

Mexico-Canada A Growing Relationship

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In examining relations between Mexico and Canada, I will attempt to explore some of their potential. The inevitable starting point is the acceptance of three points: in the first place, since formal relations were established in 1944, they were always cordial, based on affinities and sympathies that were—why not say so—open and explicit. In the second place, it was a relationship the substance of which did not measure up to the level of cordiality; that is, it was a cordial relationship with no concrete substance, with no content for public policy priorities for either government. Thirdly, we also had a series of interesting agreements that have become clear in different multilateral fora, although we never explored nor exploited them. When we look at the votes cast by Mexico and Canada in international bodies, enormous similarities in their interests and political choices emerge. There have been, then, many points of contact that nevertheless were not explored in any depth as part of either government's foreign policy.

Without exaggeration, from 1971, we have had at least a mechanism for contact on the highest level, the Mexico-

Canada Ministerial Commission, that has allowed for dialogue around different questions, although over the almost 30 years of its existence it has only met 12 times. In these conditions we came into the 1990s: seemingly bilateral relations would be relatively easy to broaden out; both sides were willing. The possibility of creating closer ties between Mexico and Canada and in general between Canada and Latin America had already been explored very interestingly in the academic world. But it was still a promise, a possibility that had not yet been brought about.



A meeting of the Mexico-Canada Ministerial Commission.

In the 1990s, several important events took place, the most significant of which was both countries entering into negotiations and signing the North American Free Trade Agreement. Obviously, it should be taken into account that one way or another a good part of what was

done was already foreshadowed in the bilateral Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Canada which, with the limited exception of the U.S.-Israeli free trade agreement a couple of years before, had broken down the main barrier to entering into this kind of negotiations: the U.S. insistence on the global nature of its international economic policies.

I remember a precedent which clearly shows the agreements between Canada and Mexico. It was in August 1971 when a new international economic order began

to develop due to then-President Nixon's policies. Among other things, Nixon decided to charge an additional 10 percent duty on all U.S. imports regardless of their origin. Immediately, Canada and Mexico—each by itself, never together—appealed to those in charge of U.S. economic policy, basically the secretary of the treasury, to argue that, since neither country was responsible for the U.S. economy's balance of payments deficit, and since their trade

was so centered on the U.S., an additional 10 percent duty, on their products would be very unfavorable for both economies. In contrast with other nations, they each requested an exception be made to that global economic policy although, it should be emphasized, never jointly.

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Both nations had the same approach, but sometimes they were not even aware of it.

However, the U.S. response was clear: U.S. economic policy is global and has no regional exceptions. That was the general foreign policy rule of our main neighbor that the late 1980s agreement between Canada and the United States definitively did away with, opening up the possibility for what in the 1990s would be a new point of contact between Canada and Mexico: jointly negotiating with our main trade partner the new norms that would regulate the process of economic links with the North American community.

In the 1990s two other important changes came about. First, Canada joined not only the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1990 but also other multilateral bodies in which Mexico participated, where it would be almost impossible not to recognize similar positions. Since then, both countries deliberate and decide on the same agendas, the same draft resolutions, the same proposals by other countries around which they agree or not, but which puts them in the position of having to clearly state their opinion for or against questions central to hemispheric policy. Canada's membership in the OAS has been fundamental in recent years. For example, with regard to legislation about extraterritoriality approved by the U.S. Congress a few years ago, Canada and Mexico played an important role in forging the positions adopted by the OAS and the Interamerican Legal Commission.¹

Not only did we agree, but we worked together. It was impossible not to, given the elemental fact that we were seated in

the same forum, at the same table, discussing with the same opponent.

The second important change also dates back to the beginning of the 1990s: Mexico's incorporation into the Asian Pacific Economic Coordination (APEC) in 1993, where something similar happened despite the fact that APEC is more flexible and less articulated, more a space for discussion than for decision-making. In this body, both countries have agreed on matters related to the Asian Pacific economies, although always limited to secondary non-political issues, due, above all, to the sensitivity of the representatives from the three Chinas.

At this point I would like to summarize the first part of this text: the foreign policy agendas of Mexico and Canada share many common views on topics that are important to both countries. This

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includes concerns from those linked to NAFTA to such transcendental questions as human rights in the framework of the inter-American system and the furthering of free trade in Asia. In the last analysis, both our countries are part of the Western Hemisphere side of the Pacific

Rim, which has a great impact. This was very clear when Canada hosted the APEC forum last year, which ended with the Vancouver summit where innumerable topics were discussed. The summit also demonstrated that both nations coincide at meetings which evaluate the environment, norms for maritime traffic, and many more topics that they had never sat down together to discuss before. This shows how important it is not only that Canada joined the OAS, but that Mexico joined APEC, both points of contact that strengthen the political links between the two countries.

The results of this new era of interaction in the 1990s are very clear. Several of the initiatives are well known: no one should be surprised that in the Western Hemisphere it has been Mexico and Canada who have emphasized the question of the Helms-Burton Act. Mexico and Canada were also the only two countries of this hemisphere that did not break relations with Cuba. Mexico, even though it was a member of the OAS in the 1960s did not break diplomatic relations with Cuba, and Canada, although it was not a member at that time, adopted a policy very similar to Mexico's.² Nevertheless, we never explored nor made more of this agreement as a possible road for joint foreign policy action. Today, however, as members of the same multilateral forum, not only do we agree on this policy, but we have broadened it out, we have made the most of it, seeking allies, and attained very important goals.

Another point of agreement and common initiatives we explored in the summer of 1996 thanks to much closer contact is land mines. We had finished

reviewing the Convention on Conventional Weapons, including a protocol on mines that had left many countries unsatisfied. Canada took the initiative that same summer to organize a process to regulate the use of land mines, consulting us immediately. Mexico became part of the so-called Nucleus Group at the negotiations forum. Surprisingly, under the initiative and leadership of Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, in a little more than a year we managed to come up with a convention on the point. Not only that, but both countries also began to apply the spirit of the convention in practice. Canada and Mexico developed policies to support the victims of land mines in Central America. Mexico could not help with efforts to dig up the mines because it has no such technical unit in its armed forces: it simply has never produced mines and they are not part of our arsenal, nor do we have trained personnel in the field. But, we could collaborate with Canada on the project, which we did. Programs were developed for aiding the victims in Central America, a high priority area for both our countries. This is an example of how we have found spaces for joint action and initiatives not only on a hemispheric level, but globally.

The third example which clearly shows Mexico's and Canada's common interests is linked to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). It is interesting that there are several different lines of argument about how to achieve hemisphere-wide free trade. Some want to first establish free trade separately in South and North America and then mix the two. Neither Canada nor Mexico consider this the best way to cooperate, and we have both made efforts to open up a

space for North-South free trade in the Americas. The first free trade agreement that Mexico signed in the 1990s was with a South American country, Chile. And Canada is the second North American country to have a free trade agreement with Chile. What Canada and Mexico are both pursuing with Mercosur is very similar and can be summarized as bridge building between North and South in a free trade area, as well as making sure that the idea of two geographic blocs that may or may not be joined in a hemisphere-wide area does not become hegemonic.

Based on the already existing and deepening cordial relations between our two countries, we have thus entered into a period in which we have begun to give those relations much more real content in the economic plane as well as on the strictly foreign policy level. Politically, the relationship's content today is infinitely superior to what it was only a few years ago. At the end of this decade, I believe we are entering into a third stage of Mexico-Canada relations. I would like to direct a few remarks to this issue.

The first stage consisted simply of getting to know each other enough to be able to have relations. From a political point of view, Mexico's Foreign Relations Ministry did not have a special office dedicated specifically to Canada. And Canada was only rarely touched on in the North American division, where something urgent was always happening with regard to the other country in the area that impeded organizing permanent work regarding relations with Canada. The Mexican government then decided to establish a special office in charge of handling relations with Canada, respon-

sible for daily taking the question of Mexican-Canadian relations to high-level Mexican policy-makers. This first stage was one, I emphasize, of getting to know each other and setting up the internal mechanisms that would allow for dialogue.

The second stage was much richer and more interesting, but also more complex. It was a stage in which, although we had more points of contact, more differences also arose, a quite natural, normal development in any mature relationship, like the one we seek to build with Canada.

At the end of the 1990s, the third stage, we are in a situation in which we fundamentally continue to have agreements, as well as a greater ability to explore, broaden out and foster them. But we also must learn what it means to not agree on some issues. Far from being an obstacle, this is a sign of a mature relationship in which there are topics around which national interests and the readings each of our two countries have of the situation may and do differ.

What we are currently doing is to create the conditions wherein it is possible to treat these inevitabilities for what they are: factors which enrich our relations and should not taint what has already been built and is a fundamentally positive basis for relations between Mexico and Canada. ■■■

NOTES

¹The author is referring to the passage of the famous Helms-Burton Act, opposed by Mexico and Canada inside the OAS, which demanded that the United States rescind the law. [Editor's Note.]

²In the early 1960s, on the initiative of the United States, all the member states of the OAS except Mexico decided to break diplomatic relations with Cuba. [Editor's Note.]