded to the situation in Mexico with a US \$1.4 billion multi-year security Merida Initiative to support efforts by Mexican President Calderón to combat the drug cartels and public insecurity. But in parallel with this it is also channeling US \$28.9 million in development assistance through the US International Development Agency into programs that include strengthening local institutions, justice systems, and rule of law.

Any Canadian offer of assistance also must be two-tracked, focusing on hard security issues but also on social and community assistance. Canadian support for the efforts of the Mexican government in security, justice and community development and as such cannot be driven solely by security concerns.

For this type of work Canada should be prepared to offer larger-scale funding than that currently provided by the fund for local initiatives. This means that the Canadian International Development Agency would need to join the effort. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and perhaps the Ontario, Quebec and some municipal police forces can offer technical assistance and cooperate with their Mexican counterparts. The RCMP is already stretched thin with its foreign deployments, but involvement in Mexico should be a Canadian priority and as such the Mounties may have to scale back commitments elsewhere. In Mexico, Canada can seek to work with state and local officials in areas that are not the focus of the Merida Initiative, which also happen to be areas with significant Canadian visitors and investment such as Quintana Roo, Durango and Sonora.

Third, Canada can reinvigorate the overall Canada-Mexico relationship, which, despite solid work by both countries' foreign services, has begun to drift. The current crisis in Mexico is being felt across all branches of government and sectors of civil society in Mexico and that urgency should extend to Canada. Increased linkages, exchanges, scholarships, government exchanges (at all levels), parliamentary internships, and CIDA funding for community organisations can help build dialogue and mutual understanding.

Finally, Canada can seek to participate in US initiatives that target the US side of the problem in Mexico. Most importantly for Canada, the US has recently begun to target the flow of illegal guns from the US into Mexico. This is an unprecedented change in policy

on the part of US authorities as 100 US federal agents have been assigned to Operation Gun Runner along the southern border to investigate and prosecute US gun shops and straw buyers. Given that Toronto police reported that over half of the guns involved in that city's homicides come from the US, curbing the flow of illegal guns from the United States is a problem we share with Mexico and on which we need to take action. We will have to become more serious, too, about reducing Canada's domestic demand for illegal drugs.

Canadian support by itself will not turn the tide in Mexico. But the absence of serious and robust Canadian involvement will hurt not only Mexico, but our relationship with the United States and our reputation in the hemisphere as a trusted friend and capable ally.

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