

Solid Americas strategy would reap big rewards for Canada

CAMPBELL CLARK (feat. COLIN ROBERTSON)

The Globe and Mail
May 24, 2011

Stephen Harper steps onto the world stage this week for the first time as a majority-government Prime Minister, with a four-year mandate that gives him a new opportunity to make good on a foreign-policy promise he made four years ago to expand Canada's presence in the Americas.

Mr. Harper flies to the G8 summit in Deauville, France, on Wednesday for talks on the current crises facing the world. But four years ago, he was in Santiago, Chile, pledging a new era of Canadian efforts to shape an Americas at a crossroads. Despite the spotty follow-through of his minority-government years, the hemisphere still offers a potential cornerstone for Mr. Harper's foreign policy.

A solid Americas strategy, fully implemented now, can bring together Mr. Harper's foreign-policy goals. It can build political capital with Washington, improve security, marry the region's needs with Canada self-interest, and expand trade. It can serve Canada's interests, and the world's.

The region offers the lure of expanded trade with big, booming economies such as Brazil. The potential is already being proven, with Canadian trade with Latin America rising 28.8 per cent in 2010 from the previous year, faster than with any other region. And with China and other Asian countries expanding investment and trade with Latin America, a bigger presence in Latin America provides a back door to promising Pacific Rim trade.

But the place to start is closer to home, with a major effort to secure stability and growth in Mexico, our biggest Latin American trading partner and NAFTA colleague, as well as the Central American nations on its border.

A bold step there, pouring in hundreds of police and justice trainers and new resources to combat the crippling forces of extreme economic inequality, organized crime, insecurity and weak institutions, can build Canadian ties by countering troubling threats in a region that has largely turned to democratically elected governments, but still faces instability.

"Now, the challenge is not what it was 15 years ago," said Heraldo Munoz, the UN's assistant secretary-general and Latin America director of the United Nations Development Program. "The problem is the quality of democracy."

In his 2007 speech in Santiago, Mr. Harper portrayed Canada as a model for the hemisphere, proof that nations did not need to choose between "political authoritarianism and class warfare" on the one hand, or being "just like the United States." Canada, he said, will play a deeper role in the hemisphere, carving out a bigger presence for the long term.

"There were great expectations raised in 2007, when Canada announced its focus on the Americas, and Mr. Harper did his grand tour of Latin America," said Jorge Heine, a former Chilean diplomat who now teaches at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont. "But then there was a disconnect."

The grand shift that Mr. Harper promised was unfunded, unfocused and beset by distractions. The government pushed through free trade and aid with Colombia and delivered a major response to Haiti's earthquake. But across the hemisphere, many other governments see Canada's new era of engagement as a chimera, and still wonder what it means. It's time for Mr. Harper's government to make it clear.

"Now they've got a majority government, they can afford to be strategic," said former Canadian diplomat Colin Robertson, vice-president of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. "They've decided through a couple of minority parliaments that the Americas matter. Well, now put some meat behind it."

The missing substance to the plans has been a liability. An internal government evaluation, completed in January, found the strategy Mr. Harper pledged lacked funds, focus and co-ordination.

High-level government committees that were supposed to steer plans never met. Embassies lacked staff and programs, the internal report found, "resulting in a threat of decreased credibility rather than increased visibility for Canada." And though Canada increased its contributions to multilateral regional agencies, bilateral programs on the ground that would give Canada's efforts an oomph were lacking.

Outside of important increases for earthquake-struck Haiti, the Canadian International Development Agency's aid for the Americas went up only \$20-million in the two years after Mr. Harper pledged a new era of Canadian presence. That's less than 1 per cent of CIDA spending.

Canada can no longer get away with such a shoestring strategy for the hemisphere, and it will have to commit resources and efforts. For trade partners Brazil and Argentina, Canada needs to make high-level political visits matched by efforts to expand co-operation programs such as those for universities and the military. In countries such as Bolivia, Canada can offer expertise to strengthen weak institutions that make governments unable to collect income taxes or customs duties.

But the strategy needs a strategy, and Mr. Robertson has one to offer: "Start with Mexico and move south."

Canada's links to Latin America are deepest in its trade, travel and personal ties to Mexico, so expanding them is a way to build Canadian strengths, he argues. Aiding its education system and bringing Mexican students to Canada can pay off in bigger trade ties in the future. And a broader strategy can serve as a pattern for Canadian commitment in the hemisphere.

In many ways, Mexico has been Canada's forgotten partner in efforts to expand its role in the Americas. It is, by the standards of developing countries, well off, and thus not on the list for Canadian aid. And it's already a NAFTA partner, so in many ways, the trade deal is done.

In its desire to smooth flows at our own U.S. border, Ottawa has kept Mexico out of talks with Washington on a North American perimeter. But Canada's interests in making the NAFTA trade bloc function in Mexico, our third-largest trading partner, are crucial, too, as companies such as Bombardier and RIM operate plants there to meet Asian competition. But dark forces of organized crime and corruption are threatening to hamper its still-impressive growth.

Drug cartels control large swaths of Mexico's northern border states, and President Felipe Calderon has deployed 40,000 troops to fight a drug war that can't be trusted to Mexico's corrupt police forces, underlining the fragility of the rule of law.

And while Canada can't fight on the front lines of Mexico's drug wars, it can help the country's massive long-term efforts to reconstitute its police forces and strengthen its threatened justice system with a bold step: pouring in hundreds of trainers to help rebuild the Mexican police forces, train its judges and help strengthen the rule of law.

"If we can train Iraqi police, as we were doing in Jordan for a while, why aren't we doing this with the Mexican police, where our interests are much greater?" Mr. Robertson asked.

Canada is already doing that on a small scale with RCMP officers helping to train officers, organize police systems and help weed out corrupt recruits, but the \$5-million program is too small and must be expanded massively to have an impact, said Carlo Dade, executive director of FOCAL, an Ottawa-based Latin America think tank.

It's a plan that can be spread to the fragile Central American states across the Mexican border such as Honduras and Guatemala, where staggeringly high crime rates and the bloody violence of drug cartels has overwhelmed weak and corrupt justice systems. And focusing aid in those two weak countries on job-skills training and programs to fight extreme poverty would send a signal of Canadian commitment to the region, Mr. Heine said.

What Mr. Harper needs now, Mr. Heine said, is to commit the resources, provide a focus and sell it again to the hemisphere. "To some extent, these things are also a matter of waving the flag. You have to sell your wares," he said. "Now that the elections are over and Prime Minister Harper has a majority government, it seems to me it's a good moment."