

The bigger picture

On an even larger scale, Canada, the U.S. and Mexico are also advancing a continental agenda through the evolving mechanism of NAFTA, as well as other means. And initial meetings in Toronto in October saw the launch of a Council on Foreign Relations task force to explore much greater continental integration.

Former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, co-chair of the task force, says that there is concern that North America “must not remain static” amid the expansion and increasing integration of the European Union and the rapid emergence of Asia—especially China—as a global trading power.

The Canadian partnership with Mexico will also greatly benefit by addressing such matters. Canada is now marking 60 years of diplomatic relations with Mexico, and both countries are interested in deepening the bonds. The recent visit to Canada by Mexican President Vicente Fox resulted in the signing of a partnership agreement between the countries that paves the way for a series of public and private-sector initiatives.

However, it's not all about products and security; nations on a continent share the water and air as well. Indeed, environmental concerns and trade are now strongly linked in North America, notes Chantal-Line Carpentier, head of the environment, economy and trade program of the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation in Montreal.

“We have a lot of collaboration as we look at renewable energy,” says Carpentier, whose intergovernmental organization helps the three countries establish harmonized environmental policies. “We look at capacity building, local development and the environment so we can improve our trade. It's a win-win-win.”

A family bond

The U.S. is also working to foster greater integration with Mexico. Yet in terms of historical parallels and political closeness, the Canada-U.S. relationship enjoys a familial bond unmatched by any other nations.

“Our countries were both built on immigration, and not just immigrants but refugees; that makes for a different kind of society,” notes Michael Dawson, Senior Policy Advisor of U.S. Relations at Foreign Affairs Canada. “These are countries with strong regional cultures and that's a big similarity.”

Canada and the U.S. also have major political commonality in being federal states, with the U.S. becoming the first such nation in the world in 1776, and Canada the third in 1867 (following Switzerland). And while no two federal countries are exactly alike in their administration,



Photo: CTV (Adrian Wajid)

observes Karl Nerenberg, director of public information for the Forum of Federations in Ottawa, federalism is a “significant point of understanding” between the nations.

The close sharing of political principles between Canada and the U.S. has made for repeated successful military alliances over the last century. Soldiers from Canada and the U.S. fought side by side in two world wars, in the Korean War and in recent conflicts, including the Gulf War, Kosovo, Haiti and Afghanistan.

Canada has also done a good job of responding to U.S. security concerns in the wake of September 11, believes Joseph Jockel, director of the Canadian Studies Program at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y., one of more than 50 such programs across the U.S. Jockel adds that the U.S. is also pleased with the apparent Canadian flexibility on continental missile defence. While some cultural differences have been accentuated of late, those long-term defence and economic linkages prevail and dominate.

“No matter what the politics are, no matter who the leaders are, this is always going to be the most important trading relationship in the world,” says Jockel. “I think Canadians pay a lot more attention to the politics and optics of the bilateral relationship than Americans do.”

That's a natural consequence of being a nation of just over 30 million people alongside one of nearly 10 times as many, and a historic global power at that. While Canadians are at times sensitive to the political ins and outs of the friendship, more notable is how many connections are taken for granted.

Cross-border picnic in Coutts, Alberta: At almost any regional track meet, film festival, scientific conference, hobbyist gathering or good-sized public event of any description on the continent, Canadians and Americans will almost invariably both be present.