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Mexico-Cuba Relations:
Lessons for Canada?

(A Report Prepared for the Policy Research Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa
May 2004)

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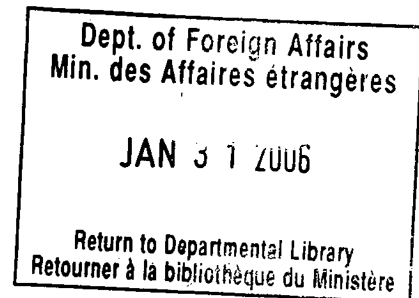

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Executive Summary

- Despite obvious differences between Canada and Mexico, there are clear reasons for a comparison of their bilateral relations with Cuba.
- Mexico's long (over 100 years) relationship with Cuba has traditionally been complex and ambivalent.
- U.S. influence on Mexican foreign policy is particularly strong. In recent years (since the Helms-Burton legislation) this has also had a negative influence on trade.
- Paradoxically (largely for domestic political purposes), Mexico has often played the "Cuba card" effectively to illustrate its independence from Washington.
- Bilateral relations have plummeted to an all-time low since 2000, during the Fox presidency.
- Popular reaction in Mexico to the Fox handling of the Cuba file has been extremely critical. Strong "people to people" relations, and a deeply-rooted respect for Cuban independence, remain in Mexico, despite the official policy.
- There are numerous reasons for both countries to promote a cordial bilateral relationship, and despite the official ambivalence shown by Mexico, pragmatism has generally been found.
- In the debate over isolation vs. engagement, the latter is more successful. Pressure tactics on Cuba (to effect change of policy) have proven remarkably unsuccessful.
- There are several lessons for Canada to learn from the Mexican experience with Cuba (and in particular the failures of the Fox approach are instructive). Canada should also recognize that it is a major player in Cuba, with tremendous potential for influence.

Mexico-Cuba Relations: Lessons for Canada?

Why Mexico?

At first glance the idea of employing any lessons gleaned from Mexico's relations with Cuba–which reached their nadir in May 2004–in an analysis of Canadian-Cuban relations appears somewhat fanciful. After all, what **is** there in common between Canada and Mexico? We have vastly different histories, are descended from radically diverse political systems and cultures, speak different languages, and traditionally have had at best limited bilateral relationships.

At the same time in the last decade we have both (finally) been discovering one another. We are both active members of NAFTA–and in fact depend upon our shared, powerful neighbour as our major trading partner. Obviously this makes for an occasionally difficult dynamic, with a number of trade problems still unsettled. Perhaps more importantly, the reference by Pierre Trudeau to the challenges of living next to the United States, applies equally to both Mexico and Canada.[1] Our economies are thus becoming (increasingly) inextricably linked–bilateral trade was $12 billion in 2002, with a million Canadian tourists visiting Mexico. But so too are our foreign policies, since we both aspire to major roles within the Americas, while on the global stage both are medium-sized players. Increasingly we also are identifying common goals in our foreign policy–and are developing an increased sense of self-awareness.

Our in many ways similar relationship with the world's only superpower clearly makes for an interesting dynamic. Most recently, to take one example where we adopted a common position despite significant pressure from our powerful neighbour, both Canada and Mexico decided to favour the U.N. approach to the Iraq question, and turned down U.S. requests to join with them against the regime of Saddam Hussein. (Mexico was a member of the Security Council at the time, and thus bore the brunt of even greater U.S. government pressure).

In terms of each country's relations with Cuba, there is a great deal in common–although the rationale for Mexican policy differs substantially from that of Canada. Mexico and Canada have traditionally had a balanced, normal relationship with Cuba–differing radically with Havana on many areas, but consistently preferring a policy of dialogue over confrontation. The differences of opinion (often over profound matters of substance) with Havana have occasionally been heated. These differences should not be underestimated, and as recently as the spring of 2004 there were protestations in both Ottawa and Mexico City about the human rights situation in Cuba. Two weeks later, following strong criticisms of this decision by President Castro, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations recalled Ambassador Lajous from Havana, and gave her Cuban counterpart 48 hours to leave Mexico. It is, however, instructive to see how Mexico, even then, has handled the low points in the bilateral relationship.

Both countries, in general, have maintained cordial, correct relations with Havana–and in fact both have recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of a reasonably productive relationship with Cuba. Moreover, in the early 1960s, Mexico and Canada were the only countries of the Americas **not** to break relations with Cuba–again despite significant pressure from Washington.

Also in the last decade both Ottawa and Mexico City introduced "antidote legislation" to counter the extraterritorial aspects of the Helms-Burton Law of 1996, and both threatened to use the NAFTA framework to protest against it. In addition, both Mexico and Canada have very substantial contacts with Cuba in a variety of fora–tourism, business, investment, NGO, academic, and general people-to-people ties. Moreover, given the dependence of both North American countries upon a single large partner, Mexico–like Canada–is the only country in the world where the United States dimension of the relationship with Cuba is so dramatically felt. Finally, as noted above, both countries have seen their relationship with Cuba chill noticeably in recent years–and have reacted accordingly.

In sum, there is indeed a rationale for assessing the Mexican approach to Cuba, and to learning from that experience. Both Mexico and Canada have much to learn from each other, both in terms of their approach to relations with Cuba and, by extension, with Latin America.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first provides an historical overview of the evolution of Mexican-Cuban relations since the 1959 revolution, assessing the principal strengths and weaknesses of each key stage. The second analyzes the fundamental reasons behind the Mexican position. The third examines the successes and failures of Mexico-Cuba relations, assessing what has worked, and what has failed. There then follows a section analyzing the applicability of this for Canadian-Cuban relations.

Mexican-Cuban Relations: An Overview of the PRI Years

Homero Campa, the correspondent in Havana for the respected Mexican journal Proceso between 1992 and 1999, has done an excellent job in dividing up the contemporary Mexico-Cuba relationship into four basic periods: Marriage by Convenience (1959-1991), One Foot on the Island (1991-1994), From the Embrace to Forgetting about You (1994-2000), and Accompanying You as We Go Our Separate Ways (2000-present).[2]

Common to all these periods has been a somewhat ambivalent level of cordiality. The relationship has always been diplomatically correct, and occasionally quite mutually supportive. Since 1959 Mexico has indeed made an effort to maintain and to develop bilateral relations, largely for reasons outlined in the second section. That is not to say, however, that there have not been problems. The Mexican government was generally very concerned about the Soviet influence in Cuba during the Cold War, and often–like Canada--provided information on Cuban activities to US intelligence agencies. Mexico also acted as a "listening post" on things Cuban for the United States and several other countries.[3] It was, then, not the most welcoming of relationships–for example, passengers to and from Cuba were routinely photographed at the Mexico City airport by the CIA, and occasionally a diplomat would be expelled because of activities not appropriate to his or her mission.

Perhaps more serious, Mexican officials were also understandably concerned that the

"Cuban example" of revolution might prove contagious in their own country, rife with socio-economic disparities. (The Cubans have studiously refrained from fanning the flames of subversion in Mexico, and have steadfastly adhered to a policy of non-intervention, even during the difficult Chiapas situation of recent years. At the same time, many Mexican officials have been wary of Cuban intentions, particularly in light of acute social tensions in Mexico).

As a result of this complex background, there has traditionally been an unusual basis to the relationship in Mexico, one of official (albeit tentative) support for Havana, as well as an underlying worry about the example of the Cuban revolution spreading to Mexico: "The Mexican dilemma created a neurotic policy toward Cuba. In its public stance, Mexico was a staunch defender of Cuba´s independence and sovereignty and insisted that the United States comply with the principle of nonintervention toward the island."[4]

Privately, however, this level of support for Cuba was far more nuanced, with Mexican governments–regardless of their political stripe–consistently expressing a wariness about Havana's intentions. "Hasta cierto punto" (up to a certain point) was thus the traditional underlying theme in Mexico's approach to the Cuban revolution.

The relationship was further complicated by the difficult balancing act which Mexico consistently needed to perform, both in domestic politics and in regards to Washington. Clearly it needed to cultivate strong commercial ties with its powerful neighbour, and traditionally its major trading partner, the United States. At the same time various Mexican administrations sought to project an image of firm independence from Washington, a process which was often aided by a process of aloofness and occasionally what seemed to be racism from the U.S. neighbours. Even more important, the traditional allegiance to the values of the revolutionary legacy of Mexico had to be respected in domestic political circles–a fact easily proven by the extraordinary number of references to revolutionary aspirations found in official political discourse. Given the increasing importance of Cuba as an obsession for U.S. policy-makers after 1959, the question of Mexico developing a relationship with the Cuban revolution became even more challenging.

The relationship was (and in fact is) therefore rather bizarre. On the one hand Mexico was seen in some U.S. circles as being overly close to the Cuban revolution (an understandable position given the traditional revolutionary discourse employed by the PRI), while on the other Mexico was in fact often working hard behind the scenes in essence to protect U.S. interests. This was never done overtly–since to do so would not only have led to charges of Mexican administrations being "vendepatrias" (or "sell-outs")–but also quietly Mexican officials passed along intelligence reports to Washington, and expressed deference to key aspects of U.S. policy. In the spring of 2004, when bilateral relations fell to an all-time low, the Fox administration was accused of voting against Cuba in Geneva at the U.N. Human Rights Commission (following a phone call from President Bush), and then seeking to appease Washington–and at the same time discredit a leftist candidate for the next presidential election–in the so-called "Ahumada affair."

Two elements further muddied the diplomatic waters–the outbreak of revolution in Central America starting in Nicaragua (where the FSLN came to power in 1979), and then spreading to El Salvador and Guatemala, and the question of greater economic integration between Mexico and the United States. The governments of Luis Echeverría (1970-76), José López Portillo (1976-82) and–to a lesser extent--Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88) were all interested in questions of Latin American development, and sought to play the role of "helpful fixers" in the Central American quagmire. (This was for reasons both selfless–since Mexico holds a place of moral and economic leadership among the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America–and also selfish, since Mexico sought to increase its political influence over the continent).

The question of political leadership, and of humanitarian solidarity with the oppressed of Central America can not be discounted out of hand. Mexico had traditionally offered refuge to political exiles (Leon Trotsky being perhaps the best example over seventy years ago, while in the late 1930s Lázaro Cárdenas welcomed 10,000 Spanish Republican exiles to Mexico), and throughout the 1980s refugees flocked to Mexico from troubled areas of Central America. Fidel Castro himself, after being released from prison following his 1953 attack on the Moncada garrison, fled to exile in Mexico. The tradition of offering a haven for exiles, then, is deeply rooted, and a source of pride for Mexicans. In addition Mexico also offered its good offices to negotiate peace agreements in the region, a position regarded well in Latin America–but which was seen by powerful circles in Washington as meddling. (This was in large degree because the Reagan and Bush administrations were determined to impose a military solution on the Central American maelstrom. While the Mexican government could appreciate the underlying socio-economic basis for revolution, Washington interpreted virtually everything through a Cold War prism). Needless to say, these efforts of Mexico were generally well seen in Havana.

Mexico´s love-hate relationship with the United States, and the desire of the business class to develop strong ties between the two countries, have also played an influential role in determining the nature of Cuban-Mexican relations. To put it bluntly, whenever Mexico has pursued closer ties with the United States (such as during the Zedillo and Fox administrations), the issue of Cuba has been quickly relegated in importance, apart from its potential leverage in supporting U.S. initiatives vis-a-vis Havana. Conversely, whenever Mexico has felt itself slighted by Washington, the Cuba card has often reappeared quickly–in no small degree to goad Washington into reacting–and in particular to recognizing the importance of its neighbour to the south. It is a strategy that has been employed on several occasions, and Mexico has employed it well.

In the first half of his presidency, for example, López Portillo sought stronger commercial ties with the United States, but when these did not materialize he quickly fell back on nationalist aspirations, and produced the Cuba card. More recently President Fox–who had caused bilateral ties with Cuba to plummet to their lowest point ever–retreated to a more balanced position on Cuba but only after the failure of his government´s efforts to have undocumented Mexican workers in the United States recognized. The relationship with Cuba can thus be resurrected by

Mexican officials to remind their U.S. neighbours that the Cuban card can always be played in a variety of ways.

Nothing sums up better the ambiguity of Mexico's official stand on the Cuban revolution as much as the official reaction to the U.S.-sponsored abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. Mexico, fearful of the precedent that might be set in Latin America by a U.S. invasion of a nation Washington deemed undemocratic (and mindful too of its own barely democratic system, as well as the loss of approximately one-half of its territory to the United States the previous century), denounced the U.S. invasion. At the same time Mexico was increasingly preoccupied by the radical reforms being enacted in Cuba. The attitude of Manuel Tello, Mexico's Foreign Minister at the time, illustrates this ambivalence starkly. He has recounted that he was convinced that the U.S. invasion would succeed. Accordingly he had prepared a statement condemning the intervention by Washington –"Then I was going to church to offer up a prayer of thanksgiving to the United States for delivering us from the dangers of Castro".[5]

In sum, there were (and are) greater divisions between Mexico and Cuba than is generally thought, largely because of the complicated intricacies of Mexican politics–and in particular its relationship with the United States. That said, there has always been a tacit agreement between Cuba and Mexico to maintain cordial relations, in essence because in the last analysis it behooved both parties to maintain the status quo. The PRI, which ruled Mexico for some seven decades, was determined to hold on to power at all costs, and if that meant making a deal with Cuba–in many ways the embodiment of its own revolutionary aspirations of "land and freedom"of the 1910-20 period--by developing a solid diplomatic friendship, then so be it. Cuba for its part agreed not to support guerrilla factions in Mexico–and went out of its way to emphasize that point to Mexico. In sum, both countries have traditionally respected a policy of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of the other.

It was also a useful pact for Cuba, since it allowed Havana access to North American goods by way of Mexico. And it was important in terms of international prestige to have a good working relationship with one of the major trading partners of its longstanding foe, the United States–a comment which was equally applicable to the Canadian situation. Caught up (still) in revolutionary rhetoric, and mindful of the basic tenet of non-intervention in domestic politics, Mexico maintained a studied, formal relationship of distant respect, and correct relations. The marriage of convenience worked well–until the implosion of the Soviet Union, after which nothing in Cuba was ever the same.

Prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the démise of the Soviet Union two years later, Cuba offered Moscow an extraordinarily valuable piece of real estate, located just 90 miles from its traditional Cold War enemy. After 1991 its strategic importance was non-existent, and Cuba sank into a horrible economic (and psychological) depression. Almost overnight Cuba lost 85% of its trade, and GDP slumped by an estimated 35%. The "Special Period" started, leaving Cuba in survival mode. It was a time for audacious actions, since only by acting boldly, and in truly innovative fashion–even when this led to gross contradictions and severe social

problems–could the substantial gains of the revolution be protected.

Cuba found itself in the early 1990s with an overwhelming commercial dependence upon the countries of the socialist bloc and the COMECON organization. Unfortunately for Havana, these countries now insisted on an end to special socialist arrangements and wanted payment for their goods in dollars. Ties of socialist solidarity thus soon evaporated. Cuba now had to develop its own economy (after being kept dependent by design upon COMECON for three decades), discover new trading partners, and new investors. In all three areas Mexico soon took on a leading role, and rapidly became one of the principal sources of investment, as well as the leading trade partner in the Americas.

The arrival to the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988 marked a watershed in the relationship, and caused a major challenge for the Cuban government. It appears clear to many observers that the winner of the presidential election in that year was the PRD led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, whose father had done so much to strengthen bilateral relations with Cuba during his presidency (1934-40), and who in later life expressed strong support for the Castro government. The dilemma for the Castro government in 1988 was whether to attend the presidential inauguration, thereby validating government corruption, and in fact a travesty of democracy–or whether to respect the ties of friendship and ideology with the Cárdenas family, and decline the invitation. After much debate in Havana, the Cuban president did attend, and in so doing voted for pragmatism over principle (ultimately to seek a resolution to Cuba's dire economic straits). In so doing, Havana subordinated making a (justifiable) moral political statement to the needs of economic survival.

The Salinas presidency was to prove a six-year period that was useful for both Mexico and Cuba. Salinas was well aware that the "Cuba card" would, as always, be a useful bargaining in dealing with the United States, while the Cuban government was delighted to have Mexico contribute to its re-insertion into the Western hemisphere. Its substantial foreign investment and generous trade credits were also much appreciated by revolutionary Cuba. Both governments worked hard to improve commercial ties and Mexican investment in Cuba. For Mexicans this was largely a case of strategic investment, taking advantage of the absence of U.S. investments on the island, and dreaming of the future when they would have a privileged position precisely because they had staked out territory first.

The early 1990s saw a flood of Mexican capital come to the island. Bilateral trade rose to $US 400 million (largely in Mexico's favour), as Mexico quickly became the major trading partner of Cuba in Latin America. A number of high profile investments were also made by Mexican companies. Pemex started oil exploration ventures and also considered modernizing the Cienfuegos oil refinery; Cemex took over the cement factory in the port of Mariel; and, most important of all, the Grupo Domos came to Cuba determined to modernize the pre-revolutionary telephone system. Until the Helms-Burton legislation was passed, it appeared to be a wise, and profitable, long-term business trend.

After the Helms-Burton legislation was passed in 1996, however, all bets were off–and Mexican investors, fearing that they would be punished by U.S. claims--quickly withdrew from the island. In part this trend had already started with the 1994 peso crisis, but even more traumatic for Mexican investors was the threat of Helms-Burton. Their investments in the United States, and their exposure to lawsuits from angry enterprises nationalized by the revolutionary government, simply proved too hot to handle. In general their flirtation with the heady concept of capitalist investment in communist Cuba came abruptly to an end–although several medium- and small-sized investments continue in Cuba.

Since 1994 and the arrival of Ernesto Zedillo, the relationship steadily deteriorated. In terms of trade it has declined–although still clearly remains in Mexico´s favour. The large investors departed swiftly after the threat of Helms-Burton was unveiled. Mexico´s own disastrous economic situation–and especially the major peso devaluation–clearly didn´t help either. From a situation during the Salinas presidency when a revolving line of credit had been established (allowing the Cubans to obtain fresh credit in exchange for paying off their debts), the cold technocratic approach of the Zedillo government now refused to allow any lines of credit at all.

During the Zedillo presidency, and while Mexican-U.S. relations warmed noticeably, the signals between Havana and Mexico City increasingly chilled. One of the low points came in 1998 when Fidel Castro criticized Mexico for abandoning its revolutionary roots in pursuit of U.S. investment. Mexican schoolchildren, he noted with heavy irony, now knew more about Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters than their own national history. He was right–but his criticism was understandably not appreciated in nationalistic Mexican circles. Mexico retaliated swiftly–its ambassador was recalled to Mexico City and not allowed to return to Havana. The Cuban foreign minister was dispatched to Mexico on a mission of damage control, and Fidel Castro published a large article in the Mexican media apologizing to Mexican children for his intemperate remarks. It was a desperate attempt at damage control by the Cuban government, and on the surface it appeared to have been successful.

At the level of the presidency, however, things continued to deteriorate in1999 and 2000. At the Iberoamerican Summit held in Havana in 1999, President Zedillo took the offensive, criticizing the human rights situation in the host country, and calling upon Cuba to put its house in order. Needless to say, his gesture was not appreciated. To illustrate the poor level of bilateral communication, it is worth noting that both countries refrained from replacing ambassadors in each other's countries when their term expired. Cuba, for instance, was without an ambassador from November 1999 to May 2000. The case of Mexico was even more noticeable–with a gap of no less than six months (January-June 2001). Clearly messages–and not too subtle at that–were being sent.[6]

Almost at the Point of No Return: Mexico-Cuba Relations under Fox

The arrival of Vicente Fox in December of 2000 has without doubt continued this rapid downward spiral in Cuba-Mexico relations. Again Fidel Castro attended the presidential inauguration (to have refrained from doing so would have been unthinkably rude), and was pleased to receive assurances in a private interview with the new president that he was keen to reinstate the bilateral relationship to its previous positive nature. Ideological differences would be respected by Fox, Cuba's large debt to Mexico could be renegotiated, and Cuba's independence from the United States was of course understood. It all sounded too good to be true–and it was.

The appointment of noted Mexican intellectual (and himself the son of a former Minister of Foreign Affairs) Jorge Castañeda to set Mexico´s foreign policy augured badly for any development of the already badly-battered relationship. His book on the dissolution of the Latin American Left published in 1993, La utopía desarmada, and his scathing remarks about the Cuban revolution, had been poorly received in Cuba. His later book on the mythical figure of Che Guevara (La vida en rojo) was also controversial because of claims that Fidel Castro had abandoned Che´s guerrilla attempts in Bolivia–and was widely criticized in Cuba. Clearly Castañeda would find it difficult to make inroads into the widespread resentment against his appointment.

In many ways, however, Castañeda was merely mirroring the official line emanating from the office of presidents Zedillo and Fox, both of whom were displeased with the traditional Mexican approach to Cuba, which they viewed as grossly out of touch. Both presidencies had swung to the right, had decided that the most important foreign policy strategy for Mexico was to focus on strengthening relations with Washington, and were displeased with what they perceived as badly outdated revolutionary rhetoric emanating from Havana. There had been a noticeable shift in the importance given to the traditional terms of solidarity with Cuba, and the revolutionary discourse from the Mexican government itself has been steadily and studiously neglected.

In fact in both 2002 and in particular May of 2004 Mexico came perilously close to breaking diplomatic relations with Cuba. The main reason for this development has been the decision of both Mexican administrations--particularly that of Fox–to "modernize" the political system of the country, and deal with the nagging problem of human rights. Put simply, the Fox administration feels that it is time for Mexico to adopt a radically new approach to the thorny issue of human rights–both in domestic and foreign policy. In terms of foreign relations, both Zedillo and Fox had also decided that it was time to accept the brutal reality that Mexico´s economic future was inexorable linked to the United States. The combination of this commercial pragmatism, clear turn to the right, increased bilateral trade with the United States, and the advent of presidential elections in the United States, all contributed to a rejection of traditional approaches–and a closer identification with the foreign policy goals of Washington. The first target of this new approach to foreign policy was to be Cuba.

To be fair to Fox, an attempt has been made to stamp out corruption in Mexico, and the issue of domestic human rights (in which Mexico has a poor record) has been addressed for the first time in decades. The fact that the PAN defeated the PRI (in power for some seven decades, and widely viewed as practicing fraudulent elections) symbolized the intent of the new approach now being taken by Fox. If Mexico was attempting to deal head on with human rights abuses and the need for democratization at home, ran the argument, then it was legitimate to do so in regards to other countries too. The formerly untouchable doctrine of "non-intervention" in the affairs of another state was thus unceremoniously–if selectively--dumped. (And if this political volte-face also garnered favour in Washington, even better). A new approach had officially been adopted by the Fox administration, and old values–including the relationship with revolutionary Cuba–were expendable.

In addition to a reinvigorated interest in political democracy and respect for human rights, Mexico also confronted a new international agenda. Increasingly its economy was identified with that of the United States, perhaps not a surprising development since Vicente Fox had a wealth of international business experience (and in particular with the United States), and in fact had been president of Coca Cola de México. In addition Mexico now depended upon the United States for trade–80% of commerce was now with the powerful neighbour to the north–leading to the reflection of José Martí's idea that "el que compra, manda". A major push for even closer business ties ensued, and at the beginning of his administration there was great hope that the Bush administration would allow undocumented Mexican workers to legalize their situation in the United States.

This would have several benefits for Mexico–creating desperately needed employment for young Mexicans, producing billions of dollars in remittance money for Mexican communities, and professionalizing the image of Mexico in the United States. It was something which Fox and Castañeda badly wanted. Unfortunately just when this goal seemed attainable (President George W. Bush had earlier remarked that no other foreign relationship was more important than that which the United States enjoyed with Mexico), the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in September of 2001 caused this expectation to be instantly frozen. Thereafter Washington pursued aggressively an agenda of domestic security, defined narrowly on its own terms. In these new circumstances, Mexico's hopes for border controls to be loosened were soon rudely dashed. Instead Washington was now keen to develop a perimeter-wide security barrier around Canada, Mexico and the United States, and possibly even more widely. Making more flexible immigration arrangements was the last thing that Washington would now consider. The ambitious plans of Fox and Castañeda were instantly mothballed.

Despite this major setback in bilateral relations, in general the Fox government has remained close to the agenda of Washington (although its rejection of an invitation to join with the United States in supporting the war in Iraq is noteworthy, possibly in part because of its disappointment over the issue of undocumented Mexican workers in the United States, and the tactical need to show "distance" from the U.S. position). NAFTA and the proposed FTAA are seen by the Mexican business sectors as an important lifeline–a process which implies

automatically accepting an even stronger dependency upon the United States.

How did this dramatically new stage in Mexican-Cuban relations play out? With great drama, several surprises, and eventually almost with a rupture of relations established fully a century ago. There was a major sea change under the Castañeda tenure in foreign affairs, summarized well by his bold claim pregnant with symbolism that "The relations with the Cuban revolution are now finished. By contrast Mexican relations with the Republic of Cuba are now started" [7] In making this claim Castañeda was rejecting out of hand the status quo which had been in effect since 1959, and was taking Mexico into unchartered waters. What was clear, though, was that Mexico under the influence of Castañeda and Fox, notwithstanding the diplomatic assurances of President Fox to the contrary, now saw Cuba as an expendable ally. In 2001 history was made in the bilateral relationship when Mexico for the first time ever abstained on a U.N. vote condemning the human rights situation in Cuba (In the past it had always sided with Cuba, claiming that non-intervention was essential). In 2002, while Castañeda was still Minister, Mexico went further, adding its voice to a condemnation of Cuba. This trend has continued in 2003 and 2004.

Jorge Castañeda served Mexico as Foreign Minister for just over two years. In general his tenure cannot be viewed as successful, and he caused difficulties with several Latin American neighbours. In terms of his dealing with the Cuba file there are no successes to report. There were, however, several embarrassing incidents, and a track record of increasing friction between Mexico City and Havana. His claim in Miami to Cuban-Americans that the doors of the Mexican embassy in Havana were open to all Cubans is seen by some as the principal cause of a bus being commandeered and smashed through the gates of the diplomatic compound as some 20 Cubans (unsuccessfully) took this opportunity to seek political asylum.

His much-publicized feud with Mexican Ambassador to Cuba Ricardo Pascoe (significantly a PRD member) resulted in a distasteful witch-hunt of the highly regarded ambassador, and ultimately his resignation. Castañeda's official edicts that Mexican Independence Day not be celebrated in Cuba in 2002 (in theory because of budget reductions), and that Mexican diplomats not attend Cuban commemorative functions to celebrate this anniversary, were particularly petty. The meeting of President Fox with Cuban dissidents in Havana in February 2002 also was not helpful. In sum, the two years with Castañeda at the helm of Mexican foreign policy brought few rewards for the country–except for improved relations with Washington; from the perspective of Mexico-Cuba relations they were an unmitigated disaster.

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs in an insightful commentary has levelled two related criticisms at Castañeda's role as Foreign Minister–first that he spurned ties with Latin America (and in particular with Cuba), and secondly that he did so in order to get closer to Washington. Their analysis is direct: "Castañeda pushed Mexico away from its historic position of maintaining a non-interventionist foreign policy, for what he hoped might be a more influential position in world affairs–as a poor man's template of Tony Blair's ties to the White House."[8]

This was doubtless his goal.

The climate that he created in the bilateral relationship inexorably poisoned good will. This was seen clearly in the visit of Fidel Castro to a major international conference held in Monterrey. In a telephone conversation Fox asked Castro to leave early in order to avoid any chance of his being in the same room as President George W. Bush. Piqued, Castro released the taped conversation several months later in a large press conference after the Mexican president denied claims by Castro that he had been asked to leave. Regardless of the proprieties of releasing details of a confidential conversation, it revealed clearly how Fox was prepared to embarrass Castro in order to accommodate Bush–and too that Castro was prepared to forego deeply established diplomatic traditions by revealing such intimate details. There was clearly no love lost between the two governments, and rupture stared them both in the face. In 2002 Cuba and Mexico were within a few days of ending a diplomatic relationship that had lasted for a century–a decision which would have been serious indeed for both of them.

As low as this relationship had fallen, even worse was yet to come–in May of 2004. The three weeks between the vote in Geneva (where Mexico voted–for the third time in a row–against Cuba following a phone call from the U.S. president to his Mexican counterpart) and May 2 (when Mexico recalled its ambassador from Havana, gave her Cuban counterpart in Mexico City 48 hours to leave and expelled a second Cuban diplomat) were tempestuous indeed. Rhetoric reached a fever pitch at the beginning of May, with Fidel Castro accusing President Fox of destroying Mexico's international prestige through its blatant support of Washington's goals, while Fox used the May 5 national holiday to lambast "offenses to the dignity of Mexico".

This deliberate downgrading of relations by the Fox government in May 2004 is the low point of this sexenio, and is totally out of character for the bilateral relationship. In part this is due to profound ideological differences between the two governments, and to the base prepared by Castañeda. Also important, however, is the apparent attempt by the Fox administration to link the Cubans to the promising candidacy of Mexico City mayor, and leading contender for the Mexican presidency, López Obrador. (Clearly the objective by the Fox administration was to cast doubt on the character of the PRD leader through a series of videotapes that incriminated his associates. The key figure in this shady operation was Carlos Ahumada, who provided the videotapes in question, and then headed to Cuba. For their part, the Cuban authorities returned Ahumada and two of his associates to Mexico).

While there may well be further crises during the remainder of the Fox term, the observation of Fidel Castro in 2002–following the diplomatic debacle in Monterrey is pertinent: "Diplomatic relations might indeed be broken because of these facts that we have outlined–but the fraternal and historical ties between the people of Mexico and Cuba will be eternal." Even allowing for political rhetoric, it is clear that the profound ties (cultural, economic and indeed political) will survive this profound crisis.

The Rationale for the Mexican Position

There are several reasons for Mexico to have adopted traditionally an independent position on Cuba–some of which have a parallel with the Canada-Cuba relationship. Some of these have been referred to in passing in the previous section. Perhaps the underlying factor is related to cultural and historical factors. The nationalist question is particularly significant in this equation, as is the desire to show that the government is "standing up to the Americans" and pursuing a made-in-Mexico foreign policy. This is extremely important in Mexico, given the strong nationalist sentiment and the historical memory (All Mexican children are taught in elementary school that the United States took one-half of national territory in the late 1840s, a act which they remember well).

The concept of national sovereignty is thus extremely important. When the Helms-Burton legislation was being discussed,[9] or at a time when NAFTA and FTAA discussions were hotly debated in Mexico, for example, the "Cuban connection" was helpful in emphasizing the image of Mexico's political independence from Washington. The objective was to convince Mexicans that the government was not "selling out" to the Americans, but instead was pursuing a policy that was ultimately advantageous to Mexicans. As proof positive of this goal often the Cuban case was trotted out to illustrate the independent foreign policy of the government.

Also related is the idea of revolutionary connections, and the nationalist sentiment that is never far from the surface in political discourse. In particular the seven decades of the PRI governments (with the "R" standing for "Revolutionary," it is worth remembering) were important in establishing and strengthening this "revolutionary connection".[10] President López Portillo had made a point of emphasizing this relationship--significantly during the Reagan years--and even in times of political strain (such as during the more conservative Salinas and Zedillo presidencies), Mexico maintained this image. (The advent of Vicente Fox and the PAN would break with this tradition, as he moved the Mexican government away from the traditional bilateral "abrazo". Even then, however, the popular reaction against this novel tendency after the first two years would lead him to revert at least somewhat towards the traditional posture).

By maintaining good diplomatic relations with Cuba, Mexico also managed to coopt left-wing groups within the country, groups which had long claimed (with some justification) that Mexico had betrayed its revolutionary heritage. Not so, claimed generations of PRI politicians, eager to curry favour in Havana–while convincing guerrilla movements in Mexico that they were in fact mindful of the revolutionary aspirations of yore.

Much of the connections between Cuban and Mexican government leaders were indeed based upon genuine friendship, many shared cultural factors, mutually beneficial business arrangements and a–deeply and naturally–felt fear of US expansionism. At the same time the ability of the government to gain Havana's pledge not to support revolutionary groups in Mexico, and to show domestic left-wing political groups that they were indeed realizing the revolutionary goals of Zapata, Villa et al., were useful byproducts of the relationship.

This point should not be under-estimated, because there have been several points in recent years–the 1968 massacre by Mexican armed forces of student protestors, the brutal repression of revolutionary groups in the state of Guerrero, and the widespread abuse of human rights after the 1994 uprising of the Zapatistas in Chiapas--all of which represented opportunities for fraternal support from Havana. Instead Cuba deliberately ignored requests for support by these groups and refused to participate in domestic Mexican politics. Yet again the creed of "non-interventionism" in the affairs of another country was extremely important.

The non-interventionist policy is of course closely related to the issue of sovereignty, and for Mexico this has traditionally been a fundamental plank in its foreign policy. Mexico is therefore grateful that Cuba–which had supported guerrilla groups in a number of Latin American and African countries in the 1960s and 1970s–never did so in Mexico. This is worth noting, since basic socio-economic injustices in Mexico were (and are) manifest. Since the eruption of political difficulties in Chiapas in 1994, the Cuban government has been consistently muted in its criticism of flagrant human rights abuses there, seeing this as an issue which the Mexicans need to resolve themselves. (This position was undoubtedly appreciated in Mexico. However, as we have seen, the arrival of the Fox government led to a radically new position by the Mexican government–and for the first time to criticism of the human rights situation in Cuba. Understandably this frustrated Havana, which has still refrained from pointing the finger at abuses in Mexico–although critical Cuban press references to are increasingly common).

There is also a commercial factor in which Mexico is profoundly interested in its relationship with Cuba. Mexico also has gained solid economic benefit from its relationship with Cuba, and its commercial connections–notably in pre-NAFTA ties–were solid indeed. Mexico is now keen to secure niche markets for post-Castro Cuba, and is concerned that it not lose ground to expected US investment there. It is also concerned with its dependence upon the United States as its principal trading partner, and in general is keen to diversify its trading dependency. Finally, it is keen to maintain the relation in order to maintain some bargaining power and thereby secure the estimated $US300 million in debt owed it by Cuba.

Finally, and although this might at first appear a rather bizarre claim, both Mexico and Cuba need each other's support–or at least a passably cordial relationship. Despite protestations about Cuba's poor human rights record in civil and political rights, Cuba remains in many ways the conscience of Latin America. Its record of international solidarity (particularly visible in its <u>internacionalista</u> medical brigades in a dozen Latin American countries, but also in its superb sports records and reputation as one of the continent's cultural superpowers) have led to a grudging (and often not so grudging) respect in many areas of Latin America.

The recent election of Lula to the presidency in Brazil, the promise of closer ties with Brazil, Venezuela and–to a lesser extent–Argentina, Paraguay and Ecuador, as well as ongoing good relations with the Anglophone countries in the Caribbean, augur well for Cuba's relations with its neighbours. Admittedly, as was the case in the Human Rights Commission in Geneva in April of 2004, several Latin American countries voted against Cuba. That said, even among

conservative sectors of Latin America, there is a respect for the achievements of this small (pop. 11.3 million) country. Significantly when there are large summit meetings of the Americas, it is Fidel Castro who attracts by far the most media attention–not the leaders of any other country, and noticeably not the president of the United States. Mexico, with its aspirations to be the leader of the Americas, can therefore not afford to be seen to be the regional Judas.

Unfortunately, the role of Castañeda as Foreign Minister precipitated a symbolic fall from grace of Mexico in the region. Traditionally Mexico has been viewed as the interlocutor of the region with the United States. Respected for its independent role, its ability to express (occasional) disagreement with the United States, its peace-brokering role in Central America in the 1980s, its support for many thousands of the region´s refugees, Mexico has traditionally been in many ways the leader of Latin America. Indeed, despite its own economic difficulties, Mexico can perhaps be seen as the moderately rich uncle in an extremely poor family–all of whom respect the uncle for his support, compassion and understanding in time of need. Like many of them it has been the victim of U.S. expansionism, and like them it has many communities which depend for their existence upon remittances sent by poorly paid workers in "el Norte." In sum, Mexico and they come from similar roots, speak the same language, and understand the dilemma of each other perfectly well.

The role of Jorge Castañeda changed that equation dramatically, however. He brought a willing Fox administration ever closer to the United States, in one fell swoop rendering the traditional values of Mexican foreign policy independence worthless. This context has been well described elsewhere:

> One can entertain a certain amount of sympathy for the ex-foreign minister in his struggle to achieve these goals. Enticed by President Bush´s early statements that "the United States has no more important relationship in the world than we have with Mexico," and that he would "look south not as an afterthought, but as a fundamental commitment of my presidency," Castañeda could be forgiven for thinking that Mexico would be handsomely rewarded for his unbridled pandering to the wishes of the White House, even if it meant selling out its cherished principles.[11]

The leaked phone conversation between Fox and Castro revealed ever more clearly just how Mexico was willingly jumping into the U.S. sphere of influence, spurning its Latin roots. The neighbours quickly picked up on the messages emanating from the Fox administration, and as a result Mexico´s currency among Latin Americans has declined. In this context, making peace with Havana and striving to return to what passes for normalcy could well prove to be in the best interests of the Fox administration. Put simply, the tacit agreement with Washington never got past the starting line–and in the process Mexico lost a lot of face with its neighbours. It remains to be seen if it is now in the best interests of the Fox administration to establish a respectable distance between itself and the United States–and the Cuba card to a certain extent can contribute to that.

In many ways a parallel argument can be made in the domestic arena–since the Fox government has been sharply criticized by virtually all parties in Mexico for its handling of the Cuba file. As a result the administration has pulled back from its harsh condemnations of the Cuban human rights record, has distanced itself visibly from the United States position on pre-emptive strikes and intervention (preferring instead the multilateral approach to conflict seen clearly by the United Nations in the recent Iraq conflict), and has sought–belatedly, and to date only partially–to make peace. The end result is an uneasy truce, although after the traumatic events of 2002–when Mexico was close to breaking formal relations with Havana--it is a clear improvement.

Cuba too needs Mexico as an ally. Mexico's importance in the region is great indeed–perhaps surpassed only by that of Brazil, which is now itself developing a warm relationship with Havana. But Cuba, while doubtless having broken out of the total diplomatic isolation that Washington attempted to impose in the 1960s, has still been unsuccessful in turning its rapidly developed formal links with the rest of the world into profitable connections which actually bring the island concrete things it needs. This is especially true of the hemisphere. With Mexico as an enemy, Cuba would be significantly isolated in Latin America. Conversely, with Mexico onside–albeit none too enthusiastically–Cuba can continue to improve its "acceptability rating" in the region. All of this helps, to a small degree, the ongoing process of contributing to make Cuba a member of the community (and it is important to remember that in 1962 all countries of Latin America apart from Mexico agreed to suspend Cuba from the OAS).

For Mexico too maintaining relations with Cuba remains a useful bargaining chip in its relationship with Washington, obviously one which is far more important for the Mexican government. Various governments have offered their good offices as mediator in the troubled Cuba-U.S. relationship, and at some point when cooler heads prevail Mexico–or indeed Canada–could play an important role. More importantly, in the short run Mexico can–as it has done consistently in the past--play off to some extent Washington against Havana.

In the long run too, the Fox administration or its successor may well have a role to play in a post-Castro government. Obviously it is to be hoped that it will be the Cubans who will decide to what point this will be the case–and indeed many of them think (with some justification) that Cuban-Americans, Mexicans and indeed any other group are being wildly optimistic if they believe that they will have any real say in the subsequent development (in economic or political terms) of the island . Nevertheless in Mexico City there are many who believe that it makes tremendous sense to maintain a foot solidly in Cuba for eventual changes in the island. In any event, given Cuba's commercial potential once a normalization of relations with the United States, Mexican companies–who in many cases have been on the island for the past decade–believe that they will play a significantly important role.

Successes and Failures in the Mexico-Cuba Relationship

The fundamental objective of a nation's foreign policy is to protect and develop the essential goals of that nation. The case of Mexico's approach to the "Cuban question" is instructive, because we can see precisely how different approaches have worked–and have not worked. Obviously there are many variables at play, many different international contexts, and many different national agendas pursued by various administrations. Nevertheless some valid general conclusions can be drawn.

It is obvious that the spirit of nationalism still permeates Mexican national public life, and is alive and well at least in political discourse. This has been channelled effectively by several Mexican presidents, who have used this deeply rooted interest in nation-building to solidify their presidencies. (It has also been manipulated in order to justify their own strong-arm, and often corrupt, political practices). Flag-waving is endemic in politics–as can be witnessed in the annual celebration of the "grito de Dolores" celebration in which the president commemorates from the balcony of the presidential palace in the Zócalo the anniversary of the movement for independence in 1810. Appeals to nationalism are common in most countries. The Mexicans, however, carry it to an extraordinary degree.

In the Mexican context, closely related with the issue of nationalism is the question of the revolutionary roots of the political system. Anybody who has analyzed the speeches given by Mexican politicians (the Fox presidency being an exception) cannot help but be aware of the consistent injection of claims that politicians are living up to the revolutionary aspirations of nearly a century ago. Even when it is clear that the socio-political reality of contemporary Mexico is extraordinarily unjust–and in many ways beckons a radical new uprising–politicians continue to invoke the memory of revolutionary goals and aspirations. Schoolchildren are socialized into accepting this history as sacrosanct, and "la Revolución" is firmly imbedded in the national psyche.

The reverse of this coin is that those presidencies which ignore the nationalist issue do so at their peril. And of course those who are seen as spurning the nationalist–and revolutionary–tradition are even more likely to create obstacles for themselves. The case of Luis Echeverría is a good example of a president who played the nationalist card effectively, whereas Vicente Fox has in general done a poor job, looking extremely weak in the face of U.S. designs (notwithstanding Mexico's courageous decision over Iraq)–and turning his back on both the inbred nationalism of his fellow citizens and the deeply-rooted ties with revolutionary Cuba. (His indecision at the Monterrey conference, his clear subordination of the conference to meet the goals of the United States, and his cavalier treatment of the wily Cuban president–using the informal "tú" form while Fidel Castro adopts the mantle of senior statesman–have all played against him, and he lost substantial credibility. The fact that Foreign Affairs Minister Castañeda would later be caught coldly in a naked lie when asked if Fox had pressured Castro to leave early so as to appease the demands of the U.S. president only added fuel to the fire, and made the government look inept and humiliated).

By contrast, his popularity has increased when he has spurned an invitation to visit President Bush on his Texas ranch, or criticized the death penalty imposed on Mexican citizens in the United States. Mexico´s decision not to support the United States in the war in Iraq was clearly a high point in this series of events.

Mexico has traditionally played well the "Cuba card" in its relationship with the United States, seeking rewards from Washington for good behaviour. Usually it has worked well for both countries. But in recent years there has been a major roadblock, largely the result of the turfing out of the PRI after 71 years in power. Vicente Fox came into power with a distinctly new style, and a radically different agenda. In the case of Cuba-Mexico relations, as Georgina Sánchez has shown, the objective of the Fox administration was to "´modernize´ the relationship, stripping it of political symbolism and injecting economic realism. In this way it converted Cuba into any regular partner–and as a result one that was subject to the vagaries of international politics, including questions of the free market, democracy and human rights."[12] The dousing of the exceptional approach towards Cuba occurred during the Fox presidency, but was well advanced under Zedillo and even before. At the same time, the embers of that exceptional policy occasionally threatened to ignite, again largely as a result of strains in Mexico-U.S. relations.

President Fox´s principal goal was to obtain a new migration agreement from the United States for undocumented Mexican workers living in the United States. This affects both national pride and the Mexican economy. In all, just under one million Mexicans were apprehended by INS officials in 2002, down from the 1.2 million a year earlier, but still a very substantial number.[13] This, in addition to the estimated 4.8 million undocumented Mexican workers in the United States, who send home an estimated $US10 million annually in remittances, gives some idea of the importance of the issue in Mexico.[14]

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States of September 11, 2001, however, Washington has done all it can to tighten up the border–much to the chagrin of Mexico, which sought desperately to loosen immigration law. In essence a sea change in the relationship has occurred, and after being allegedly the most important partner of the United States in mid-2001 (significantly Mexico was the first country visited by Bush after his inauguration), most analysts agree that the country is no longer of critical interest to Washington. The end result of this diplomatic rebuff in Mexico was to dig deep and show displeasure with the U.S. position.

The Fox government did this in several small gestures. In August 2002 the president cancelled a planned trip to visit his U.S. counterpart because of the execution of a Mexican citizen (Javier Suárez Medina) accused of killing a policeman. The Mexican government also demanded fresh trials for several Mexicans on death row in U.S. prisons. In September 2002, Mexico dropped out of the Río Pact on inter-American security, although it pushed more than ever for more bilateral defence cooperation with the United States. In late 2002 and again in early 2003, when it held a revolving seat on the U.N. Security Council, Mexico refused to participate in the "coalition of the willing" and send troops to support the U.S. War on Iraq. Having seen that Washington was ignoring Mexico´s agenda,[15] the Fox government started to

remind the Bush administration of the need to take it seriously. One arm in this arsenal is the Mexican approach to Cuba. The resignation of Foreign Minister Castañeda (and his ferocious opposition to the Cuban revolutionary government) on January 9, 2003 obviously facilitated this process. Once again the Cuba policy is thus being revisited in Mexico City.

What clearly does not work on Cuba is the use of pressure tactics. If the objective of the Fox administration in its policy towards Cuba is to make Havana improve its human rights policy, then it has been a lamentable failure. Washington should have learned by now, even if only the hard way, that supporting opposition groups on the island, lobbying at the U.N. Human Rights sessions in Geneva to depict Cuba as an international pariah (and thereby make it improve its human rights situation) simply does not work. Unfortunately it has of course not learned that lesson. Consistently in these situations the Cuban government has circled the proverbial wagons, appealed (successfully) to the nationalist sentiments on the island, and cracked down on government opponents. In other words the end result of this external pressure has been precisely the opposite to what had been hoped for.

The Fox government has learned this at a fairly high cost. The previous PRI administrations had played the card close to their chest, exploiting the bilateral relationship to their benefit. Never particularly at ease with revolutionary Cuba, the PRI leaders were savvy enough to know that their capacity to force Cuba to change direction was extremely limited. Nor did they really want to effect such change. They therefore refrained from trying. (It must be pointed out, of course, that the hypocrisy inherent in advocating an improvement of human rights in Cuba while these were widely abused in Mexico would have also been exploited by the domestic opposition). President Fox has learned the hard way that the Cubans are extremely tenacious when facing the human rights issue. While still refusing to abandon the time-honoured policy of non-intervention in another nation's domestic policies, the Cubans have deflected the pressure applied by Fox, and in fact have turned it back on him. The implication for all is that Fox is in fact less interested in democratization and human rights issues than he is in supporting the U.S. agenda–as was shown clearly in Monterrey.

The issue of U.S. pressure upon Mexico is of course the predominant variable in the relationship with Cuba. Given the degree of self-confidence (some would say triumphalism) in Washington's foreign policy following the Iraq conflict (and with warning shots being already fired across the bows of Syria and Iran), it is obvious that U.S. policy is in an aggressive mood. Its budget on defence is almost as large as that of all other nations in the world combined, and it clearly feels relatively comfortable if hardly completely happy with its role as an international gendarme. (The presidential elections in 2004 will also provide even more stimulus for George W. Bush to look for further opportunities to show U.S. international resolve, thereby boosting his chances to be re-elected).

Undoubtedly Washington will continue to pressure Mexico to do its bidding. The Mexican situation is more complex, however, not only because of the profoundly rooted issue of nationalism but also because of the fact that President Fox is not eligible to stand for re-election

in Mexico in 2006. As a result his tactics may well be radically different than those adopted by his U.S. counterpart–since while he will be campaigning for his party to retain power, he will not be a candidate. The issue of Cuba will continue to be a major plank in his reform project, but it is unclear whether he will continue to push for a major improvement in the human rights record in Cuba. The role taken by Fox in May 2004–withdrawing Ambassador Lajous from Havana because of President Castro's harsh criticism of Mexican foreign policy, while at the same time condemning the latest Bush pressure on Cuba (the 500-page White House Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, released on May 6)--reveals a foreign policy that is confused. And, while the Zedillo approach was conservative and cool towards Havana, it was at least consistent. By contrast, the approach of the Fox administration reveals a lack of focus or clear goals–and the electorate may well not be forgiving to the PAN in the next election.

The debate on whether isolation or engagement is the best policy in dealing with a nation with which one has a disagreement is a long one. Some would argue that it is only by sitting down at the table with the other party, by establishing a dialogue and expressing concerns, by developing a sense of "confianza" or trust that one can sensitize the opponent to one's own concerns. Others would posit that this simply does not work, since it is only by isolating the other party (and thereby both reducing their malevolent influence and shunning them) that any impact can be made. (A third group would argue–with some justification-- that nothing works with Cuba, and that Havana has always "marched to its own drummer," eschewing all efforts to pressure it, whether by the carrot or the stick).

The trouble with the isolation strategy where Cuba is concerned of course is that it requires a collective approach, since unilateral isolation is doomed to failure. That has not happened, and is unlikely to happen–since most countries disagree fundamentally with Washington's approach. The fact that the United Nations General Assembly has routinely rejected the isolationist route, most clearly seen in the 43-year old U.S. embargo of Cuba, shows precisely how few support this approach. This has happened during the last 11 years. Most recently–November of 2003–179 countries (96% of member countries voting) supported Cuba's position, with only three (the United States, Israel, and the Marshall Islands) voting against.

Many countries will rightfully criticize Cuba's human rights situation, although most will also recognize that this is to a significant degree the result of U.S. pressure upon the island (One must remember the litany of U.S. aggression since 1959 against revolutionary Cuba –and that Washington maintains its "Trading with the Enemy" legislation against Cuba). Most will also be displeased with the tactics employed by Washington to bully smaller nations to support them in their international crusade against Cuba–seen most clearly in the annual Geneva meetings of the United Nations on human rights.

While maintaining dialogue with Cuba has not always brought the results that Mexico has desired, it has helped to keep the door open for concessions. (By contrast the alternative policy of confrontation–as employed by the last ten U.S. presidencies–has been a resounding failure). It is therefore in Mexico's interest to maintain reasonably cordial relations with Cuba, regardless

of the degree of political discord, and no matter how convoluted and inconsistent that policy is.

The Lessons for Canada

Canada has maintained more or less the same approach to Cuba since diplomatic relations were formally established in 1945. Going further back–and the establishment of consular relations in 1903–one has the advantage of an even longer trajectory. Admittedly there have been problems along the way (even during the Chrétien years), but in general the approach–very similar to that shown by Mexico–has oscillated between relative distance and closeness. There has never been a sense, however, that the relationship was imperilled, no matter how great the disagreements. What is common to this century of bilateral relations for both countries is the need to sit down and discuss differences with Cuban officials, since bluster and pressure have simply not worked. Nowadays this policy is known as either "constructive engagement" or "pragmatism with principles". Regardless of the tag, the essence of the approach is to negotiate fairly and with transparency.

Mexico has traditionally followed a very similar approach–although clearly it has not pursued as deliberate an approach as Canada has with its clear intent, particularly seen in the last decade, of "engaging" Cuba. By contrast Mexico has simply co-existed with Havana, "going with the flow," and using shared Latin sensibilities to maintain a relationship that seemed to function fairly well–but rarely going above and beyond the call of deliberately seeking to improve relations. (And of course it should be pointed out that the approach of the Fox government is significantly different from that of any of the previous governments during the past century). They were simply there–and both countries seemed to get along quite well. As we have seen, one could argue that this defence of the status quo was done largely for domestic political gain, emphasizing Mexico's independence from Washington's long reach.

That said, it is clear that such a policy touches a respondent chord throughout the Americas, where U.S. expansionism, unilateralism, and commercial, cultural and political clout are reasons for ongoing concern. (Indeed a successful Canadian approach to Cuba can also serve U.S. interests in the long run, even if Washington is unaware of this-- and probably would regard it as a ludicrous suggestion. This, however, should be made clear to the Americans, through a variety of potential initiatives–either national or bilateral–undertaken by Mexico and Canada). Regardless of the motivations, Mexico has played its cards well–recognizing its limits, using its relationship with Cuba for domestic and international political gain, and also occasionally expressing its concerns with Havana. It is a lesson from which Canada has also benefitted. Indeed relations with Cuba–as an illustration of an alternative policy to dependency upon the United States–can be a positive experience in political terms. (Given the increase in U.S. tendencies to unilateralism, and rising international concern at this approach, it is perhaps time to reassess the advantages of a more diverse foreign policy, particularly in the Latin American

region. In this regard our relationship with Cuba serves us well).

A comparison of the two countries' position on the human rights question in Cuba is instructive in this regard. In June of 2003 at the annual meeting of the foreign ministers of the Organization of American States in Santiago de Chile, this matter was hotly debated. (In March of that year Cuba had arrested some 75 government opponents, and had executed 3 people who had sought to hijack violently a small ferry boat to the United States). Canada actively supported the U.S. lead in attacking Cuba–but failed miserably to get its message across, and in fact squandered much of its hard-earned political capital. Despite lobbying by Secretary of State Powell, the OAS refused to pay any heed to U.S. appeal: "The bold projection of the United States power in Iraq didn't build a lot of goodwill, either. Furthermore, the United States persisted in pursuing a selective agenda: the need for change in Cuba."[16]

Unfortunately Canada went along with the U.S. approach–a dangerous strategy in the O.A.S., where a wariness of U.S. motives is commonplace. Yet Canada sponsored a resolution expressing "deep concern" on Cuba. John Graham, chairman of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, noted the vigorous Canadian support for Washington over this question: "I can't think of another time when Canada has adopted such an aggressive stance on Cuba at the OAS" he correctly remarked.[17] The widely held response to the U.S. position was voiced by the Barbados delegate, Michael King: "No one condones what took place in Cuba ... But knee-jerk reactions aren't helpful".[18] The Mexican reply, given almost two months earlier, was also circumspect: "The Government of Mexico does not consider the Permanent Council of the OAS to be the most appropriate forum for this topic to be discussed, among other reasons because Cuba is not an active member if the Organization."[19] Canada would do well to seek to understand better the dynamics around the question of Cuba, not just within the O.A.S., but also within the body politic in Latin America. And of course the Mexicans in particular need to be consulted.

It can be argued that the Mexican approach to Cuba has been consistently inconsistent, with most (if not all) presidents paying lip service to the fraternal ties between the two countries, while quietly supporting U.S. objectives. (And of course, under Vicente Fox this has not been carried out so tacitly). There have indeed been exceptions, but these are limited. The bottom line was instead to remain on good terms with the powerful northern neighbour–at all costs. Overlying this vital political objective was at all times a sophisticated layer of nationalism, but the bottom line was the need for Mexico to look after its own strategic goals.

The Fox agenda has changed that to a noticeable extent, in essence because it has greatly removed the appeal to nationalism, and has been noticeably clear in its Cuba policy–particularly when Jorge Castañeda was at the helm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. An extraordinarily ambitious programme (in terms of proposed domestic change as well as in its projections for an enhanced emphasis on respect for human rights and democratization abroad), it has thus gone against the grain of seven decades of PRI policy. Will this radically different approach have a noticeable impact on Mexican relations with Cuba? Three years later, the jury is still out. To be fair to Fox, he has sought to apply the same approach to the domestic political scene as he has to

international concerns, as well he might–for the Amnesty International reports on human rights abuses in Mexico are chilling indeed. Some would argue that he has been unsuccessful in both domestic and international arenas, and that he was wildly optimistic to even attempt such reforms. (Others would say that he is to be commended for trying to bring in badly needed change, and that the weight of seven decades of PRI government, and a Congress that is opposed to his reforms, are simply too onerous a burden to overcome). The next presidential elections will allow the vox populi in Mexico to be heard, and the "Cuban question" with its multifaceted repercussions, will undoubtedly be a major talking point.

Be that as it may, it is worth noting that the Fox administration's hard-nosed approach to seek change in the human rights policy in Cuba backfired disastrously. Pressure on Cuba–by the countries that voted against Cuba in the United nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva in the spring of 2003–did not lead to an improvement in the human rights situation. In fact just the opposite happened. The rounding-up of some 75 opposition figures in the spring of 2003 (all of whom were accused of being on the Washington payroll) revealed once again that, when the Cubans feel pressured, they react by suppressing dissent.

The domestic political scene in Cuba is worth mentioning in passing, since there has clearly been a hardening of the political arteries in Havana in the last five years. Indeed, in conflict with a number of important partners in recent years, Cuba has amplified the differences rather than downplay them. In many ways this complements the radicalization of the revolutionary process in domestic economic concerns, to a large extent the result of Cuba having survived the worst of the "Special Period." Indeed, among the revolutionary leadership there is a feeling that, having almost caught up with the economic stability of a decade ago, it is now time to revert to the days of greater equality, of a purer form of socialism. The elusive (and tenacious) search for a level playing field in socio-economic concerns has also been accompanied by a dogged pursuit of a more aggressive South-centred foreign policy, and a decreased interest in making concessions to potential allies (such as Mexico, the European Union, or even Canada).

This ongoing campaign to return to revolutionary socialist roots has been seen in a number of recent economic developments, ranging from limiting the number of professions that self-employed workers can engage in to increasing prices on consumer items not covered by the ration book. In foreign policy terms it is reflected in strong support for the Chávez government in Venezuela, and for fostering ties with a number of Latin American and African countries. As Cuba becomes the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement this year, this trend will be expected to continue. The resultant polarization poses a challenge for Mexico (at least under Fox), which seeks increasingly to move away from the South-South axis, instead promoting ever-closer ties with the North.

It is important to bear in mind when analyzing Mexico-Cuba relations (and in many ways Canada-Cuba relations too) that this relationship does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, to use the catchy title of a recent essay on the subject, it takes "three to tango"–and the bilateral connection simply cannot be conceived without taking into account the massive role of the United States in

the equation.[20] Mexico–like Canada–has at times been the fulcrum of the troubled Cuba-United States relationship, and in so doing has amassed important advantages–in commercial ties, and in projecting (internationally and nationally) its autonomy vis-a-vis the United States. In international fora, Canada (and Mexico) have both gained for supporting Cuba, developing their international profile as a regional leader. Meanwhile in terms of coopting the strong nationalist current found in both countries, both Ottawa and Mexico City have defended a policy of political sovereignty that is extremely popular in domestic politics. In this way the relationship with Cuba has generally been beneficial.

By contrast, the United States has gained little in international or domestic benefits from its policy of antagonism with Havana. The hard-ball approach of Washington, initially supported (not so) tacitly by the Fox administration, sought different goals from those of Mexico–in essence a regime change. Despite justifiable concern over the human rights situation in Cuba, Mexico does not see this goal as particularly desirable or necessary. And, even though many countries condemned the rounding up of dissidents, it is most probable that those same countries will yet again vote to support Cuba at the U.N. General Assembly in November. The attempts to use pressure tactics against Cuba failed, miserably–as Fox knows well.

This of course raises the question of where the three tango partners are headed in the new post-Iraq era of pre-emptive strikes and unilateralism, and of a decline in effective U.N. multilateralism. As Georgina Sánchez has pointed out, "Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, President Bush has designed a policy based on the old Cold War paradigm, with the world being divided into friends and enemies ... The return to a new Cold War, this time with the enemies being characterized as terrorists–among them Cuba–will increase international tensions, as well as causing obstacles to development issues and the process of international negotiations".[21] In those circumstances of probably heightened tension, what lessons can be learned?

The essential question is whether the best way of bringing about change in a country is through isolating it (thereby obliging it to amend its policies), or "engaging" and winning it over through the development of a sense of confidence in the partner nation. There are two schools of thought on constructive engagement. (To a certain extent Mexico has followed its own approach of co-existing with both Havana and Washington, occasionally playing one off against the other. In essence, however, its approach is closer to the engagement strategy–although it has not articulated such a policy. Moreover, clearly this approach has suffered in recent years).

A critical interpretation emphasizes that this strategy has not worked, and will not with a totalitarian regime such as that of Fidel Castro, particularly when he has significant popular support in Cuba, and can skillfully rally nationalist sentiment–admittedly, not a particularly difficult objective in the face of ongoing U.S. hostility . The essence of the argument opposing constructive engagement is that it is only through concerted pressure that change will be made to come about in Cuba. Critics of constructive engagement note that almost a decade of Canada's pursuit of this policy has yielded disappointing results. A hard-line approach is clearly

warranted, they argue. Unless there is significant pressure, nothing will change.

The opposing argument claims that 44 years of U.S. hostility of precisely such a policy has produced even more disappointing results. If the objective is to make Cuba adopt a Western-style liberal democracy and develop an appreciation of related civil and political human rights, then clearly it has failed. Neither has happened. Countering the hard-line approach, proponents of constructive engagement claim that the U.S. tactics have in fact made Cuba withdraw even more from these goals. Not only has the U.S. approach failed, but it has also been counter-productive–and has probably resulted in the Cubans adopting an even harder line. Indeed heavy pressures, especially in the public eye, achieve little or nothing in Cuba, while constant presence and helpful approaches in confidence-building–although a painfully slow process–do.

Mexico has traditionally sought a third way in its dealing with Cuba–seeking to maintain the status quo in its relationship, without any attempt to promote political change in Cuba. In essence this can be termed a diluted form of engagement. The administration of Zedillo and, in particular, that of Vicente Fox have adapted this approach to suit their own goals, but have aligned themselves far more closely with U.S, goals. As a result they have followed a noticeably proactive strategy, seeking to denounce what they see as flagrant abuses of human rights, and calling for greater liberal democratization. After three years this clearly has not worked–and as in the case of the U.S. policy pursued by nine former presidents (George W. Bush is the tenth president following this goal)–it has been counterproductive, both in Cuba and in terms of domestic politics. (The only possible exception was the attempt of President Carter in the late 1970s to pursue a new approach, one which sadly failed).

Perhaps the essential lesson to be learned by Ottawa is to continue pursuing the essentially Canadian position of compromise, negotiation, constructive criticism, and confidence-building (although this should be pursued more consistently than has been the case in the last decade). The alternatives simply don't seem to work. In fact, as has consistently been shown, when the Cuban government feels itself attacked, it fights back swiftly and with aggressiveness. Nothing has been improved as a result of over four decades of U.S. hostility, nor is there any real prospect that it will. Aggression from Washington is simply counterproductive.

The Mexican approach has generally been intelligently played out, focussing less on changing the situation in revolutionary Cuba and more on improving the bilateral relationship to facilitate Mexican gain. It is a lesson from which Canada too could gain, although clearly Ottawa believes (probably incorrectly) that it can impose its own stamp upon the relationship. It is indeed useful to cooperate with Mexico in seeking common approaches to Cuban issues–but we should not underestimate the validity of our own ideas. We believe that this made-in-Canada approach in the long run makes the most sense. Constructive engagement is clearly not perfect. It is, however, the only sensible policy for a peaceful transition with honour–both for Cuba and for Canada.

Whenever it occurs, and notwithstanding rhetoric on all sides of the political spectrum, the transition is crucial for Cuba, and indeed perhaps for Latin America. To a large extent this has already begun–as can be seen in the impact of tourism, foreign investment, and increased international contacts as the Cuban revolutionary process seeks to develop. The role of Canada thus far, in a variety of ways–from its NGO role to its successful CIDA programmes, from the role of Canadian investors to that of the hordes of sun-seekers, from its influence on the Cuban tax system to the multitude of university and community college connections–has made a significant difference. Put simply, Canada **is** a major player in Cuba. This approach should be continued, and indeed increased. The goal has to be for all international partners to ease Cuba through this process (however one seeks to define it) as much as possible. Any other approach–and in particular that advocated by Washington–carries very grave risks for future hemispheric order.

In many ways the Canadian role in Cuba is even more important than that of Mexico, notwithstanding cultural, linguistic and political similarities between the two Latin nations. The role of Canadian business on the island is important, to no small degree because companies like Sherritt International have been active on the island for a decade. They, and Canadian NGOs such as OXFAM-Canada and several Church-affiliated organizations, have become the model to emulate for other nations. Finally the importance of people-to-people contacts (with over 500,000 Canadians travelling to the island in 2004, the single largest national group) is great indeed. Together with a wise policy of development assistance from CIDA, they have cemented an extremely strong relationship, regardless of government rhetoric either in Ottawa or Havana. In sum, while there is much that Canada can indeed learn from an analysis of Mexico's approach to Cuba, there is also a tremendous amount that we can learn through an analysis of our own role to date. There is much that is worthy of note, and praise.

NOTES

1. "Americans should never underestimate the constant pressure on Canada which the mere presence of the United States has produced. We're different people from you and we're different because of you ... Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt." Cited in John M. Kirk and Peter McKenna, Canada-Cuba Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. vii.

2.See Homero Campa, "México-Cuba. Contigo a la distancia," Foreign Affairs en español, summer 2002 (www.foreignaffairs-esp.org/search/printable.asp?i=20020501FAEnEspEssay8478.xm... 4/1/2003 (Eight pages in total).

3.In fact U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk confided to an American journalist: "When we were discussing the breaking of relations at the foreign ministers' meeting ... We decided it would be in the best interests of all our countries if one country maintained relations with Cuba and acted as a listening post for all of us. That country was Mexico." Cited in Carl Migdail, "Mexico, Cuba, and the United States: Myth Versus reality," Cuba's Ties to A Changing World, ed. Donna Rich Kaplowitz (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993), p. 207.

4.See Carl Migdail, "Mexico, Cuba, and the United States: Myth Versus Reality," Cuba´s Ties to a Changing World, ed. Donna Rich Kaplowitz (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993), p. 201.

5.Cited in Migdail, p. 205.

6.This section is based largely on the insightful comments in Homero Campa, op. cit.

7.Cited in Campa, op. cit.

8.See Larry Birns and Matthew Ward of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Jorge Castañeda–A Retrospective. The Decline and Fall of the Mexican Foreign Minister," Hispanicvista, January 30, 2003, p.5 (http://www.hispanicvista.com/html2/020303fc.htm)

The report continues: However, under Castañeda, Mexico´s relationship with the rest of the region nose-dived as the country´s once-famed independent foreign policy was unceremoniously cashiered in favor of a role of dependency on Washington regarding crucial geo-political issues. Sadly, during this period Mexico has become increasingly "NAFTA-ized,"–more inclined to relate to Washington´s priorities rather than to those of its fellow Latin Americans". Ibid., p.5.

9.Fernando Solana, President of the Foreign Relations Commission of the Mexican Senate, emphasized this aspect when discussing the Helms-Burton law: "Evidently there are some people who attach a different dimension to the problem of Helms-Burton. However, this legislation is not merely an issue of business–it is also a problem of dignity and national sovereignty. That is how we need to understand it, and to confront it." Fernando Solana Morales, "La Ley helms-

Burton, un problema de dignidad y soberanía nacional," La Ley Helms-Burton a la Luz del Derecho (Mexico City: PRI, 1966), p. 48. (Here, and throughout, all quotations from the Spanish original have been translated into English).

10.The other main opposition party, the PRD, also lays claim to this revolutionary traditon.

11.Larry Birns and Matthew Ward, op. cit., p. 6.

12.See Georgina Sánchez, "Three to tango: los futuros de la relación México-Cuba," Otra vez Cuba... Desencuentros y política exterior, ed. María Cristina Rosas (Mexico City: UNAMN, 2002), p. 40.

13.Data provided in Theodore S. Wilkinson, "The Impact of September 11 on US-Mexico Relations," paper delivered at the 2003 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Dallas, March 2003, p. 8.

14.Ibid., pp. 11-12.

15."Focused on its enemies, the Bush administration has forgotten its friends. Only one world region went entirely unmentioned in the State of the Union speech: Latin America. In another, far distant age–five days before terror struck New York and Washington–President Bush pledged a new alliance with President Fox of Mexico, on the grounds that a strong Mexico makes for a stronger United States. After 9/11, however, everything changed." Mexican historian Enrique Krauze cited in Ibid., p. 3.

16.Michael Shifter, "A Policy for the Neighbors," The New York Times, July 17, 2003.

17.Cited in Stephen Handelman, "When Comrades Fall Out," Time, June 30, 2003, p. 30.

18.Ibid.

19.See "Intervención del Embajador Miguel Ruiz Cabañas en la Sesión Ordinaria del Consejo Permanente de la OEA del 23 de abril de 2003 respecto al proyecto de resolución 'Apoyo a los derechos humanos y a las libertades democráticas en Cuba." This document is found at: http://www.sre.gob/mx/comunicados/discursos/disc_2003/abril/d-10-04.htm

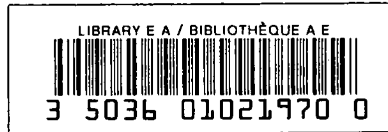
20.See Georgina Sánchez, Op. cit., pp. 33-54.

21.Ibid., 49.

Appendix A

Persons interviewed during the course of this research project

Isabel Allende, Ambassador of Cuba to Spain
Ibis Alvisa González, Central Committee, Cuban Communist Party
Gerardo Arreola, Correspondent in Cuba, La Jornada (Mexico)
Carlos Alzugaray, Dean, International Relations Institute (ISRI), Havana
Jean-Jacques Bastien, Former Senior Policy Analyst, Latin American Section, CIDA
Anthony Boadle, Reuters Chief Correspondent in Cuba
Jorge Chabat, Professor at CEDI, Mexico City
Graeme Clark, Director General for Mexico, DFAIT
Nicholas Coghlin, formerly First Secretary, Canadian Embassy, Mexico
Rafael Daussá, Head of North American Division, Cuban Foreign Ministry (MINREX), Havana
Omar Everleny, Researcher, CEEC, Havana
Fernando Espinoza, First Secretary, Embassy of Mexico, Ottawa
Rafael Fernández de Castro, Head, Dept. of International Relations, ITAM, Mexico City
Carlos Fernández de Cossío, Ambassador of Cuba to Canada
José Fernández de Cossío, Ambassador of Cuba to the United Kingdom
Paul Gibbard, First Secretary, Canadian Embassy, Havana
Séline Grandchamp, Senior Analyst, Cuba Desk, CIDA
Isabel Jaramillo, Researcher at CEA, Havana
Pedro Lobaina Jiménez de Castro, Central Committee, Cuban Communist Party
María Teresa de Madero, Ambassador of Mexico to Canada
Vladimir Mirabal Regueiro, North American Division, Cuban Foreign Ministry
Sergio Oliva Guerra, Deputy-Head, Latin American Division, Cuban Foreign Ministry
Andrés Ordóñez, Minister/Counsellor, Mexican Embassy, Havana
María Cristina Rosas, Professor, UNAM, Mexico City
Jorge Mario Sánchez, Researcher, CESEU, Havana
Brian Stevenson, former Special Assistant to Lloyd Axworthy, DFAIT
Michael Small, former Ambassador of Canada to Cuba
Georgina Sánchez, Professor, UNAM, Mexico City
Luis Suárez Salazar, Researcher, ISRI, Havana
Duncan Wood, Head, Canadian Studies Programme, ITAM, Mexico City



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