

Mr. Harper rediscovers the Americas

JOHN GRAHAM

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has surprised both critics and supporters with a new thrust in foreign policy: Latin America and the Caribbean. His expedition this week occupies just six days, but visits to Colombia, Chile, Barbados and Haiti make it an ambitious trip around the hemisphere. The visits underscore that this region has been promoted to No. 3 priority after the United States and Afghanistan.

Mr. Harper had other options — Asia, Europe and the acute needs of Africa. So why the Americas?

Trade and investment provide part of the answer. Canada's investment in Latin America and the Caribbean (mining, tourism, petrochemical, banking and financial services) is almost three times that of our investment in Asia. Trade with the region has been increasing more rapidly than with any other part of the world: by 78.6 per cent in three years as opposed to an average of 15.5 per cent with the world as a whole. Mexico already is our fourth-largest trading partner. And it works both ways. Canada is now the single largest destination for Brazilian investment.

Security is another reason. The increasing movement of people and cargo from Caribbean and Latin American airports and seaports directly to Canada has meant that the Caribbean has become Canada's most porous border. The issues are drugs, counterterrorism and crime. Virtually all non-home-produced narcotics consumed in Canada are shipped from Latin America through the Caribbean. The battle against organized crime is ongoing and uncertain.

Money laundering thrives. In Central America, Jamaica, Guyana, Venezuela and Colombia, violence has become a subculture. Yet we lag far behind the British, the Americans, the French and the Dutch in supporting local security forces. The Department of National Defence has a training program based in Jamaica but, on intelligence, we are freeloaders, largely ignoring the vital needs of counterintelligence engagement in this region.

With one in 10 Canadians visiting the region annually, health security is one more reason for closer collaboration. The rising incidence of communicable diseases coupled with inadequate monitoring and disease prevention highlight this potentially hazardous health vector.

Mr. Harper's trip is a welcome initiative, as was the successful visit of Governor-General Michaëlle Jean to Brazil. However, their benefits will quickly atrophy if they are not buttressed by follow-up visits from ministers and senior officials, and by sustained support for public, trade and cultural diplomacy — a general failure that has debilitated our efforts in pursuing the national interest around the world for at least a decade.

Appropriately funded institutional linkages are not frills. Canadian governments have been slow to learn this lesson.

Finally, another potential shoal is Cuba. Rightly or wrongly, most Latin American and Caribbean leaders will be judging Canada by how tightly we are linked with Washington's policies. Despite U.S. President George W. Bush's recent tour of Latin America, the U.S. image has never been lower in the region. Those in the region have admired the independence and distinctiveness of Canadian policy toward Cuba since the Diefenbaker government in the 1960s. Our present policy of constructive engagement would set a positive tone for dialogue on other issues. This can be done without U.S.-bashing.

Our influence in the Americas peaked when we joined the Organization of American States 17 years ago and then sagged thanks to little follow-up. It rose once more in 2001, when Canada hosted the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, and fell again. These visits present a timely opportunity for Canada to finally make a difference in our own neighbourhood.

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