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Thinking Outside the Box in the Canada-Mexico Relations: From
Convenience to Commitment

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Canadian-Mexican relations can be described as being driven by a sense of convenience as opposed to commitment. Rather than operating as “like-minded” countries,¹ the logic of their interconnection remains dominated by an instinct to balance vis-à-vis the United States. The grip of this habit – although loosening somewhat under the weight of multiple contacts – is still strong enough to drive (and arguably distort) the relationship. Rather than building towards a strategic partnership based on their common North American/NAFTA location and membership a tactical perspective prevails with a deep overview of sensitivity and tension contradicted only with bursts of common purpose on an episodic basis directed at their super-sized neighbour.

Signs of this convenient behaviour of course stand out prior to the NAFTA connection, as witnessed most famously by the shared resistance of the governments of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and Mexican president José López Portillo to Ronald Reagan’s proposal (as part of his initial presidential campaign in November 1979) for a North American accord. But it came to the fore in the launch of the NAFTA project in that at least at the outset Canada was a “reluctant” participant. Having signed its own deal with its dominant trading partner, in the form of the Canada-US free trade deal, Canada was highly sceptical about the value of entering into a set of negotiations which would extend this type of arrangement to include Mexico. Symbolically, NAFTA raised the spectre that Canada would no longer be special. Instrumentally, it raised the danger of Canada joining Mexico as a spoke to the American hub. As well recognized by

¹ On the notion of ‘like-mindedness’, see Andrew F. Cooper, “Coalitions of the Willing: The Search for Like-Minded Partners in Canadian Diplomacy,” in *How Ottawa Spends 1999 – 2000: Shape Shifting: Canadian Governance Toward the 21st Century*, ed. Leslie A. Pal (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1999).

participant/observers this ambivalent attitude to NAFTA was only overcome by the Canadian instinct for being an insider as opposed to staying on the outside.²

Even in the post-integration era the image of convenience – even opportunism – is compelling. The Chrétien government did its best to put the brakes over the Fox initiative on a NAFTA plus agenda. And – despite the photo-ops of the three North American “amigos” at the April 2001 Quebec summit,³ the chemistry between President Vicente Fox and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien cooled considerably with the Canadian’s reluctance to bite on the “big enchilada”. Whereas Fox called for an expanded NAFTA that would eventually become a hemispheric version of the European Union⁴ with borders open to immigration as well as trade, Chrétien rejected the idea after saying the structure of North America, with two smaller countries on either side of the powerful United States, makes the idea unworkable.

Yet, in early March 2003 at the most compelling moment of the Iraq crisis, Chrétien and Fox met and spoke to similar scripts about a compromise solution which distanced them from the Bush administration without putting them explicitly in the “unwilling” camp of France, Germany and Russia. At a personal level this meeting still exhibited some elements of tension (with Mexican newspapers commenting that Chrétien called Fox “indecisive”). On a structural level, however, the meeting was highly salient in showcasing a sense of solidarity against the US push to remove Saddam by force.

² The most recent testimony to this instinct is Derek Burney’s memoirs: Derek Burney, *Getting it Done* (Montreal/Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 159.

³ See Andrew F. Cooper, “Quebec as Democracy Summit”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 24, 2 (Spring): 159-171.

⁴ See also Anthony De Palma, *Here: A Biography of the New American Continent* (New York, Public Affairs, 2001); Robert A. Pastor, *Toward a North American Community: Lessons from the Old World for the New* (Washington: Institute for International Economics, 2001).

Reframing the Disconnect in the Bilateral Relationship

Standing back from these snapshots it seems contingent for any close analysis of the Canada-Mexico relationship to at least attempt to unravel this puzzle of convenience over commitment – and to see if these constraints can be overcome. Thinking out of the box in this regard means focusing on two interconnected tasks. The first is to recognize far more explicitly than commonly presented the diplomatic dimension of what the current Canadian Minister of Industry, David Emerson, has termed the “tyranny of small differences”⁵ – differences that continues to beset the relationship. The second is to attempt to lay out some suggestions about how that distance can be narrowed if not closed completely.

The underlying struggle for diplomatic status between the two countries lies at the heart of this disconnect between a convenient and committed relationship. Mexico has reacted vigorously in the past to perceived slights, as for instance on the episode surrounding Bombardier’s bid for the contract on Mexico City’s subway system. Canada suffers from a degree of reputational anxiety vis-à-vis Mexico.⁶ It sees its position as having a more diversified (if not as special as many would like it to be) position with the US than Mexico. After all the relationship between Canada and the US extends into many areas deemed off-limits by Mexico. To list just the basic ingredients of this complex interdependence Canada belongs both to NORAD and NATO, and has engaged in some areas of niche diplomacy (Haiti for one) where Mexico has refused to entertain.⁷

⁵ David Emerson, ***, quoted in Bruce Cheadle, “Three nations move to end ‘tyranny of differences’: Canada, U.S. and Mexico commit to broader economic and security integration,” *Canadian Press*, June 28, 2005.

⁶ On Canadian concerns immediately prior to September 11th see William Walker, “Bush woos ‘most important’ Mexico,” *Toronto Star*, September 6, 2001, ***.

⁷ This image of complex interdependence goes back to the pioneering work of Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

At least in the early stages of the Fox presidency Mexico had the aura of an ascendant actor on the international stage that threatened this position. As reflected by their reciprocal visits, this up and come position was highlighted by the (early) good relationship between Presidents Fox and Bush. The image of Mexico having the US's attention was sensitive enough for Ottawa to handle. But the fact that Fox could take advantage of factors not available to Canada within the US (the re-location of political power away from the North to the Southwest and the growing abundance of Hispanic voters)– lent a structural grounding to this dilemma.

This is not to deny that the “rise” of Mexico has been a complex phenomenon with different sort of spillover effects for Canada. Organizationally the bid by the Fox government for entry into the Security Council (even on a non-permanent basis) was a sharp departure from the historical Mexican position – and one that could be seen as curtailing some of Canada's activist diplomatic space. Yet as illustrated by the Iraq case it also opened up some room for ad hoc coalitional opportunities.

A similar measure of complexity is captured in the push for normative entrepreneurship. The advent of democracy at home in Mexico brought with it some immediate signs that Mexican foreign policy would shift in some manner from its longstanding reluctance to be involved beyond it borders. Still, few commentators would have predicted such an initial rush. One motivation here of course was the desire by the Fox government when Jorge Castañeda was still foreign minister to lock in the advances of Mexican democracy. Another rationale was to gain a greater role in international affairs more generally by playing the democratic card. As Castañeda rehearsed in one speech the need here was for a hybrid form of multilateralism that blended the possibility

of ‘constructing a counterweight —the only possible and viable one— to its vital but asymmetrical relationship with the United States’ with one in which ‘State sovereignty [could] be reconciled with a new body of generally-observed norms.’⁸

This shift allowed Canada and Mexico to co-operate on some specific issues (most notably on the campaign to eradicate anti-personnel land mines). Nonetheless, the robust style of the Mexican conversion was not always in synch with Canada’s own position. Indeed, the Fox government can be criticized for overplaying its diplomatic hand not on border issues but in the area of democracy promotion. These differences in style came out most notably on the contrast between Canada’s and Mexico’s approach to Cuba. The hallmark of Canada’s approach (notwithstanding the intrusion of ‘Northern Ice’) has remained constructive engagement. Mexico by way of contrasted morphed from strong association with the Castro regime to a more assertive and openly critical approach. The first hint of this changed approach came during President Ernesto Zedillo’s trip to Cuba in 1999, when he publicly stated that the Cuban people had a right to elect a government of their choice and gave leeway to his foreign minister to meet with Cuban dissidents.⁹ These hints became a surge of activity through 2002 with a number of highly-publicized disagreements.

Variations on these themes come out in terms of an exploration of the fuller economic relationship between Canada and Mexico. To be sure, the mutual interests pertaining to the NAFTA - ization of the relationship have increased. This side comes out

⁸ Quoted in Speech given by Secretary of Foreign Affairs Jorge Castañeda at the lunch given by President Vicente Fox for the diplomatic corps in Mexico, National Palace, June 27, 2002.
Jorge Castañeda, speech at the lunch given by President Vicente Fox for the diplomatic corps in Mexico, National Palace, June 27, 2002.

⁹ Andrés Oppenheimer, “Cuba trip to test Fox’s democratic credentials, and word,” *Miami Herald*, January 24, 2002, ***.

most obviously from the Summit held in March 2005 after the re-election of President Bush at Baylor University in Waco Texas which among other things – through the establishment of the “Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America” - announced a commitment to pursue a North American steel industry strategy, continental compatibility in automobile standards, and removing requirements for “rules of origin” on some \$30 billion of goods.

This pressure to act together has come not only because of the pressures of securitization within North America – as a consequence of September 11 and the inexorable move to privilege “Homeland Security” - but by the prospect of accelerated and ongoing pressures from emerging/ent actors most notably China that are re-writing the rules of global commerce. The Canadian peak organization the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, for example, has expressed firm support for a new form of partnership in North America as a device for competing for investment and jobs with the new giants on the international stage.¹⁰

As played out on both the security and competitive scale, though, these types of pressure accent again the constraints on strategic co-operation due to countervailing holds. A key ongoing component of the Canadian approach to border issues pre 9/11 was the maintenance of the differentiated status. On a crucial aspect of border management, Canada faced the threat of losing this status under Section 110 of the U.S. 1996 *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act*. Indeed a full repertoire of lobbying techniques was used to try to delay, deflect and/or temper the U.S. push on

¹⁰ Independent Task Force on the Future of North America, *Building on a North American Community: Report of the Independent Task Force on the Future of North America* (Ottawa/Mexico City: Council on Foreign Relations in association with the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales, May 2005).

cross-border controls. The focus of the Canadian effort was to point out the adverse effect of this legislation on the already congested traffic at entry points between the two countries.¹¹

Post –9/11 Canada attempted to stick to this bilateral orientation. Unenthusiastic about explicit or implicit modes of trilateralism in this arena, Canada preferred to deal with the U.S. strictly on a one-to-one basis. By design, therefore, it chose to differentiate itself (both in terms of issues and solutions) from Mexico. While this stance could be justified on technical grounds (the two-speed approach), it also underscored important symbolic/political factors, which depicted Mexico not so much as partner but as a complicating ingredient in the neighbourhood. As in other areas of Canadian foreign policy, the incremental approach was judged to be the first best option. Any notion of a North American security perimeter was rejected in favour of a series of incremental and piecemeal measures with the focus on the more efficient management of the Canada-U.S. border.¹²

The impact of new competitors on the Canada-Mexico relationship is also highly complex, especially with regard to China. In declaratory terms, it allows a push towards cooperation. Prime Minister Paul Martin notably highlighted this fundamental change in

¹¹ See Andrew F. Cooper, 'Waiting at the Perimeter: Making US Policy in Canada', in *Canada Among Nations 2000*, ed. Fen Osler Hampson and Maureen Appel Molot (Don Mills, Ont: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also the speech by David Zussman, 'What's After Nafta?' to an Industry Canada conference in Calgary on North American economic integration, June 2001; and Daniel Drache, *Borders Matter* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004).

¹² For one sign, however, that Canada is at least prepared to think outside the box see Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *Partners in North America: Advancing Canada's Relations with the United States and Mexico*, (***, December 2002).

“the nature of the world’s economy” at Waco as a catalyst for making “North America as competitive as possible”.¹³

In practice, however, the “threat” from China is far more intense for Mexico than Canada. Mexico sees itself with some justification as being under a massive threat from Chinese manufacturers (with a loss of some 200,000 clothing, textile and other jobs between 2001 and 2003), and has (unlike the major South American countries) resisted efforts to recognize China as a market economy. Moreover, while there has been some Chinese investment in the Mexican mining industry, the constitutional restrictions on non-state firms exploring or producing oil puts Mexico in a very different situation than Canada.¹⁴ Despite the nod to a sense of historical solidarity as developing countries, therefore, Canada can more effectively put in place a measure of an extended relationship.

Formulating some proposals for overcoming the sense of difference

As in any relationship one prime suggestion is that the two countries do things together. In good part this still features the choice of working together to reduce the leverage of the US either through bilateral or plurilateral means. One illustration of this tendency stands in the campaign against the Helms-Burton legislation. Another comes out in the stance of both Canada and Mexico to the Byrd Amendment.

¹³ Susan Delacourt, “The ties that bind; Three leaders sign complex, itemized deal with Bush pushing security, Martin trade issues”, *Toronto Star*, March 24, 2005, ***.

¹⁴ James C. McKinley, “Hu signs trade deals during trip to Mexico: Visit gives chance to defuse tense relationship,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2004, ***.

Yet, while highly salient on an issue-specific basis, these types of activity by themselves reinforce the convenient not the committed tone of the relationship. To break down the sense of disconnect there is a need to build trust and confidence in each other that goes beyond balancing “the powerful one.” On some sensitive diplomatic issues, this means privileging each other over other choices. One sign of progress in this area from the Mexican side came with President Fox’s support for Canada on the softwood lumber issue. A similar note of commitment from the Canadian side came through the recent support for Canada for the Mexican Foreign Minister, Luis Ernesto Derbez, in his bid win the position of the OAS Secretary-General not only following the US lead as its backup option but as its first choice over Jose Miguel Insulza, Chile’s Interior Minister.

Yet while necessary for a more committed relationship this type of support is still not enough. As the episode of the Derbez candidacy reveals there is also a need for more detailed appreciation about not only the opportunities but the risks of taking such a supportive stance. The image of Derbez as the candidate from the NAFTA and soon-to-be CAFTA countries isolated him from the South American “core” countries (excepting only Peru and Bolivia which had their distinct historical reasons for mobilizing against any candidate from Chile, and Colombia, the US’s close ally). It also helped create a backlash against Derbez in Mexico itself.

With this context in mind, then, far more detailed attention needs to be paid to a regular and multifaceted pattern of diplomatic engagement directed at elevating the knowledge base of the political/social systems of the two countries.¹⁵ One suggestion that

¹⁵ For good background see Stacey Wilson-Forsberg, “Canada and Mexico: Searching for Common Ground on the North American Continent”, *Focal Policy Paper*, FFP-02-3, February, 2002; Danielle Goldfarb, “The Canada-Mexico Conundrum: Finding Common Ground,” C.D. Howe Institute Backgrounder, *The Border Papers*, No. 91, July 2005.

would do a lot of good here would be a return to the idea of some form of a Canada-Mexico Commission that would bring both state and non-state actors together on a regular basis. Such a forum must go beyond the notion of a small select wise men/women committee. Not only has this more limited option been tried through the Independent Task Force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations (and co-chaired by John Manley, Pedro Aspe and William Weld); It almost inevitably tilts the balance towards discussion of formal top-down integration options (customs union, common market, economic union) as opposed to informal bottom-up mechanisms signposted already by the Waco agreement.¹⁶

Another suggestion along the same lines would be to set up a version of the advocacy Secretariat established at the Canadian Embassy in Washington DC in Mexico City. Paralleling the US version this institutional innovation would supplement the Congressional liaison function of the embassy, with special attention as well to the facilitation of visits by provincial representatives, business people, and NGOs. The office would also ratchet up the level of public diplomacy techniques available to Canadian officials, via connections with media, cultural and academic personnel and focus groups.

All of these efforts would reduce the impression that the Canadian-Mexican relationship has been driven simply by day events and an ad hoc reaction to specific problems – the real box in which this relationship has become entrapped. Not only could a strategic vision be refined but a system of networks be tapped into. Indeed, the timing appears to be good to run with this agenda from the perspective of both business and NGOs. Business groups symbolized by the Council of Chief Executives appear to be far

¹⁶ My colleague Daniel Schwanen has focused on these developments in a number of works, including “Interoperability, not Convergence”, *Policy Options*, November 2001, 47.

more engaged with Mexico than they were even at the negotiation of NAFTA (as witnessed by the enthusiasm for the Waco declaration). NGOs fixation with the Chapter 11 and the “race to the bottom” has also arguably eased, allowing some momentum to be built up on other initiatives designed both to build “like-mindedness” and to address key problems. One illustration that would be valuable on both counts would be a common initiative on the cross-border movement of small arms (and the implications for multi-level governance).

A number of other proposals would do much a sense of commitment. Through a bottom up lens an ambitious move towards a societal project – for instance, via a buy in on President Fox’s “Vision 20/20” proposal for a social fund - seems unlikely at the moment. However, specific policies could be implemented that would be at least markers along that route. Enabling small scale but highly symbolic programs such as the one centred on thee some 11,000 seasonal Mexican agricultural workers to be embedded stands out here. So in a different manner does the introduction of an equivalent program to the Fulbright Scholarships to allow selective students and academics to forge connections in Canada and Mexico.

Through a top down lens one crucial ingredient is building momentum towards Prime Minister Martin’s Leaders’ 20 proposal The beauty of this plan is that it adds Mexico to the cluster of BRICS (Brazil, India, Russia, China) in an expanded G7/8. Another sign of commitment might be for both Canada and Mexico to support each other’s candidates for top-level institutional position. One possibility of this type is in connection with the OECD, where a successor is needed for Donald Johnson the current Secretary General.

Again, as in any relationship these signs of commitment must be ongoing. If Canada is to be taken seriously as a partner it must make sure that amidst all its other diplomatic connections Mexico does not get short shrift. Mexico likewise must scale up its delivery on a wide number of fronts. It must not only forego any hint of backsliding on democracy it needs to keep trying to build a rules-based system. But beyond that it needs to craft a more nuanced, multifaceted approach that allows some further glimpses of commonality in how the two countries see and deal with international issues. The assistance given by the Mexican military in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (via an army convoy, marines, and a navy vessel) may be a harbinger of this sort of parallelism, in that this work replicates in some ways the focus that Canada has placed on a DART.

For both Canada and Mexico, furthermore, the relationship needs to span material as well as institutional/procedural matters. The “Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America” signed by Prime Minister Martin with Presidents Bush and Fox lent some weight to these claims that things would be done differently.¹⁷ [Office of the Prime Minister, Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America Established”, Ottawa, March 23, 2005 <<http://pm.gc.ca>>] Advocates most notably the Canadian Council of Chief Executives announced that the arrangement served as “a quantum leap for the continent”.

On closer examination, however, the deal was far less a big bang than an incremental shift in design. What was novel was the level of ministerial/bureaucratic engagement that the work plan entailed. The degree of trade-offs that were made possible between issues areas was also different. Yet in terms of the detailed plan the statement

¹⁷ Office of the Prime Minister, “Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America Established”, Ottawa, March 23, 2005 <http://pm.gc.ca>.

lacked any ingredient to establish new or improved institutions. Most tellingly, the overall process lacked any compelling timeframe or responsibility to deliver results.¹⁸ In overall terms, therefore, an air of convenience still hung over the program.

Given this context, moving to a committed relationship will not be a sudden or seamless movement. Only an unmitigated optimist would predict that Canada and Mexico will be able to move away from their entrenched habits in dealing with each other. Indeed there might be a temptation to backslide if the two countries go in divergent political directions. Only by thinking outside the box – with a very different mental map and policy trajectory - can these obstacles be confronted. Moreover, amidst the growing awareness that there could be more to North America than convenient arrangements (debates encompassing the future of a limited and stalled NAFTA) the way is open to at least a more robust discussion about potential options. The glimmer of opportunity should be seized and new points of reference and cohesion located.

¹⁸ See Allan Gotlieb, “Baby steps towards a partnership”, *Globe and Mail*, April 13, 2005, ***.

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