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Op-Ed

Discussing Canada's Agenda for the Americas: Suggested Guidelines for a Leadership Role

Vladimir Torres

Upon being appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Peter McKay said Canada's foreign policy would be reviewed to reflect the Conservative Party's objectives. The Conservative platform states that the new government will "articulate Canada's core values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, free markets, free trade and compassion for the less fortunate on the international stage." On the issue of international trade, the campaign document points out that the Conservative government will "reassert Canada's traditional leadership in negotiating the Free Trade Area of the Americas."

Bearing in mind these assertions and the current political and economic landscape of the Americas, some considerations should be made on how to define the Canadian agenda for our hemisphere. There is room in our continent for Canada to play a more influential role, furthering our interests whilst shaping the future of the hemisphere, but it demands decisive, long-term commitments and sharp negotiating skills.

It is About Democracy, Not Ideology

We need to have a non-ideological but rather pragmatic approach. Much has been said of Latin America's shift to the Left. Even if we accept the premise, our real concern should be whether recent new governments and those potentially elected later this year will advance the democratic development of the hemisphere or if their actions hinder the continuation of progress made over the last two decades. Our commitment is with democratic governance, and that includes embracing scenarios with alternating parties in power and the opening of political spaces and participation mechanisms for—until now—marginalized social actors.

The challenges in the political sphere stem from the perceived inability of several democracies to respond to the social needs of their populations, with the resulting lack of trust in the system. Our focus should be to remain committed to supporting democratically elected governments, holding them accountable to the principles of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and to contribute to institutional development and improved governance through assistance in judicial and fiscal reform, electoral transparency, accountability, and indeed social policy issues.

To advance in the promotion of democracy and many other political issues on our agenda we should reinvigorate our participation in the Organization of American States. It is the venue of choice for actively bridging the North-South political divide, creating consensus and allowing multilateral initiatives to prosper. Critical among the issues to tackle in this context is engaging with Venezuela in initiatives such as the Social Charter of the Americas, whilst exerting multilateral pressure to ensure that the presidential elections scheduled for December in that country take place in a fair and transparent fashion.

It is About an Independent Policy, Not Backing Vocals

Current widespread anti-US feelings throughout the region are attributable to a reaction to the George W. Bush administration's policies in the world and its lack of attention to Latin America, but by extension, opposition to trade liberalisation initiatives and foreign direct investment opportunities is wrapped up in the same sentiment, and fuelled by the anti-globalization, anti-neoliberal, and anti-imperialist discourse flaunted by leaders such as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. As long as our policy continues to be perceived as independent from that of the US, Canada will remain a valid interlocutor and partner for multilateral initiatives, and we will have to rely heavily on that clout when peddling our economic agenda.

The economic policies of some governments in the region represent a return to failed models of decades past, with an emphasis on state controls and a populist approach to social policy. Our commitment to the trade integration agenda should rather encourage attempts to tackle the urgent social demands, yes, through redistribution policies and social investment, and—specially—job creation through the promotion of micro, small and medium-size enterprises, while propitiating openness in their economies to foreign investment in the context of a clear rule of law.

When discussing the subcontinent's swing to the Left, analysts list several countries under the same group, but a closer look highlights not only the differences in political shades, but also in approaches to the agendas of trade liberalisation and regional integration. From Chile's successful open economy, to Brazil's pragmatic economic and foreign policy, most governments share the need for integration, competitiveness, openness and indeed fairness in multilateral agreements. Cuba and Venezuela are the only real exceptions in the hemisphere.

It is About Trade Liberalisation Opportunities, Not Only the FTAA

The FTAA negotiations are stalled. Our best approach to further advance the trade agenda in the Americas should be to go ahead—start, re-start and continue—with as many bilateral negotiations as possible. With most countries in our hemisphere committed to the principles of trade integration, it is almost inexcusable that since signing the North American Free Trade Agreement, we have only reached free trade agreements with two other countries in the Americas—Chile and Costa Rica.

Central American countries are open to exploring trade agreements with Canada. Though these are small economies with separate little weight in our overall international trade, two arguments can be made for pursuing this avenue: the aggregate benefits of negotiating regionally; and how by contributing to the growth and stability of these countries they can be moved away from our direct aid programs, freeing resources to attend more urgent needs elsewhere.

Especially relevant is to explore possible trade agreements with MERCOSUR, the South American block that includes the four countries that have expressed their reluctance to renew FTAA negotiations—and is in the

process of admitting Venezuela as a member. MERCOSUR regulations establish that they should negotiate as a group. And although lately Uruguay has expressed the possibility of negotiating a bilateral agreement with the US, thus opening a door to bilateral approaches, this should not be our preferred course of action.

It is About Results Beyond Trade, Not Isolated Goals

Everyone agrees that our relations with Brazil should be enhanced, exploring many other initiatives beyond trade, up to including possible coordinated actions in international fora such as the G-20. President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and his party might not be re-elected later this year, but as he has shown, we can expect continuity in Brazil's foreign policy and its commitments. Finding further common grounds with a new government should be an easier task.

Trade negotiations with the Andean nations should also be pursued. Aside from the positive impacts of free trade agreements on Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, it is arguably Bolivia—currently a recipient of our direct assistance—who could benefit the most. We should contribute to the success of Evo Morales' government in bringing stability and contributing to alleviate extreme poverty, as these are the only deterrents to the radicalization of Bolivia and its democracy succumbing to a Chávez-like regime. From natural resources management to multilingualism and indigenous rights, there are many areas in which Canada can and should assist this Andean nation.

Our goals are clear, we want further democratic strengthening and social development, with sustained growth and stability for the region; to create a more favourable climate for foreign investment; advance trade liberalisation; and consolidate hemispheric integration. Yes, it is an ambitious agenda, a challenge worth assuming for earning the relevant role we should play in the Americas.■

Vladimir Torres is a Latin America current affairs analyst. E-mail: vladtortes@sympatico.ca

Op-Ed

Nicaragua's Woes Threaten Region

Carlos A. Rosales

The dust finally settled in Nicaragua. President Enrique Bolaños will finish his six-year term in 2007. Despite peacefully resolving its recent political crisis, Nicaragua's *políticos* have managed to severely complicate the November presidential election. They have also brought uneasiness to their Central American neighbours.

Nicaragua was thrown into disarray as a result of a perverse political alliance—or *El Pacto*—between former presidents Arnoldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega. Acting on different motivations, they aggressively sought to undermine Bolaños. Alemán wanted to get back at Bolaños, his former vice president: Bolaños' anti-corruption crusade landed Alemán in jail for massive fraud. Alemán hopes *El Pacto* will eventually get him an amnesty for his crimes. Sandinista strongman Ortega looked to benefit electorally from dividing the country's right-wing, in advance of the upcoming election. His power-sharing arrangement with Alemán also allows him to exert enormous power in Nicaragua's state institutions.

Together, they effectively control the legislature, the Supreme Court, the Electoral Council and the Comptroller's Office. This allows them to corner Bolaños on many issues, including changing the Constitution to strip him of crucial presidential powers.

Things came to a head last November when congress threatened to lift Bolaños' immunity so the courts could prosecute him for alleged wrongdoing during his presidential campaign. Weakened to the point of desperation, Bolaños made public appeals to the international community to rescue his beleaguered presidency.

The Central American heads of state condemned the threat of what they termed a "technical *coup*" against Bolaños. The US Embassy in Managua also became a vocal Bolaños supporter.

Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General José Miguel Insulza flew to Managua to assess the situation. He then sent seasoned diplomat Dante Caputo as his Special Envoy. Caputo, a former Argentine Foreign Relations Minister, spent several months in Nicaragua skillfully facilitating a dialogue among the feuding parties.

On the eve of congressional deliberations on whether to strip Bolaños of his immunity, Ortega announced that his party would no longer support the initiative. His change of heart came on the heels of public declarations of support for Bolaños by regional leaders, the OAS, and several US officials.

In late December, Ortega and Bolaños met to end the crisis. Ortega announced that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) would no longer press for Bolaños' ouster, and agreed to postpone application of the constitutional changes that curtailed the president's powers.

But the damage had already been done. The feud between Alemán and Bolaños severely weakened Nicaragua's right wing. The promising presidential candidacy of Eduardo Montealegre, a well-known former member of Alemán's and Bolaños' cabinets, was deeply hurt by the dispute. Shut out of the Liberal Party (PLC), Montealegre is now candidate of a coalition of smaller parties.

Ortega faces problems of his own. Last February, the Sandinista leadership reversed its decision to hold primaries and imposed Ortega as its presidential candidate for a fifth consecutive time. The move was a pre-emptive strike against former mayor of Managua, Herty Lewites. Polls show he is Nicaragua's most popular politician: his pragmatism and good performance as mayor earned him kudos from voters. He was later expelled from the party and is now candidate of a coalition of parties representing Sandinista dissidents.

Yet, Lewites lacks the FSLN's impressive electoral machinery. Moreover, Ortega may still tap *El Pacto* in order to derail Lewites' candidacy by manipulating the judiciary and the Electoral Council.

Although Ortega compares himself to Latin America's moderate leftist leaders like Chile's Ricardo Lagos, or Brazil's Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, his strong-arm tactics and fiery anti-Americanism resemble hardliners like Cuba's Fidel Castro or Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

His strong ties to the Cuban and Venezuelan leaders show that his ideological pedigree remains intact from when he ruled Nicaragua two decades ago. With Castro and Chávez purportedly supporting leftist candidates across the Americas, Ortega will no doubt get plenty of advice and resources.

A victory by Ortega would revive his "Sandinista Revolution." That means trouble for his Central American neighbours. Sandinista support of leftist forces during the 1980s exacerbated the civil wars that ravaged the isthmus. Central Americans would rather forget their "lost decade."

The most recent CID-Gallup poll (12/2005) shows Lewites and Montealegre are tied for voter preferences. Both candidacies are nonetheless far from certain. If Nicaragua's right wing is not able to regroup and mount a serious campaign effort for the presidency, Ortega will face his best-case scenario in November's electoral contest.■

Carlos A. Rosales is Special Secretary to the President of El Salvador. He was Director of the Central America Program at the Inter-American Dialogue and Project Officer at the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL).

OPERATION MIRACLE

Several Latin American and Caribbean countries have benefited from the Operation Miracle (*Operación Milagro*)—a Cuba-Venezuela project to provide free surgery to restore vision to poor people in the continent.

On February 13, the sixth group of Panamanian patients traveled to Havana sponsored by Panama's First Lady, Vivian Fernández de Torrijos, in coordination with Cuban authorities. Over 700 Panamanians from the Kuna Yala and Gnobe Bugle ethnic groups had already benefited from the Operation Miracle, and patients from Panamá and Colón provinces were on their way. The day after, during his visit to Cuba, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Ralph Gonsalves, said that his country has sent 1,092 patients to Cuba since July 21 and that another 670 are waiting to enjoy the benefits of the program. Meanwhile, according to statements made by Venezuelan Ambassador to Ecuador, Óscar Navas, over 20,000 Ecuadorians, all from Santo Domingo de los Colorados, in the Province of Pichincha, will benefit from Operation Miracle during 2006. Navas said that Cuba and Venezuela hope to provide eye surgery to 6,000,000 Latin American patients in the next ten years.

In 2005, over 6,500 patients were treated in Havana, including 4,800 who underwent surgery. Since its creation in 2004, Operation Miracle has benefited over 190,000 people from 20 Latin American and Caribbean countries. It is one of the social components of the Cuba-Venezuela Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), signed by presidents Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro in December 2004 (*EFE, Prensa Latina, AIN, AP, 3-20/02/2006*).

Op-Ed Haiti's Elections: Challenges Ahead

Carlo Dade

The successful completion of elections in Haiti this past February marks an important and rare success in the process of rebuilding the country. Yet, whether this heralds a new era will depend on a host of factors.

As with past elections in Haiti, there were minor problems and charges of fraud. However, this time Haitians and the international community chose not to sacrifice the greater importance and utility of a largely free and fair election on the altar of minor grievances and pedantic fixation on following the absolute letter of the law.

This was a rare victory for common sense and progress. The newly elected president, René Préval—returning for a second term—has followed this trend and sent important early signals with the selection of economic advisors and overtures to key members of the outgoing interim government to advise or join his administration. At this point, the major elements of the opposition appear, to varying degrees, to be offering a begrudging olive branch to the new president-elect accompanied by a guarded willingness to cooperate. Given the long history of extreme partisanship coupled with social and political divisiveness, these events are cause for optimism if not exuberance. Less the exuberance turn irrational, it is important to bear in mind that at this stage the government is René Préval. Until a parliament is seated and the US position toward the new government becomes clear, whether this is real change and sign of progress or a brief thaw before the country returns to chaos will not be known.

To no one's surprise, René Préval emerged as the front-runner in the February elections in Haiti. The one serious challenger was Dumarsais Simeus, a Haitian-American businessman. No other candidate had widespread support or effective campaign networks. When Simeus was ruled ineligible to run by the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP) due to his holding of US

citizenship, he unofficially threw his support behind Préval, and thus effectively handed the election to him before the first vote was cast. The closest remaining candidate, Haitian businessman Charles Baker, finished with well under 10% of the vote and that he did this well was due almost entirely to the support he received for Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, leader of the Papay Peasant Movement. That a left-wing peasant leader and a right-wing businessman could find common cause would seem out of place anywhere else in the region. Yet, both were united solely in their distrust and past injury suffered from Bertrand Aristide and the Lavalas party.

The only real surprise from the elections was that Préval did not win the 50% plus one needed to avoid a second round. This was due to an extraordinary number of blank ballots; 85,000 to 90,000 out of 2.2 million votes cast. While it is possible that a few blank ballots would be cast in protest, it is inconceivable that eighty to ninety thousand Haitians would walk miles and endure hours-long waits to cast blank ballots. The CEP and the international donors made the right decision to discount the blank ballots and not call a second round of elections given the weakness of the other candidates, the difficulties faced in carrying out the elections and their elevated cost that diverted funds from other pressing needs, the tensions in the country around the vote, and the obvious attempt at fraud. This allowed Préval to claim victory with 50.15% of the vote. Although some electoral monitoring organizations, such as IFES criticized this decision, Haiti simply could not afford—financially or socially—the cost of another round of elections.

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

A two days extraordinary session of the Organization of the American States (OAS) General Assembly took place in Washington D.C. on January 30 and 31. The session had been convened in order to overcome the funding difficulties that have been plaguing the organization, which in spite of an increasing number of mandates had not received a budget increase since 1996. In fact, its Regular Fund is estimated to be worth 40% less than 15 years ago in real terms.

A consensus agreement was reached to authorize the General Secretariat to present a draft budget with a higher ceiling of US\$5 million for next year, bringing the total of the Regular Fund to US\$81.5 million. Of this increase, \$2.25 million will be funded by a 3% increase in member states' contributions and the difference derived from other sources of income. The distribution of the additional effort is determined by quotas, which according to the OAS Charter must be determined taking into consideration each member state's ability to pay. New quotas were adopted on a transitional basis for 2007-2008, with Canada and Chile bearing the most important increase, and Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela being allowed the most important decrease. Both the new budget and the definitive distribution of contributions will be adopted at the next General Assembly, which will take place in June in the Dominican Republic.

The question now is what comes next for Haiti. Parliamentary elections will be delayed and until then a cabinet cannot be selected or negotiations with donors start to renew the Interim Cooperation Framework. This will be a serious problem that could delay measures to increase employment and ease social pressures and crime. Selection of a cabinet will be the first major test for Préval and will be watched closely by multilateral donors, who are more comfortable with a Préval administration than the US administration and the opposition in Haiti. There is a strong possibility that Préval will pick Simeus as Prime Minister. The two are reported to get along and the selection of Simeus would reassure those at home and abroad who are still on the fence about the new government. This would also temper the view of the US administration toward Préval and allow some flexibility in his dealings with Washington. The move would be popular in Haiti as well since Simeus enjoyed widespread support before his candidacy was declared invalid. The move would be particularly welcomed by the Haitian Diaspora.

Another test for the new government will come in foreign relations. There will be strong pressure to cut ties to Taiwan and recognize China. If not, China could veto an extension of the United Nations Mission in Haiti when it comes up for a vote in the Security Council. Préval has had close ties to Taiwan, which has supported several of Préval's pet development projects. Another important test will be relations with Venezuela. The Hugo Chávez administration refused to recognize the interim government and continues to support Aristide. A Préval victory, however, will allow Venezuela to resume relations with Haiti and prompt a visit from Chávez, who, along with past Venezuelan presidents such as Carlos Andrés Pérez, has emphasized the historical debt Venezuela owes Haiti for its support for Simón Bolívar. Moreover, Chávez is the only self-identified African-descendant head of state in Latin America and has sought to position himself as a spokesperson and leader for African-Latinos. The racial dynamic has been—and under Chávez will intensify—a driver for Venezuelan-Haitian relations. Race adds important subtleties and a level of complexity and nuance to Venezuelan-Haitian relations that likely will be missed by most observers of the region who may read improved

Venezuelan-Haitian ties in the optics of the alleged “shift to the Left” in the region.

The elephant in the room for the new government though is the return of Aristide. Préval has trod a careful line and said all the right things to reassure the international community while not fomenting tension at home. This will be a tough balancing act to maintain. It is not in Préval’s interest to have Aristide return; governing the country and working with the opposition will be difficult enough without this as a distraction (or worse). An improvement in the material conditions of life in the country and some degree of peace and stability will dampen pressure for the return of Aristide and allow the country, and Préval, to move on.■

Carlo Dade is Senior Advisor at FOCAL.

Op-Ed

Challenges in the 2006 Mexican Presidential Race

José Ramón López Rubí Calderón

In Mexico, the July 2006 presidential election has three definitive contenders: Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Roberto Madrazo of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) and, unexpectedly, Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN).

How are each candidate and their parties faring in the electoral race? Much has been said and written about them during the last two months, but the answer to the question is quite simple although it has not been discussed explicitly in the public debate: as of now, the PRD has a candidate without a party; the PRI is a party without a candidate; and the PAN has a candidate that appeals mostly to its membership. In other words, López Obrador is strong but the PRD is weak; the PRI is strong but Madrazo is weak; Calderón is strong and (now) popular... but inside the PAN.

Each team (party and candidate) thus faces an electoral challenge of its own in the run up to the elections of 2006 defined in their capacity to attract *swing* voters. For the PRD, the challenge is to convert López Obrador’s popularity into votes in view of the party’s organizational weakness and its lack of electoral presence in many states. The PRI’s challenge refers to the conquest of free and independent voters in the face of the rejection of Madrazo—a conflictive and discredited politician—by a significant number of citizens. The challenge at hand for the PAN is to put forward a candidacy and a platform that moves to the centre to modify the electorate’s perception of both the party and Calderón as being too conservative.

Because of an inefficient but showy public policy, boosted by a failed political attempt to impeach him and despite the media scandals involving a series of

videotapes showing businessman Carlos Ahumada delivering significant sums of money to some of his close collaborators, López Obrador has been the most popular presidential prospect since 2003. The problem—his problem—is that the PRD has not been able to track electorally at López Obrador’s level. Electoral support for the PRD remains concentrated in a few states, such as Baja California, Guerrero, Michoacán, Zacatecas and, of course, Mexico City, holding a poor voting average in the total of the last elections for state governors (16-18%).

Furthermore, the party’s response to this problem, the “citizen networks” (*redes ciudadanas*), is failing, mostly because many local politicians use them to seek rent. The “citizen networks” are flexible organizational structures outside the PRD supposedly conducted and used by citizens to promote López Obrador’s candidacy among citizens. Actually, these networks are led by politicians, who tend to use them as their own financial and electoral supports. In the states of Puebla and Tlaxcala, for example, some local politicians are creating “citizen networks” to accumulate enough political capital to obtain from—or negotiate with—the candidate and the party’s elite their tickets to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

The question remains as to whether high popularity will be enough to win a federal contest in spite of the lack of a national party structure.

The PRI, the party that held the presidency for over seven decades, is still alive. Unlike the PRD and the PAN, it has a permanent, experienced and well-funded electoral bureaucracy—*i.e.* a formalized structure of political operators and resources at the service of candidates during the elections—that covers practically each and every Mexican region and state. In tandem with bad opposition candidates and bad administrations produced by the PRD and the PAN, this bureaucracy is responsible for the local governments that the party has recently retained or recovered.

Nevertheless, at present, the PRI’s electoral machinery is capable to mobilize the “hard core vote” of the PRI, which represents around of 20-25% of the national electorate. Even though this

partisan support is certainly important, it is insufficient to win this presidential election. The roadblock for the PRI to rise from the “hard core vote” to a winning vote is Madrazo. Undoubtedly, Madrazo does not enjoy public credibility; citizens simply distrust him as a natural result of his political career full of perceived corruption, electoral fraud and accusations of political betrayal within the party (*FOCAL POINT*, September 2005). Madrazo’s candidacy is leading citizens to confirm their old perception: the PRI as an obscure and profoundly antidemocratic party.

Some distinguished members of the PRI are very worried, so worried that they are talking about a plan B: the substitution of Madrazo for another candidate. However, since he controls the party’s apparatus, this is unlikely to happen. Besides, formally, Madrazo is the candidate of an electoral coalition between the PRI and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) and according to the Mexican Federal Electoral Code (article 181) the substitution of the candidate of an alliance can only be done “in case of death or permanent and total incapacity.”

Finally, the challenge in the PAN-Calderón equation is that the PAN is not a multiclass party and Calderón suffers from his connection to ideas of conservative social forces (e.g. the Catholic Church). Calderón may lose the presidency for the same reason he won the PAN’s candidacy: he is and looks like a true “panista.” Nonetheless, he may win if his campaign strategy and message eliminate the partisan banner implications by moving to the center and target the millions of young urban voters (middleclass students) who grew up during the democratic transition (*i.e.* during the movement against the hegemony of the PRI) and are being ignored by López Obrador in his popular discourse.

Which team will win the upcoming battle for the highest public office in the country? I think we have to wait until the end of March and the beginning of April. At that time we might be in a better position to analyze which team is managing to address its challenges most effectively. ■

José Ramón López Rubí Calderón is a political scientist and Director of the journal *Estudios de Política y Sociedad*. School of Law and Social Sciences, Autonomous University of Puebla, Mexico.

Spain and Latin America: The Return of Autonomy

Francesc Bayo and Christian Freres

The coming to power of the new President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, has renewed debate on the situation in Latin America, with one discussion in particular addressing political alignments in the region. Morales’ expressed preference for an alliance with Venezuela and Cuba, the countries that sponsored the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) as an alternative to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), seems to foretell a revitalization of the anti-American front as a relevant objective of some Latin American foreign policies. At the same time, that front will inspire latent anti-imperialist sentiments in a large portion of the Latin American population, which already finds fertile ground for confrontation in the foreign policy of the current administration of George W. Bush. All in all, it seems possible that a regional grouping with defined objectives could be consolidated and presented under the integrated leadership of Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. The question is whether the advance of such an alliance could produce a seismic shift in the correlation of forces in Latin America’s international relations, which would also force other external stakeholders close to the region to take a stand.

This situation presents some serious challenges for the Spanish government, both in terms of bilateral and regional policies, for several reasons. Spain’s primary goal is to uphold a policy of autonomy in Latin America, which will allow it to positively influence its development and international insertion without having to be defined as a supporter of the ALBA or as subordinate to the stance of the United States. It is a matter of standing on a middle ground of moderation, while trying to bring the extremes closer together. To do this, Spain has committed to a general focus on promoting dialogue between countries and an emphasis on multilateralism as the preferred means for managing regional and global problems.

This position—similar to Canada’s traditional stance—is not currently a common one to adopt, which has led some in Spain and Latin America



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to consider Spain's policy to be ambivalent (in the best of cases), or openly biased toward the ALBA countries. The arguments in support of the latter opinion, relate to the initiative to promote a change of direction in the European Union's (EU) policy toward Cuba in late 2004, the various meetings between José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Chávez, or Evo Morales' visit to Madrid—after travelling to Cuba and Venezuela—shortly before taking office. Although these examples are real, they do not reflect the entirety of Spain's activities in the region.

In reality, current Spanish policy involves a reconnection with the country's traditional foreign policy line, one that is adapted to the times and to the style of government. This policy, in short, is about getting along with everyone. Even when there have been commercial or diplomatic conflicts, Spain has traditionally sought paths that would lead to cordiality in relations. Nevertheless, this general characteristic was not respected during the previous administration of José María Aznar, which left various conflicts open, creating a certain sense of unease in the region with respect to Spain's role.

Aznar's government promoted a close alignment with the US, which began with pressuring Cuba. It maintained a distant attitude with those governments with whom it had the least political coincidence (e.g. Argentina), and sought a closer relationship with El Salvador and Honduras (who participated alongside the Spanish troops in the military intervention in Iraq). In addition, it created frictions with Chile and Mexico by applying strong pressure on them to support that intervention in the United Nations. Spain also adopted Álvaro Uribe administration's line of thought on dealing with the Colombian conflict, while practicing hostile politics with Chávez. Finally, through various initiatives Spain attempted to capitalize on the Ibero-American Summits for its own interests.

Upon coming to power, Zapatero's government sought to recover its former autonomy, which entailed mending ties with Cuba, Venezuela and Argentina in particular, while at the same time shifting to a more appropriate level of relations with various countries that shared a certain vision with the previous administration. This implies, in any case, a risky and difficult balancing act. One of the risks is that the nuances of this approach may not be readily understood. This happens not only in Spain, where certain media and the Popular Party (PP)—(in the opposition)—constantly question this policy, but also abroad, particularly in the United States, where the apparent change of direction seems to be an inexplicable betrayal (when compared with Aznar's nearly complete alignment).

In summary, Spain's autonomous position in Latin America is not a comfortable option in these times of growing ideologization of the stances in the region and in other nearby countries (e.g. US). As such, greater efforts are required in explanation and self-justification, which can, to a certain extent, wear down the Spanish foreign policy. Yet it is a policy coherent with the return to dialogue and multilateralism as a main focus. Because of this, Zapatero's government has given great importance to strengthening the Ibero-American System and has sought to encourage greater involvement of the EU in Latin America (with a lesser degree of success). At the same time, it has sought to strengthen ties with Brazil and Chile, who play a certain role

of containment vis-à-vis extremist tendencies that have arisen recently in the region.

In conclusion, the Spanish government is interested in developing an autonomous agenda with Latin American countries, but at the same time it is concerned with the promotion of cooperative and moderate actions, a far cry from a confrontational attitude such as that advocated in the ALBA. This is a risky venture and, certainly, it is not free of inherent contradictions coming from a country with varied and often opposing interests in Latin America, as occurred with the sale of military equipment to Venezuela. Nevertheless, this is probably the most reasonable option if Spain wishes to play a constructive role in a transforming region. ■

Francesc Bayo is a Researcher at the CIDOB Foundation in Barcelona, and Christian Freres is an Associate Researcher at the Instituto Complutense de Estudios Internacionales in Madrid. Emails: fbayo@cidob.org; freres@icei.ucm.es.

Mexico between Cuba and the United States...Again

Ana Covarrubias

Once again, the Mexican government has found itself in the middle of the conflict between Cuba and the United States. On this occasion, however, Mexican-Cuban relations were not as solid as they once were, and we cannot be certain that what is known as the "Sheraton affair" will not contribute to deteriorating the bilateral relationship even more.

On February 3, a group of representatives of Cuban state enterprises and US businessmen met at Mexico City's María Isabel Sheraton Hotel to discuss business opportunities in the Cuban energy sector. After receiving a warning by the US Treasury Department that the hotel was violating the Trading with the Enemy Act by hosting the meeting, the Sheraton personnel asked the Cubans to leave the premises at the end of the first working day. Some sectors of the

Mexican public opinion reacted strongly to the decision of the hotel's management and accused the US of violating Mexico's sovereignty. Movimiento Mexicano de Solidaridad con Cuba—a pro-Cuban non-governmental organization—symbolically shut down the hotel and intended to burn a US flag at the front door. The Cubans who were evicted from the hotel declared that they were not going to sue it on the basis of discrimination, which was a legal option.

The Sheraton Hotel in Mexico City—headquartered in the US—applied a US law in Mexico and, in so doing, violated Mexican laws. The initially hesitant response by Mexico's Foreign Ministry complicated the situation even more: its position was that the "incident" was a problem between individuals, implying that it was not the government's business. In other words, Mexican authorities did not immediately recognize the extraterritorial application of a US law, or a possible violation of Mexico's sovereignty. Once it was—albeit wrongly—argued that the Helms-Burton Law had been applied, Mexican authorities reconsidered and more forcefully expressed that Mexico would not accept the extraterritorial application of any law or any violation of Mexican laws by any firm, national or foreign. After a series of vague and contradictory declarations by Mexican officials, the Ministries of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs seemed to agree on one point: the US had not violated Mexico's sovereignty; it was rather the Sheraton Hotel who had violated Mexican laws. Opposition parties, media, opinion leaders and other stakeholders as well as the Cuban government, however, did not agree, and the incident became a debate in domestic politics. Domestic groups and political opposition in Mexico asked the government to send a diplomatic complaint to the US Department of State but Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez refused, insisting that neither the US nor the Sheraton Hotel had violated Mexico's sovereignty. Victoria Jaramillo, the administrative head of the borough where the Sheraton is located, however, threatened to shut down the hotel. A member of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Jaramillo claimed that after the expulsion of the Cubans, her office had received a series of complaints against the hotel. After an extensive inspection, local authorities discovered some irregularities that would imply heavy fines on the hotel and even the possibility of shutting it down. These irregularities were merely an excuse to demonstrate a strong stand against the Sheraton—and ultimately, the United States—something that was not conveyed by federal authorities.

The Sheraton episode was quickly linked to Mexico's position in the forthcoming United Nations Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva. Mexican authorities declared that the Mexican government would not change its position in support of a resolution requesting the Cuban government to accept the visit of an international human rights rapporteur. Moreover, according to a *Granma* editorial (10/02/2006), by asking the Cubans to leave the Sheraton's premises, the hotel manager was probably thinking that he was "pleasing the government that easily and strongly condemns Cuba every year in Geneva and, strangely, does not say anything about the horrendous torture of defenceless prisoners committed everyday by the United States in Cuban territory illegally and forcefully occupied by the government that accuses Cuba of violating human rights." Cuban Ambassador to Mexico, Jorge Bolaños, declared that a favourable Mexican vote in Geneva would not help improve Mexican-Cuban relations.

The *Granma* editorial did not limit its remarks to the Geneva meeting: concerning Minister Derbez' declarations, it expressed that they provoked a "strange mixture of perplexity and almost pity." It noted that Minister Derbez had initially looked insecure and hesitant, and went on to criticize his subsequent decision to "analyze" the idea of writing a diplomatic note of protest to the US Department of State. According to a Mexican newspaper, Ambassador Bolaños said that the Sheraton episode was not a closed case for the Cuban government (*El Universal*-on-line, 13/02/2006). Given President Vicente Fox's government experience with Cuba, it would not be surprising if the Cuban government brings up the issue again when it considers it convenient.

The extraterritorial application of US laws is not new to Mexico. Mexican firms were the victim of the Helms-Burton Law, and the Mexican government issued the Law of Protection of Trade and Investment Norms from Foreign Norms that Infringe on International Law as an "antidote." In the face of international opposition, US presidents have continuously postponed the enforcement of the most difficult provisions of the Helms-Burton Law so it has not been an issue in US-Mexico relations for a few years. Nonetheless, the Mexican government's initial reaction to the "Sheraton affair" was a surprise: the declarations concerning the violation of Mexican law but not of Mexico's sovereignty were confusing and raised speculation as to whether there was indeed an attempt to not trouble the United States. It is true that it was the Sheraton Hotel and not the US government—strictly speaking—who violated Mexican law, but if this is not a sovereignty problem, how should we understand the application of a foreign law in Mexico? It is worth remembering Mexico's traditional position: at least since the Revolution, Mexican governments have insisted that foreigners be treated according to Mexican laws and with no privileges whatsoever resulting from their position as foreign nationals.

The extraterritorial application of the law, at least in a case such as the Sheraton's, has no real solution, and the victims are actually US firms. The hotel had to comply with US legislation thereby violating Mexican law. In turn, to comply with Mexican laws implied the violation of US

legislation. So, either way the company would have to pay fines. This is not to say, however, that the Mexican government should accept such imposition of power; Mexico has a legitimate right to condemn an unfair and illegal practice. The “Sheraton affair” looks like a lost opportunity to strengthen Fox’s government domestically and, probably, to contribute to a minor improvement in relations with Cuba. ■

Ana Covarrubias is a professor at the Centro de Estudios Internacionales at El Colegio de México.

Op-Ed

Discutiendo la Agenda Canadiense para las Américas: Directrices Sugeridas para Asumir un Rol de Liderazgo

Vladimir Torres

Al ser nombrado Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, Peter McKay señaló que la política exterior canadiense sería revisada para reflejar los objetivos del Partido Conservador (PC). La plataforma conservadora afirma que el nuevo gobierno “articulará en el escenario internacional los valores canadienses fundamentales de libertad, democracia, respeto al estado de derecho, derechos humanos, libre mercado, libre comercio y compasión para con los menos afortunados.” En cuanto al comercio internacional, el documento de campaña señala que el gobierno conservador “reafirmará el liderazgo tradicional de Canadá en las negociaciones del Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas” (ALCA).

Teniendo en cuenta estas aseveraciones y el actual panorama político y económico de las Américas, es necesario hacer algunas consideraciones sobre cómo definir la agenda canadiense para nuestro hemisferio. En nuestro continente hay espacio para que Canadá desempeñe un rol más influyente, avanzando nuestros intereses a la par de darle forma al futuro del hemisferio, pero para ello se requieren compromisos firmes, de largo plazo, y excelentes capacidades de negociación.

Se Trata de la Democracia, No de la Ideología

Tenemos que tener un enfoque no-ideológico; uno más bien pragmático. Mucho se ha dicho sobre el giro de Latinoamérica hacia la izquierda; aún si compartiésemos esa premisa, nuestra preocupación central debería ser si los nuevos gobiernos de reciente elección—y aquellos otros potencialmente electos más adelante este año—avanzan hacia el desarrollo democrático en el hemisferio, o si sus acciones entorpecen el progreso logrado a lo largo de las últimas dos décadas. Nuestro compromiso es con la gobernabilidad democrática, y ello incluye la aceptación de escenarios con alternabilidad de partidos en el poder, y la apertura de espacios políticos y mecanismos de participación para actores sociales hasta ahora marginados.

Los desafíos en la esfera política se desprenden de la percibida incapacidad de varias democracias para responder a las necesidades sociales de sus poblaciones, con la consecuente pérdida de confianza en el sistema. Nuestro enfoque debe ser mantener el compromiso de apoyar a los gobiernos democráticamente electos, haciéndolos responsables bajo los principios de la Carta Democrática Interamericana, y contribuyendo al desarrollo institucional y al mejoramiento de la gobernabilidad, a través de la asistencia para las reformas judiciales y fiscales, la transparencia electoral, la rendición de cuentas, y por supuesto, en temas de políticas sociales.

Para avanzar en la promoción de la democracia y de muchos otros temas políticos en nuestra agenda, debemos revitalizar nuestra participación en la Organización de Estados Americanos. Ésta es el foro apropiado para superar la división política Norte-Sur, creando consenso, y permitiendo que prosperen las iniciativas multilaterales. Un tema crítico a ser abordado en este contexto es entablar conversaciones con Venezuela sobre iniciativas tales como la Carta Social de las Américas, ejerciendo a la vez presión multilateral para asegurar que las elecciones presidenciales en ese país, programadas para diciembre, tengan lugar de manera justa y transparente.

Se Trata de una Política Independiente, No de Ser Coro

Los sentimientos contrarios a los Estados Unidos, actualmente generalizados en la región, son atribuibles a la reacción a las políticas de la administración de George W. Bush en el mundo, y a su falta de atención para con Latinoamérica; pero por extensión, la oposición a las iniciativas de liberalización comercial y a las oportunidades para la inversión extranjera directa, se ve arropada bajo el mismo criterio, y es azuzada por el discurso anti-globalización, anti-neoliberalismo y anti-imperialismo desplegado por líderes como Fidel Castro y Hugo Chávez. Siempre y cuando nuestra política continúe siendo percibida como independiente de la de los Estados Unidos, Canadá seguirá siendo un interlocutor válido y un socio confiable para las iniciativas multilaterales, y a la hora de promover nuestra agenda

económica tendremos que depender en buena medida de esa reputación.

Las políticas económicas de algunos gobiernos de la región representan un retorno a modelos fracasados de décadas anteriores, con su énfasis en controles estatales y un enfoque populista de la política social. Nuestro compromiso con la agenda de integración comercial debería más bien estimular los esfuerzos para abordar las urgentes demandas sociales, a través—sí—de políticas de redistribución e inversión social, y—especialmente—de creación de empleos a través de la promoción de la micro, pequeña y mediana empresa, a la par de propiciar la apertura de sus economías a la inversión extranjera en el contexto de un claro marco legal.

Al abordar el giro del subcontinente hacia la izquierda, los analistas incluyen a varios países dentro de un mismo grupo, pero una mirada más de cerca resalta no sólo las diferencias en las tonalidades políticas, sino también en los enfoques de las agendas de liberalización comercial y de integración regional. Desde la exitosa economía abierta de Chile, a las políticas, económica y exterior, pragmáticas de Brasil, la mayoría de los gobiernos comparten la necesidad de la integración, la competitividad, la apertura, y por supuesto, la justicia en los acuerdos multilaterales. Cuba y Venezuela son las únicas verdaderas excepciones en el hemisferio.

Se Trata de Oportunidades de Liberalización Comercial, No Sólo del ALCA

Las negociaciones del ALCA están estancadas. Nuestra mejor aproximación para hacer avanzar la agenda del comercio en las Américas debería ser seguir adelante—comenzar, reempezar y continuar—con tantas negociaciones bilaterales como sea posible. Con la mayoría de los países de nuestro hemisferio comprometidos con los principios de la integración comercial, es casi inexcusable que desde la firma del Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte, sólo hayamos alcanzado acuerdos de libre comercio con otros dos países de las Américas—Chile y Costa Rica.

Los países de Centroamérica están abiertos a explorar acuerdos comerciales con Canadá. Si bien estas son economías pequeñas con muy poco peso específico dentro de la totalidad de nuestro comercio internacional, se pueden formular dos argumentos a favor de este curso de acción: los beneficios agregados de negociar regionalmente; y cómo al contribuir con el crecimiento y la estabilidad de estos países, éstos pueden ser removidos de nuestros programas de asistencia directa, liberando recursos para atender necesidades más urgentes en otros sitios.

Es especialmente relevante explorar posibles acuerdos comerciales con MERCOSUR, el bloque Sudamericano que incluye los cuatro países que han expresado su renuencia a reiniciar las negociaciones del ALCA—y que está en proceso de admitir a Venezuela como miembro. Las regulaciones del MERCOSUR establecen que deben negociar como grupo, y aun cuando Uruguay ha expresado recientemente la posibilidad de negociar un acuerdo bilateral con los Estados Unidos, abriendo así la puerta a aproximaciones bilaterales, ese no debería ser nuestro curso de acción preferido.

Se Trata de Resultados Más Allá del Comercio, No de Metas Aisladas

Todo el mundo está de acuerdo en que nuestras relaciones con Brasil deben ser ampliadas, explorando muchas otras iniciativas más allá del comercio, hasta llegar a incluir posibles acciones coordinadas en foros internacionales tales como el G-20. El presidente Luis Inácio Lula da Silva y su partido tal vez no sean reelectos este año, pero tal y como él lo ha demostrado, podemos esperar continuidad en la política exterior de Brasil y en sus compromisos. Hallar nuevos elementos en común con un nuevo gobierno debería ser una tarea aún más sencilla.

También se deberían proseguir negociaciones comerciales con las naciones andinas. Aparte de los impactos positivos de acuerdos de libre comercio en Perú, Ecuador y Colombia, podríamos argumentar que Bolivia—actualmente un receptor de nuestra asistencia directa—sería el país que más podría beneficiarse. Debemos contribuir al éxito del gobierno de Evo Morales en procurar estabilidad y en sus esfuerzos por aliviar la pobreza extrema, ya que éstas son las únicas fuerzas disuasivas para la radicalización de Bolivia y para evitar que su democracia sucumba a un régimen tipo Chávez. Desde el manejo de recursos naturales, a los desafíos de una sociedad multilingüe y los derechos indígenas, son muchas las áreas en las que Canadá puede y debe asistir a esta nación andina.

Nuestras metas son claras, queremos avanzar en el fortalecimiento democrático y el desarrollo social, con crecimiento sustentable y estabilidad para la región; crear un clima más favorable para la inversión extranjera; avanzar en la liberalización comercial; y consolidar la integración hemisférica. Sí, es una agenda ambiciosa, un desafío que bien vale la pena asumir, dado el rol relevante que deberíamos desempeñar en las Américas.■

Vladimir Torres es un analista de asuntos contemporáneos de Latinoamérica. Correo Electrónico: Vladtorres@sympatico.ca

Upcoming events

Seminar on Indigenous Governance and Democracy in the Americas, March 15, 2006 – Visit focal.ca for more information and [Agenda](#).

International Summer School on the Americas Workshop, Centre for Inter-American Studies, Laval University, May 21-23, 2006.

Issues to be discussed include: the contours of inequality; Coordinating Agents of Development; Health Policy in the Americas; Indigenous Movements, Poverty and Inequality; and Migration in the Americas.

For more information, visit: <http://www.cei.ulaval.ca>, or contact Valérie Bouchard or Raphaëlle Lapierre at ecole-amerique@hei.ulaval.ca or at (418) 656-2131 Ext. 4517.

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FOCAL

1, rue Nicholas Street,
Suite/Bureau 720
Ottawa, Ontario
K1N 7B7 Canada

Canadian Foundation for the Americas Tel/Tél : (613) 562-0005
Fondation canadienne pour les Amériques Fax/Téléc : (613) 562-2525
Fundación Canadiense para las Américas E-mail/Courriel : focal@focal.ca
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