

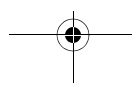
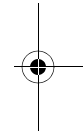
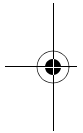
A Mexican perspective

ANDRÉS ROZENTAL

Since 2004, when the Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales and the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas began a series of biennial public opinion surveys to gauge Mexican views on international issues, Canada has consistently been at the very top of the list of favourable countries as seen by both a representative sample of Mexicans and by those who make up an informed elite on foreign policy issues (Anonymous 2004, Gonzalez and Minushkin 2006, Gonzalez et al. 2008). This is quite surprising, given that before the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), knowledge about Canada in Mexico was scarce and limited to a handful of political, academic, and business interests.

But, over the last 15 years, NAFTA has brought our two countries closer together than ever before. Since 1994, bilateral trade has increased over 500 per cent, while Canadian investment in Mexico has climbed from under USD 1 billion dollars at the signing of the free trade agreement to well over USD 7 billion at the end of last year. Since 1994, the number of Mexicans visiting Canada has grown to a quarter of a million, while over one million Canadians come to Mexico each year as tourists and some 50 000 have become semi-permanent residents with property stakes in the country.

Notwithstanding this increasing friendship, does Canada deserve such a privileged position in the minds of Mexicans? There are many Canadian traits that Mexicans undoubtedly admire: its democratic government, its harmonious federal-provincial relations, its multi-ethnic society, and its highly developed and prosperous economy. In



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addition, many Mexicans look on the “other” NAFTA partner as one that has managed to preserve its national and linguistic identities in spite of being such a close neighbour, vital partner, and military ally of the United States (U.S.). Unlike Mexico, with its 30-centuries-old cultures and civilization and a separate national language, Canada works much harder at differentiating itself from the U.S. and keeping as clear a distinction as possible between the two societies, albeit not always between the two economies.

However, like Mexico’s, Canada’s relationship with the U.S. is overwhelming, sometimes characterized by conflict, and often tense. A vast portion of our trade, investment, tourism, migration, and other exchanges are with our common neighbour. Our land borders are crossed hundreds of millions of times a year in both directions. Our geographic proximity means that for business, finance, and leisure, the North American subregion comprising the three nations has become a *de facto* single market even though we are still far from the concept of a community similar to the European model. Politics and history still dominate much of the bilateral and trilateral agenda, and both Canadians and Mexicans continue to be wary of the U.S. and its overpowering influence on our societies and economies.

This has been even truer since 9/11, when the security agenda became Washington’s – and therefore the region’s – number one priority, trumping almost every other aspect of the trilateral relationship. Although Ottawa thought that its so-called “special relationship” with Washington would exempt Canada from many of the measures taken under the Bush administration’s policies on homeland security, this has not been the case. The U.S.–Canada border has, in many ways, become similar to the U.S.–Mexico one, with increased budgets and manpower devoted to surveillance, checkpoints, and beefed-up security. Gone are the days when certain portions of Canada’s border with the U.S. did not even have customs or immigration checkpoints. Long lines and waiting times at the Ambassador Bridge and other crossings have become the rule rather than the exception, and the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative requiring all travellers to the U.S. to carry a valid passport or other recognized biometric identification did not exclude Canadians despite vigorous protestations by the government in Ottawa.

Contrary to some thinking in Canada, the U.S. government does not believe its northern border is significantly different from its southern frontier. The new secretary of homeland security, Janet Napolitano (2009), has publicly stated that, under the Obama administration, both will be treated symmetrically. On the trade front, the “buy American” policy applied to U.S. companies that receive public funding has

already affected Canadian exporters, even more severely than their Mexican counterparts.

The idea that Canada has a unique, special relationship with the U.S. that somehow differentiates it from Mexico – and other countries with which Washington has close ties – has done much damage to the concept of an integrated North America and has stymied efforts by those of us who strongly believe in the advantages of building a North American Community (Independent Task Force 2005). Although few Canadians would argue that NAFTA itself has been a failure – the figures prove otherwise – one continues to hear and read about the mysterious dangers that NAFTA poses, the threats to Canadian sovereignty, and the fact that Canada is better off dealing with the U.S. alone on most issues, rather than working trilaterally with Mexico. I have yet to be convinced that this is the case and fail to see in which aspects of its bilateral agenda Canada has gotten a “better deal” from Washington than it would have if it had included Mexico.

In part, the call to privilege the bilateral over the trilateral results from the absence of a vocal constituency to defend NAFTA against those who continue to frame it in negative terms, or even to contradict the absurd notion that it is part of a secret plot to create a theoretical North American union that would undermine Canadian independence. Even the Canadian business community, which undoubtedly has benefited significantly from the increased trade and investment flows that the single market represents, has been relatively silent on the positive aspects of NAFTA, preferring to defend the exclusive U.S.–Canada relationship as key to Canada’s future.

From a Mexican perspective, this unfortunate Canadian effort to differentiate itself from us has inevitably had a negative effect on our own bilateral relationship, as well as on those aspects of the three-way partnership that could be strengthened and built on to the benefit of both countries. There is no question that certain issues and concerns that are exclusive to each bilateral agenda should remain there, but if an unreasonable emphasis is placed on those exceptions over the advantages of working as a trilateral partnership whenever possible, little or no progress will be made in making North America more robust and competitive vis-à-vis other groups of nations such as the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Although these other unions constantly build on their comparative advantages and common agendas, many in North America appear to take satisfaction in emphasizing our differences and undermining the construction of an integrated region that would clearly be beneficial to all three countries.

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This criticism also holds true for Canada's relationship with the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, where successive recent governments in Ottawa have been searching for an agenda beyond the free trade agreements signed with Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Peru. So far they have been unable to articulate a clear objective-oriented policy, preferring to engage in a constant intellectual redefinition exercise, rather than in concrete strategies and commitments.

The lack of trilateral institutions and the reluctance of all three North American partners to create any has also contributed to the problem. Because the European model of a Brussels-type bureaucracy was rejected out of hand by all three governments while NAFTA was being negotiated, no institutions were established to push the three-way agenda and, as a result, there is no locomotive to pull the train. Infrequent meetings of senior officials and the only-recently institutionalized annual summit of leaders are the only high-level occasions at which the trilateral agenda is even addressed. When the North American Competitiveness Council (NACC) was set up in 2006 as part of the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP)* to institutionalize the business community's involvement in furthering the North American agenda, the idea was to make sure that governments looked to the private sector to tell them what needed to be done to further enhance the region's competitiveness.

The NACC's mandate was to provide governments with recommendations on broad issues, such as border facilitation and regulation, as well as the competitiveness of key sectors including automotive, transportation, manufacturing, and services as a way to work toward a more integrated North American economic and security region, but opposition to the idea in both the U.S. and Canada focused on the fact that it granted the corporate sector a formal role that had been denied to the public, citizens' organizations, labour, and legislators. Also, media commentators, such as Lou Dobbs and Bill O'Reilly on CNN and Fox News, constantly vilified the SPP as a disguised attempt to force the U.S. into a union with Canada and Mexico. Canadian analyst Maude Barlow has also been a constant critic of NAFTA and the SPP using similar arguments. In any case, the NACC no longer appears to be among the current priorities of the Calderón, Harper, or Obama administrations. Many of the SPP recommendations to Ottawa, Washington, and

* The Security and Prosperity Partnership for North America was launched in March, 2005 as a trilateral effort to increase security and enhance prosperity among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico through greater cooperation and information sharing. It is premised on the premise that the security and economic prosperity of the three countries are mutually reinforcing.



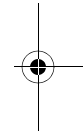
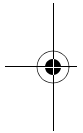
Mexico City back in 2005, together with the competitiveness proposals agreed to in February 2007, have never been implemented.

As a long-time observer and admirer of Canada, I have been bewildered by some of the country's most recent stated foreign policy objectives, priorities, and actions. From the time Prime Minister Trudeau's government marked an important shift in Canada's role in international politics, relations with previously untapped global regions such as Latin America had been seen as vital to Canada's future political and economic interests. As he stated, "We have to take greater account of the ties which bind us to other nations in this hemisphere – in the Caribbean, Latin America – and of their economic needs. We have to explore relations with Latin America, where more than 400 million people will live by the turn of the century and where we have substantial interests" (Stevenson 2000, 114).

As a result, successive Canadian governments began the shift from a previous, almost exclusive, trans-Atlantic focus (including the U.S.) and started looking south toward the rest of the hemisphere. Prime Minister Mulroney's decision to join the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1990, together with serious Canadian diplomacy efforts to strengthen democracy in the region, end some of Central America's interminable civil wars, participate in peacekeeping operations, and promote greater respect for human rights, all became hallmarks of Canada's policy toward the region. Considerable resources were expended in furthering these objectives and the country's standing in the region grew as a result.

Today this all seems to be history. As Robert Greenhill's (2005) External Voices Project so aptly found, "[Canada's] international performance and, to a certain extent, international reputation have fallen over the last 15 years." In the last four years, since the results of Greenhill's interviews were published, the situation has probably worsened. Although Canada is still an active member of the OAS and contributes substantially to the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, foreign policy priorities have shifted to other regions and issues. Afghanistan, the Arctic, China, and India are at the forefront of current Canadian diplomacy, while Latin America and the Caribbean – often seen today more as a region of conflict and crime than of opportunity – seem to have dropped off the radar screen. Negative issues of poverty, illegal migration, drug trafficking, and organized crime are those mostly favoured by Canadian media when referring to Latin America, while apparent "new" opportunities in other parts of the world generate more excitement and are said to offer greater potential for furthering the country's interests abroad.

My view is that this reshaped foreign policy misses an important point: Canada inevitably still belongs to this hemisphere and will be



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unavoidably affected by what happens here, both now and in the future. There can be no reasonable justification for the argument I have sometimes heard from Canadians, that such issues as poverty alleviation, illegal immigration, the fight against organised crime, and socioeconomic development failures in the region are further today from Canada's interests than closer and stronger relations with the U.S. According to those voices, that is where Canada should be investing its foreign policy resources, rather than in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, or in building the trilateral relationship with Mexico.

In a *Globe and Mail* article on 1 May, Robert Pastor and I made the case for a trilateral approach to common issues on the bilateral agendas (Rozenal and Pastor 2009). John Manley and Gordon Giffin (2009) responded four days later with a stinging attack on our premise that working with Mexico on the common agenda makes eminent sense for Canada and furthers its foreign policy interests. Three weeks later, an editorial in *The Ottawa Citizen* (Dark et al. 2009) supported Pastor's and my views, and urged the Harper government to demonstrate a clear interest in Mexico–U.S. border issues, join the North American Development Bank, put forward climate change solutions that explicitly include Mexico, and treat calls for renewed bilateralism carefully; the approach put forward by Manley and Giffin could only exacerbate the asymmetric power relations that Canada has spent much of the past two decades trying to reduce.

So we come back to the question: in view of the realities described above, why does Canada continue to be seen in such a positive light by Mexicans? Is it because Mexico has tried to shift its foreign policy away from concentrating on the North American agenda and wants to look more toward its Latin American neighbours, or is it because Canada is perceived as a neighbour with many affinities and a desire to keep its distance from the U.S.? The answer probably lies somewhere in between, with many in Mexico viewing Canada as a model of development and a good NAFTA partner, while also believing that Canada – especially Quebec – has Latin characteristics that Mexicans see as a difference from our common partner, even though statistics prove that the U.S. today, with its huge Hispanic population, is much more Latin than Canada. That immigrant population in the U.S. and its growing political influence make the Mexican agenda one of Washington's most important and, indeed, special relationships.

In contrast, the Harper government's sudden decision in mid-July 2009 to impose visa requirements on all Mexicans visiting Canada (some 250 000 a year according to recent estimates) is a clear indication of the low priority that Mexico is given in Ottawa. Although there is no justification for the growing abuse and fraudulent use of Canada's

liberal asylum and refugee policy by people from many countries – including Mexico – the new visa policy will have an immediate negative effect on Mexican perceptions of Canada, as well as on trade, investment, academic exchanges, and tourism. The decision calls into question the Canada–Mexico partnership launched in 2004, which was meant to highlight the fact that both countries “share a dynamic and prosperous relationship, as friends, as North American neighbours and as strategic partners in the Americas and beyond” (Canada 2007). None of this seems to have been taken into account with the visa decision.

In 1991, when Mexico and the U.S. decided to initiate a bilateral negotiations toward a free trade agreement, Canada understood that its interests lay in being part of the resulting agreement, rather than remaining with the U.S.–Canada free trade treaty already in existence. Partly because of worries about being left out and partly to improve its own position vis-à-vis trade and investment with the U.S., the Mulroney government did the right thing by insisting on participating in three-way negotiations. Having Canada as a partner was of great benefit to Mexico, because more than 80 per cent of the time Ottawa’s positions coincided with Mexico City’s. More recently, when President Obama espoused reopening NAFTA during his political campaign, Mexico and Canada joined in opposition to any such attempt and were successful in convincing the new administration that picking apart the treaty was a bad and dangerous idea.

Today there are many multilateral issues on which Canada and Mexico can cooperate closely, in addition to the trilateral agenda: Cuba’s role in the hemisphere, growing populism in Latin America, climate change, the United Nations and international governance architecture reform, and the G20 agenda are all topics that concern both of us. If our two countries are able to join forces and work together on these and other areas of common interest, we will be stronger and our voice will be louder and more effective than if we each go our own way. It is time for Canada to rejoin the North American table and use its influence to shape the trilateral agenda, rather than resist it.

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