

How to get that border deal just right

ALLAN GOTLIEB AND COLIN ROBERTSON

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With this week's Iowa caucuses, the presidential season begins in earnest. An American presidential campaign is splendid entertainment, but it's also diversionary and we can't expect much attention to our agenda. If we're to realize the promises of the December border agreement designed to improve our economic competitiveness, we have work to do in the coming months.

The Oval Office remains the best entry point for Canadian interests. It's the one relationship that every prime minister has to get right, and Stephen Harper has demonstrated this ability both with George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Closing on the border deal is the priority for our embassy and our network of consulates. With their technical ability to demonstrate the linkage between jobs, exports to Canada (still America's first market) and Canadian investment for each legislative district, Ambassador Gary Doer will be the chief advocate as well as the control point for a co-ordinated outreach to Congress and state legislators.

As we learned long ago with the experience of the still-born East Coast Fisheries Agreement, we need to make our case starting with Capitol Hill. This means a thousand points of contact: legislators and their staff, and also the permanent staff of the committees, agencies and departments within the Beltway. They're critical on regulatory issues and the all-important "interpretation" of the rules for those in the field.

Passage of the free-trade agreement was a near-run thing, and it depended on the cultivation of "white knights" such as senators Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Bill Bradley. We need to develop champions within Congress, and this is where Canadian ministers and legislators need to cultivate and solidify relationships, beginning with those representing the northern border states, where many of the pilots will take place.

The regional conferences of premiers and governors and provincial and state legislators are important forums. Given the deepening integration, we should aim to make a discussion of Canada-U.S. relations a standing item on the agenda of the National Governors Association. Intervention by the premiers with their governor counterparts was instrumental in securing the 2010 reciprocity agreement on procurement.

The long-term success of the deal lies as much in addressing the "tyranny of small differences" afflicting our goods, services and people as with the challenges they encounter at the border. While the deal was crafted by Barack Obama's administration to avoid submitting implementing legislation to Congress, we would be making a mistake if we relied solely on the administration. Behind a regulation, there often stands a protectionist interest, and behind the protectionist interest stands a congressman.

Our success ratio rises in proportion to the perception that it's both an American issue and vital to their national security, as we are currently witnessing with the Keystone XL pipeline debate. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been especially vocal in encouraging the administration to approve the pipeline.

The Chamber of Commerce and like-minded associations, including the Business Roundtable and the National Association of Manufacturers, need to be encouraged to devote commensurate attention to highlighting the importance of cross-border supply-chain dynamics. So, too, with the union movement, a vital constituency in the Democratic coalition, that has also been active in support of the XL pipeline.

All of these initiatives will contribute to building the conditions for passage of the border deal. Given the immense complexity of the deal and the constraints of time and competition for time, we also recommend the appointment of special envoys. They would report directly to the President and the Prime Minister and drive its implementation during the next 12 months. The acid rain agreement wouldn't have been achieved without the appointment of former Ontario premier Bill Davis and former transportation secretary Drew Lewis.

Such appointments would signal the priority the two leaders attach to the achievement of this deal. To represent Canada, we can think of no one possessing a better appreciation and the experience of successfully working both systems, as well as the gravitas, guile and good humour to get it done, than Brian Mulroney.

Allan Gotlieb, a former Canadian ambassador to the United States, is a senior adviser at Bennett Jones LLP. Colin Robertson, first head of the Advocacy Secretariat in Canada's Washington embassy, is a senior strategic adviser at McKenna Long & Aldridge LLP.