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ENGAGING REVOLUTIONARY CUBA: COMPARING MEXICAN AND CANADIAN APPROACHES

Peter McKenna and John M. Kirk

Abstract

Historically, both Canada and Mexico have had a broad, cordial and constructive relationship with revolutionary Cuba. By the early 1990s, the two North American countries unlike the United States had continued a wide-ranging policy of engagement and dialogue with Fidel Castro's Cuba. From 2000 onward, however, bilateral relations hit a rough patch in the road with Canada applying some northern ice and Mexico calling for a re-evaluation (based largely on human rights considerations) of its core relationship with Havana. One is understandably tempted to argue that many similarities exist in both Canada's and Mexico's approaches toward revolutionary Cuba yet there are striking, and sometimes more subtle, differences between the two. This article seeks to outline the nature and extent of Mexican and Canadian engagement with Cuba since 1994. Secondly, it will strive to highlight the similarities and differences between Mexican-Cuban and Canadian-Cuban approaches. Thirdly, it will identify both the push and pull factors that explain or underscore these similarities and differences in approaches toward Cuba. Lastly, it will conclude with some general observations of a comparative nature and outline the future policy direction that both countries Cuba policies are likely to take in the coming years.

Since the late 1950s, both Canada-Cuba and Mexico-Cuba relations have lent themselves to the following general characterizations: cordial, difficult and uncertain, yet always intriguing and puzzling. Like any normal bilateral relationship, the tone of relations has fluctuated with shifting international and regional circumstances, different governments and changing political personalities and various actions by the Cuban government itself. The one consistent theme, however, is the fact that neither country has severed relations with Havana, or openly endorsed the

US economic embargo against Cuba. Still, the bilateral relations of Mexico and Canada with Cuba have experienced their fair share of diplomatic highs and lows (Randall, 1995: 15-34).

On a positive note, Canada and Mexico were the only two countries in the Americas not to break diplomatic relations with Cuba in the early 1960s. Both countries still prefer some form of engagement with Havana rather than isolation and confrontation, even in the face of intense US pressure to do otherwise (as seen in the Cuban Democracy Act and the Helms-Burton law). In the case of Cuba, Mexico has steadfastly defended principles of national sovereignty and non-interference, while Canada has condemned trade sanctions and rarely endorsed diplomatic bully-boy tactics. Instead, both countries have viewed Fidel Castro's Cuba as a legitimate governmental entity (which they engage at the highest political levels), a major regional player, a source of domestic goodwill, and, for the most part, as a constructive hemispheric player.

Over the last five years, however, overall relations between Canada and Cuba and Mexico and Cuba have soured noticeably. While former Canadian prime minister, Jean Chrétien, applied some "northern ice" to its relations with Havana in 2000 (which current prime minister, conservative-minded Stephen Harper, is likely to maintain), Mexican president, Vicente Fox, has presided over a severe deterioration in bilateral relations (McKenna, 2004; Kirk, 2005: 107-119). And Cuba's March-April 2003 crackdown on seventy-five dissidents has done nothing to improve bilateral relations with either Canada or Mexico, serving mainly to provide hardliners in both countries with fresh ammunition to support their case for not melting the diplomatic ice with Havana. Indeed, at the April 2005 (and 2006) meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, both Canada and Mexico once again supported a toughly-worded resolution that singled out Cuba's poor human rights record.¹

Nevertheless, both Canada and Mexico have, at least since the early 1990s, experimented with their own unique versions of constructively engaging the government of Cuba. One is understandably tempted to argue that many similarities exist in both Canada's and Mexico's approaches toward revolutionary Cuba, yet there are striking, and sometimes more subtle, differences between the two. For the purposes of this paper, then, we seek to accomplish the following scholarly aims: first, to outline the nature and extent of Mexican and Canadian engagement with Cuba since 1994. Secondly, to highlight the similarities and differences between Mexican-Cuban and Canadian-Cuban approaches. Thirdly, to identify the "push" and "pull" factors that explain or underscore these similarities

and differences in approaches toward Cuba. Lastly, the paper concludes with some general observations of a comparative nature and outlines the future policy direction that both countries' Cuba policies are likely to take in the coming years.

UNDERSTANDING MEXICAN-CUBAN RELATIONS

Until the latter stages of the 20th century, Mexico's Cuba policy had exhibited very few changes over the last one hundred years. Besides rhetorical flourishes of friendship (encapsulated in a longstanding cultural identification between Mexicans and Cubans), revolutionary fraternity (recall that both José Martí and Fidel Castro sought political exile in Mexico) and political "understandings" (a mutual respect and a realization of shared interests), Mexico has taken the position that Cuba has the sovereign right to decide how it wishes to organize itself internally and to be free from outside (read foreign) intervention. (Covarrubias, 2006: 1-26; Dávila Villers, 2006: 1-23). (Both Mexico and Cuba have, in fact, been the target of US expansionism, and indeed Mexico lost approximately one half of its territory to its northern neighbor by the mid-19th century. Cuba, for its part, has been the victim of more than four decades of unrelenting US hostility, ranging from assassination attempts against President Fidel Castro to US-sponsored acts of terrorism and proxy invasion.) Not only did Mexican authorities promise not to support any counterrevolutionary forces in Cuba, but Castro's government made a similar commitment not to export revolution to Mexico. Traditionally, the view from Los Pinos has also been that political stability in Cuba is regarded as a matter of geo-strategic significance and national security for Mexico.

In order to understand the consistency in Mexico's approach to Cuba, then, one needs to understand fully Mexico's own unique history of revolution, conquest, invasion, and its often controversial relations with the United States. For powerful historical and symbolic reasons, Mexico has rigidly adhered to a policy of respect for national sovereignty/self-determination (and diplomatic recognition) as well as non-interference (manifested in its forceful defense of Cuba in various international fora) in the domestic affairs of other states, as codified in its national constitution (specifically embedded in article 89) and the crucially important Carranza and Estrada doctrines.² This position has been further reinforced by deep-seated concerns about US intentions, a strong desire for independence in foreign policy-making and a deeply rooted national pride. Since

revolutionary Cuba has successfully stood up to US pressure since 1959, many Mexicans reflect Havana's determination to maintain its political sovereignty.

Indeed, for much of the reign of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Mexican-Cuban relationship had been a close and intimate one, with both sharing an understandable bitterness toward, and a deep distrust of, the United States. In fact, Mexico resisted US pressure to sever diplomatic relations with Cuba in the early 1960s, provided economic, political and moral support to Havana, maintained profitable commercial relations with the island, and has repeatedly criticized the US economic embargo against Cuba (Morley, 2005: 180-233). It not only voted against Cuba's "exclusion" from the OAS in 1962, but it has (until the arrival of the Fox administration) consistently opposed any resolution at the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva that has sought to censure Cuba. Put simply, a PRI-led Mexico had been a loyal, trusted and valuable friend and ally of Cuba over the years, even at the expense of its diplomatic relations with other countries in the Americas (Sánchez, 2006: 260-279).

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Since the late 1970s, however, Mexico's Cuba policy began to experience some subtle shifts in economic emphasis and political tone. With the country's crushing debt burden, the end of the Cold War (and US interference in Central America) and the coming into force of the NAFTA, Mexico's approach has gradually and incrementally veered from its traditional unstinting support for Cuba. (The fact that bilateral trade ties have become inextricably linked, especially since the United States has been Mexico's largest trading partner for years, has clearly played a major role in influencing Mexican government policy.) In fact, the changing tenor of Mexican-Cuban relations was beginning to materialize toward the end of President Ernesto Zedillo's reign, when he started to incorporate ideas about democratic pluralism and respect for basic human rights in his government's foreign policy posture.

Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of that change was showcased at the 1999 Ibero-American Summit in Havana, when President Zedillo implicitly endorsed democratic principles for the hemisphere and even called for greater democratization in Cuba, putting into words what no other Mexican leader before him had dared to utter.³ As he remarked pointedly at the time: "There cannot be sovereign nations without free men and women; men and women who can fully exercise their essential freedoms: freedom to think and give opinions, freedom to act and participate, freedom to dissent, freedom to choose" (Smith, 1999). Not surprisingly, President Castro responded by highlighting what appeared to

be the sycophantic behavior by Mexico and its ill-advised hope to curry favor with the United States.⁴

While Vicente Fox ended the PRI's iron-grip on political power in 2000, he has picked up where Zedillo had left off and even espoused a more critical line toward Cuba than any of his predecessors. Granted, he still rejects the US embargo and Washington's policy of isolating Cuba in the hemisphere, but he has grafted on a statement of support for a democratic transition in Cuba (and greater respect for political rights and freedoms) (Leiken, 2001: 91-104). His former Foreign Relations Secretary, Jorge G. Castañeda, also vigorously grasped the president's embrace of the human rights agenda and applied it to Mexico's relations with revolutionary Cuba, immediately dispatching Mariclaire Acosta, Mexico's newly-minted Special Ambassador for Human Rights and Democracy, to discuss this thorny issue with senior Cuban officials in Havana. The Cuban government, for its part, began to publicly criticize the Fox administration and to raise serious questions about Mexico's independence in the foreign policy realm.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that past Mexican principles about sovereignty and non-intervention were being jettisoned in favor of a new understanding, namely, a willingness to intervene in internal Cuban matters. Indeed, there was some speculation that Mexico might even vote in favor of a resolution that was critical of Cuba's human rights record at the April 2001 UN meetings of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. In the end, it abstained from doing so. But with Havana clearly in his cross-sights, Castaneda was blunt: "Some countries place great emphasis on economic and social rights yet relegate others, such as political and civil rights, to a more distant order of importance. While it is indeed important to guarantee the former, this should never be used as an excuse to not ensure the latter" (PBS NewsHour, 2001). At the same time, both Fox and Castañeda made it clear that it was possible to reconcile a preoccupation with the human rights situation in the world with the maintenance of harmonious and productive relations with other states, including revolutionary Cuba.

Since early 2002, however, the harsher rhetoric of key political figures has set in motion an obvious cooling of official relations between Mexico and Cuba. In February, both Castañeda and Fox met quietly with a group of Cuban dissidents in Havana, openly challenging Castro's government. Two months later, the Mexican government broke with its past (after stating publicly that it would not vote against Cuba in Geneva) and endorsed for the first time a US-sponsored resolution criticizing Cuba's human rights situation before the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Shortly thereafter, Castro precipitated a diplomatic furor by releasing

(after both Fox and Castaneda had vehemently denied the Cuban government's insinuations) a secretly taped phone conversation between himself and President Fox in which Fox asked Castro to leave the UN Monterrey Development Summit before US President George W. Bush arrived. There was, however, a temporary improvement in bilateral relations when Castaneda was replaced by former Minister of the Economy, Luis Ernesto Derbez. Although Derbez was not particularly interested in promoting closer ties with the Cuban government, he was experienced enough to know that cooler heads would have to prevail. As one senior Mexican official was quoted as saying: "We are going to repair relations with Cuba, slowly and bit by bit. It is not in our interest to have relations in a constant state of tension" (Chavira, 2003).

But after Mexico voted again in favor of a critical resolution at both the 2003 and 2004 meetings of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, the diplomatic wheels started to fall off the Mexican-Cuban wagon once again. In May of 2004, Ambassador Roberta Lajous was recalled to Mexico City, while her Cuban counterpart in Mexico, Jorge Bolaños (along with a second Cuban embassy officer), were ordered by the Fox government to leave the country within forty-eight hours. Mexico City justified this dramatic action on the basis of intervention in the country's internal affairs, that is, in response to a series of critical statements about Mexico emanating from Havana and the fact that two members of the Cuban Communist Party, traveling on diplomatic passports, entered Mexico without first notifying the Foreign Ministry, and met with members of the opposition political parties.⁵

Prior to the diplomatic expulsions, the bilateral relationship was already heading for the rocky diplomatic shoals because of the so-called "caso Ahumada" (Kirk, 2004: 15-16). Evidently, Carlos Ahumada, an Argentine businessperson living in Mexico, was videotaped bribing a Mexican PRD official, and subsequently sought refuge in Cuba in the midst of "Videogate." (The apparent objective of the videotape was to embarrass the popular PRD major of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is seen as a viable candidate for the 2006 presidential elections.) The Cuban government, for its part, deported Ahumada before receiving any formal extradition request from Mexico, but not before videotaping some forty hours of incriminating evidence (and potentially embarrassing testimony involving the ruling PAN party) about the whole sordid affair. Meanwhile, officials in Mexico City objected strenuously to the suggestion that Ahumada was somehow caught up in some shadowy political conspiracy.

In July of 2004, the Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary, in an attempt at face-saving and bridge-building, visited Havana for a five-hour meeting with his Cuban counterpart. In an effort to normalize relations somewhat, both sides met and recognized the value of getting the bilateral relationship back on the right track. Accordingly, ambassadors Bolaños and Lajous returned to their respective diplomatic posts on July 25, and further discussions on a wide variety of matters were to take place at some undetermined date. It was clearly a sign that a partial diplomatic thaw was setting in, but it was a long way from removing the overall bilateral relationship from its persistent and ongoing political deep freeze.⁶ While moving forward in terms of bilateral relations, Derbez told a Mexican radio station: “We both understand clearly that the issue that separates us is human rights...” (FOCAL, 2004: 52). However, once again Mexico voted against Cuba’s human rights record in Geneva in the spring of 2005 and 2006.

In early February 2006, the Mexico-US-Cuba triangle took another turn for the worst (Bachelet, 2006). For the most part, a large group of Cuban officials, who were meeting with a group of US businesspeople about energy-related issues, were asked by the manager of the Hotel Maráa Isabel Sheraton in Mexico City to leave the premises, and to turnover their room deposits. Evidently, the US Treasury Department had determined that the meeting violated US laws, which prohibit American businesses from engaging in any commercial interactions with Cubans.

This recent spat over the Sheraton Hotel (the so-called “Sheraton Affair”), which saw Mexico City comply with the US embargo against Cuba, only served to reinforce the Fox administration’s willingness to sacrifice Cubans at the altar of improved relations with Washington (Sánchez, 2003: 33-54; Covarrubias, 2006: 8-10). Rather than follow its own antidote laws rejecting compliance with the embargo, the Mexican government maintained that its national sovereignty had not been violated. The Cuban government was simply left to wonder what had happened to the historic underpinnings of Mexican-Cuban relations. As a result of this amalgam of distrust and tension since 2001, the Mexico-Cuba bilateral relationship has been relegated to a veritable chilly holding pattern, at least until after the July 2006 presidential elections.

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DISSECTING CANADA’S RELATIONS WITH CUBA

Like Mexico, relations between Canada and revolutionary Cuba have always been multifaceted, complicated, provocative and puzzling, especially

to the Cubans. Historically speaking, Canada accepted the sovereign principle of self-determination, recognized the legitimate government of Fidel Castro, and vigorously opposed US efforts to punish and isolate Havana. In fact, successive Canadian governments (irrespective of their political stripe) have consciously opted to maintain cordial political and economic relations with revolutionary Cuba (Kirk and McKenna, 1997). (Moreover, there is significant “people-to-people” contact, which includes dozens of Canadian-based corporations and NGO, a wide array of cultural and academic exchanges, and hundreds of thousands of sun-deprived Canadian tourists.) Since 1959, then, the Canadian approach was (and presumably still is) underscored by an overarching principle, namely, that dialogue, exchange and engagement are key to fostering positive political and socio-economic reforms in Cuba (McKenna and Kirk, 2005: 67-86).

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Indeed, Canada’s policy record toward Cuba over the last forty-six years (as opposed to its enormous neighbor to the south) amply demonstrates this central policy objective. Along with Mexico City, Ottawa refused to rupture diplomatic relations with Havana in the early 1960s, was opposed to pushing Cuba into the arms of the Soviet Union by isolating it hemispherically, and remained an ardent critic of the US economic embargo. Not only have commercial relations flourished over the ensuing years (making Canada an important trade and investment partner for Cuba), but so have educational/civil society-level interactions, development assistance projects and high-level ministerial exchanges.⁷ Former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau traveled to Cuba in 1976 and former PM Jean Chrétien, with the late Pope Paul II urging him on, made an official visit to Cuba in 1998, while former Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy signed a 14-point Canada-Cuba Joint Declaration with his Cuban counterpart in early 1997.

Borrowing a bureaucratic catch phrase from US policy toward apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, Canada’s Cuba policy in the 1990s was dubbed “constructive engagement”, or “principled pragmatism” in some quarters (McKenna and Kirk, 1999: 57-76). The underlying argument was inescapable: isolating, punishing and haranguing the Cubans was invariably counterproductive and would only serve to bolster the hardliners in Havana (and thus prevent meaningful change from actually taking place on the island). In pointing to a fatally flawed US approach, Canadian officials were convinced that engagement (over time and if maintained consistently and firmly) was the best way to foster peaceful democratic change, to introduce much needed economic reforms, and to reintegrate Cuba into the inter-American family. While they were under no illusions that this would be a

short-term undertaking, or that there would not be bumps along the way, they nevertheless argued that sitting down at the table with the Cubans was infinitely more productive than simply shunning them, as Washington has done for almost five decades.

This sharp divergence in policy approaches toward Cuba was most acute over the implementation of the anti-Cuba Helms-Burton law. Canada saw the law as little more than unhelpful putative sanctions, a desire to shut off the investment tap to Cuba, and to merely “internationalize” the US economic embargo (McKenna, 1997: 7-20). Not surprisingly, Canada was in the forefront of opposing the law (much to the delight of the Cubans) because of its negative economic and financial implications for Canadian companies. (It is important to note that virtually the entire international community was opposed to the US legislation.) At every level of the US government apparatus, Canadian officials made their case that the law has to go, that its “extraterritoriality” is in violation of international trade and investment rules, and that barring Canadian corporate officers from traveling to the United States has only raised the ire of the general public in Canada. While the law still remains on the books—though key sections relating to lawsuits have not been executed under the Clinton or current Bush administration—Canada’s unflappable opposition to the legislation has been most appreciated by the Cuban government.

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By the end of the 1990s, however, the Canadian-Cuban relationship had hit upon a rough patch in the bilateral road, or what former prime minister Jean Chrétien once characterized as some “northern ice.” Ottawa pointed to a deteriorating human rights environment in Cuba (especially the jailing of the so-called Group of Four political dissidents in 1998), Fidel Castro’s critical comments about Canada as an “enemy territory” during the 1999 Pan-American Games in Winnipeg, and the lack of results from its engagement policy, as justification for reviewing or downgrading the relationship to something akin to “continued engagement, curtailed activity” (McKenna and Kirk, 2002: 49-63). Moreover, the late 2001 appointment of John Manley as Foreign Affairs Minister (replacing the more progressive Lloyd Axworthy) did little to improve Canadian-Cuban relations. In fact, the relationship seemed to slip even further into a bilateral freeze, as evidenced by Manley’s criticism of Cuba’s lack of democracy, the decision by Ottawa not to invite President Castro to the April 2001 Summit of the Americas held in Quebec City, Chrétien’s negative remarks at the conclusion of the Summit and Castro’s subsequent television interview where he criticized both Canada and Chrétien. While an official policy of engagement still remained in place (however tenuously) the Canada-

Cuba warmth of the early Chrétien years had apparently turned into an unmistakable bilateral chill.

After roughly twenty months of bilateral relations locked in a veritable frosty holding pattern, some signs of an early thaw began to materialize. In November of 2002, the Chrétien government dispatched a junior cabinet minister to visit Cuba to take stock of the overall diplomatic relationship and to put out the feelers to the Cubans. Ostensibly, Denis Paradis, then-Secretary of State for Latin America and Africa, was leading a trade mission (along with a handful of parliamentarians and representatives from some seventy Canadian businesses) to participate in the 20th Havana International Trade Fair. While visiting the country, he met with Cuban officials, inaugurated a cultural exhibit commemorating the life of Pierre Trudeau, and spoke to a large gathering of students at the prestigious University of Havana.

However, just as signs of improvement in relations were looming on the horizon, the bilateral temperature was lowered precipitously by the actions of the Cuban government. The highly-publicized 2003 March-April (just after the US-led invasion of Iraq) crackdown on some seventy-five Cuban dissidents was clearly a major setback for the Canadian-Cuban relationship. Officials in Ottawa were quick to respond, with Canada's then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bill Graham, protesting against the arrests, the subsequent trial process and the harsh prison sentences (ranging from six to twenty-eight years) and arguing that the detentions could not be justified on national security grounds (Government of Canada, 2003: 1). Cuba's ambassador to Canada was tersely summoned to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and told bluntly of Ottawa's "extreme concern" over the clampdown and how "deeply disturbed" it was over these unacceptable actions (Knox, 2003: 8). In addition, a formal protest letter was handed over to the Cuban emissary to present to Cuba's Foreign Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque. Two weeks later, Canada supported an OAS resolution condemning human rights abuses in Cuba and calling on Havana "to immediately free all unjustly arrested Cubans" (Bachelet, 2003). At the annual OAS General Assembly in Chile in June of 2003, Graham let it be known that Canada would support an OAS-backed resolution on imposing "non-economic" measures against Cuba, such as suspending high-level ministerial contacts. It was clear, if it had not been fully recognized by both countries already, that relations had hit another rough patch of ice on the bilateral road.

As Paul Martin was sworn in as Canada's twenty-first prime minister in mid-December 2003, and today clings to power following a narrow

election victory in late June of 2004, very little has changed in terms of Canada-Cuba relations. A noticeable chill still continued to characterize the overall relationship, and no ministerial exchanges between the two countries have taken place since the major crackdown in March of 2003 (McKenna, 2004a: 3). Martin has said very little about Cuba in his public remarks, once responding to a media question at the mid-January 2004 special Summit of the Americas in Mexico by noting opaquely: "We have in the past used or sought to basically deal with our relationship with Cuba in a way that provides greater benefit obviously for Cuba but also for all of the surrounding states."⁸ Under former Prime Minister Martin's shaky minority government from 2004-2006, very little changed in terms of the generally cool complexion of Canadian-Cuban relations. And with the new Conservative government, another tenuous minority situation under right-leaning Stephen Harper, there is not much chance that any moves will be undertaken to melt the bilateral ice in Canadian-Cuban relations. What will most likely happen in the short term is simply more-of-the-same: no ministerial visits, no increase in Canada's development assistance program for Cuba, and, most assuredly, no official invitations for Fidel Castro to visit Canada anytime soon. In short, a "stay-the-course" type of Cuba policy will remain in place, that is, continued engagement, but with a conspicuously frosty edge.

COMPARING POLICY APPROACHES TOWARD CUBA: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Clearly, the approaches toward Cuba of both Mexico and Canada make for an interesting pair to compare and contrast. Both countries have an unusual relationship with their neighbor, the United States, which is the dominant trading partner and the world's only superpower. Sensitive to domestic political considerations and an impetus to demonstrate an independent foreign policy posture, both Ottawa and Mexico City have also traditionally played the "Cuba card" to their advantage.

Of course, one key point should be established from the very outset: namely, that Mexico and Canada have more similarities than differences (although there are signs this may have changed under Fox) when it comes to their respective Cuba policies. Still, there are obvious differences in terms of overall bilateral stress and tension, in the tone of diplomatic language (especially by leading political figures) and in general policy expectations, to say nothing of the differing emphasis on human rights considerations. In addition, there appears to be a widening gap between Canada and Mexico

in terms of Cuba's domestic political/electoral significance for them, its regional or hemispheric import, and the importance of "people-to-people" exchanges with the island.

But it is the similarities in official policy objectives/pronouncements and instruments/means that in recent years have been more obvious and striking. Both Mexico and Canada, for instance, subscribe to the view (albeit with their own unique emphasis and historical filter) that significant meaningful change in Cuba is both desirable and possible. In their own way, each rejects the heavy-handed approach of the United States and supports engagement over isolation, but both are not averse to rebuking the Cubans if circumstances warrant. At the same time, neither country deems it worthy to make relations with Cuba the central focus of its respective foreign policy universe that is, either criticizing Cuba too harshly or seeking to strengthen bilateral ties in a particularly effusive manner.

While differences between the two countries' Cuba policy exist, it is the similarities that tend to be more conspicuous. Indeed, there are clear and revealing similarities between Mexico and Canada, particularly when one considers their official government pronouncements and policy determinants. Simply put, history does matter in how they fashion their own policy responses toward Cuba. Not only have their respective Cuba policies (and their overall policy thrust) remained remarkably consistent and largely unchanged since the early 1960s, they have also promulgated the same policy aim, namely, a free, capitalist-oriented and liberal democratic Cuba. Consequently, each has consistently raised the issue of human rights in Cuba at the highest levels, and their representations have often been met with fierce resistance and defensiveness.⁹ In fact, their Cuba policies also share another similar trait; to wit, they are very much influenced by the actions of the Cuban government itself—such as crackdowns on political dissidents, a toughening of its criminal code or even provocative behavior in the international arena.

More strikingly, their respective approaches toward Cuba cannot be completely divorced from their core relations with the United States. As both countries struggle with, and contemplate the full impact of, powerful integrative forces, political leaders in Canada and Mexico see their relationships with the United States continue to deepen economically, just as their respective populations express serious reservations about becoming more closely intertwined with the US "hyperpower." Cuba factors into this mix because the two governments are well acquainted with the anti-American strain in their respective populations (though neither Mexico and Canada have condemned some forty-six years of US interference in

Cuban politics), evince deep concerns about national identity and policy independence vis-à-vis the US, and recognize the domestic difficulties of being perceived as having a Cuba policy indistinguishable from that of Washington's. As a result, this has united Mexico City and Ottawa in opposing the US economic embargo, attacking the anti-Cuba Helms-Burton law, and disagreeing publicly with a US policy of confrontation and isolation.

Additionally, the similarities in approaches to Cuba are reflected in their respective policy-making processes. While the various actors (i.e. government officials, the business community, domestic opinion, etc.) influencing the process are basically the same, idiosyncratic factors or different personalities in each case do impact on their Cuba policies. Presidents and prime ministers, along with their foreign ministers and foreign secretaries, can greatly influence the tone of their positions toward Cuba. In the case of Canada, for example, one can witness the enormous impact on Canadian-Cuban relations of Pierre Elliott Trudeau or Lloyd Axworthy and Mexico's Vicente Fox and Jorge Castaneda. Put another way, ideological disposition (and center-right governments in particular) can be an important variable in shaping their approaches toward Cuba.

Interestingly enough, both Mexico City and Ottawa, when it comes to Cuba, tend to suffer from the same public policy-making blind spots. Each country displays a selective moral indignation, holding the Cuban government to a higher human rights standard than, say, Colombia or Guatemala. More important, they subscribe to the view, in one form or another, that Cuba will automatically and necessarily respond to certain tactics or policy stimuli, whether through positive inducements or punitive measures. What they fail to realize is that Cuba is not Canada or Mexico, and that the Cubans operate according to their own time schedule, in response to their own domestic situation, and to their own reading of the external environment. Both countries also tend to underestimate (considerably) Havana's willingness and ability to "go it alone" and thereby not respond predictably to outside measures.

Arguably, the differences between Canada and Mexico on the Cuba question are not huge, but they can be identified and noted. More so than the Canadian case, the Mexican-Cuban relationship has clearly been strained by recent diplomatic developments, to the point where ambassadors were being withdrawn and others were being asked to leave.¹⁰ There was even some suggestion that diplomatic relations between the two countries would be severed completely, with both sides seemingly reaching

the proverbial tipping point. Furthermore, officials in Ottawa have not raised the temperature of their diplomatic exchanges (both privately and publicly) with the Cubans to the same level as the Mexicans. Indeed, there have been charges of Havana meddling in internal Mexican matters and Cuban authorities accusing the Fox's administration of prostrating itself before the Bush White House. Unlike Canada, Mexico has been unable to restrain itself from engaging in both a shouting match and diplomatic tit-for-tat with the Cubans (Tuckman, 2004: 3).

It is also unclear precisely what the end game is for the Mexicans with respect to Cuba. While Canada has essentially viewed engagement as a long-term strategy to help facilitate positive change in Cuba, and although the Mexicans once thought the same, the Fox administration seems less committed than Canada to influencing Cuba's internal political situation through contact and interaction. By opting to criticize Cuba directly, President Fox has only served to cement Fidel Castro's defensive attitude and thereby strengthening those in key positions in the government who seek to resist pressures for internal change.

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Mexico, for instance, has been more vocal in its criticism of Cuba's human rights situation, as evidenced by the harsh comments of Zedillo, Fox, and former foreign secretaries Rosario Green and Jorge Castaneda. Far more than Canada, Mexico has been prepared to speak openly about Cuba's record on fundamental political rights, the lack of democratic pluralism in Cuba, and the absence of party competition in its political system. As President Fox's government has indicated in the past: "[Mexico] is deeply concerned about the situation of human rights in Cuba", accordingly, as one journalist has noted, its 2003 vote at the UN Commission on Human Rights was a "faithful reflection of Mexico's policy and President Vicente Fox's commitment to promote human rights" (San Martin, 2003). But by breaking this erstwhile bilateral understanding (followed religiously by PRI governments) of not publicly condemning Havana's rights record, Mexico has inflicted significant damage on relations with Cuba. And its predilection to meet with noted Cuban dissidents, which Canada has pointedly refused to do, has only added salt to an already open diplomatic wound.

Today, both Mexico and Canada have refrained from linking productive bilateral relations explicitly to any designated set of human rights conditions, standards or benchmarks. However, the Mexicans, particularly during the Fox's years, have gone further than the Canadians in tying directly the issue of human rights and democratic development to anticipated improvements in the tone of bilateral relations. Canada, by way of contrast, has sought to bring about greater economic and political liberalization through a long-

term process of cordial engagement and contact with the Cubans across a wide variety of sectors.¹¹

Needless to say, Mexico's willingness to speak critically about Cuba's human rights record, its discussions with vocal critics of the Castro government, and its general hard-line stance toward Havana have all been positively received in official Washington. More so than Canada, the Fox's administration (and arguably during the waning years of the Zedillo period as well) has made a conscious foreign policy choice to link itself more closely to the United States, especially from an economic standpoint, and thereby lessening its foreign policy-making autonomy in the process. But as former Mexican ambassador to Cuba, Richard Pascoe (who was actually appointed by Fox), warned: "It demonstrates a country and a government that's too servile to the interests of Washington" (Bensinger, 2004). Although Canada, too, has sought to refurbish relations with the Bush administration, it has not sought to remove the "Cuba card" from the deck (as the Mexicans appear to have done) as a means to improve the overall tenor of bilateral relations with Washington.

At first blush, it would also appear that Mexico has shown more willingness than Canada has to downplay its longstanding interest in maintaining close and profitable commercial linkages with Cuba.¹² As the forces of globalization have accelerated, and Cuba's economic situation has deteriorated over the special period (leading to measures to tighten control of foreign investment), the Mexican business community has looked elsewhere for commercial opportunities. Moreover, it seems increasingly clear that the Fox's administration is more intent on focusing on the North American marketplace for Mexico's economic sustenance (Laghi, 2005: 1; Cunningham, 2005: 21). Canada, on the other hand, continues to view the Cuban market positively (particularly since the US is rapidly closing the gap) and Canadian businesspeople are still committed to commercial ventures in tourism, mining and oil exploration, and in basic foodstuffs and consumer durables.

Politically or symbolically speaking, Mexico and Canada also appear to be on different tracks with respect to revolutionary Cuba. Ottawa still views its Cuba policy in terms of demonstrating independence in its foreign policy to other countries in the Americas, while the Mexicans seem much less concerned about this expression of national sovereignty. The Mexican government is also less concerned about the political/electoral fallout from adopting a tougher approach toward Cuba. Canada, for its part, still values the fact that it has a different approach to Cuba than the United States, and Canadian governments know full well that altering that policy would

only serve to alienate the voting public, which has a soft spot for Cuba and the Cuban people.

EXPLAINING THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Accounting for the similarities in approaches toward Cuba has already been touched upon, revealing historical and cultural reasons, political personalities in Mexico City and Ottawa, and because of their principled opposition to sanctioning and isolating countries in the Americas. Generally speaking, both Mexico and Canada (albeit through different ways) believe that Cuba will be more responsive and amenable to the “carrot” rather than the “stick” (Washington’s favorite choice of inducement). Additionally, they each have had trade and investment considerations or interests to advance in Cuba (though this is now changing for Mexico), and both are nervously watching the United States slowly re-enter the Cuban marketplace.¹³ Perhaps most important, their similar Cuba policies have, in the past, reflected a deep concern (shared by those at the political, bureaucratic and citizen levels) about exercising sovereignty vis-à-vis Washington (and not succumbing to US pressure), not wanting to upset the electoral apple cart by taking a harsher line toward Cuba, and looking to use their relations with Havana as a means of demonstrating policy independence in the Americas (and beyond).

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From a scholarly perspective, the real challenge here is to explain why there are differences between Mexico and Canada in approaching revolutionary Cuba. As mentioned above, the differences, though real and substantive, largely revolve around issues of tone, language and tactics. Clearly, Mexico, especially under the Fox’s administration but beginning with President Zedillo, has taken a tougher stance toward Cuba, using more strident language, recalling its ambassador and threatening to sever diplomatic relations with Cuba, while pressing harder on the sensitive question of human rights in Cuba. This change in emphasis and strategy raises the obvious query: after decades of friendly and cozy relations with Cuba, why would Mexico alter this approach? The answer lies in a series of new realities for Mexico, politically and geo-strategically, economically, regionally, domestically and personality-wise.

Firstly, Mexico’s political star has been drawing closer to the United States orbit since the coming into force of the NAFTA in 1994. It has obviously tied its economic progress and future to a vibrant US economy, unfettered access to the US marketplace, and continued US investment in

Mexico. Even though Mexico refrained from joining the “coalition of the willing” in the March 2003 Iraq war, it has sought to curry favor with Washington in hopes of securing a groundbreaking immigration/migrant worker arrangement with the US (where every year some 400,000 Mexicans enter the US without a visa). While such a formal agreement has thus far proved elusive (and probably unattainable in the post-9/11 environment) it has not stopped the Fox government from seeing the geo-strategic writing on the wall and thus heightened its eagerness to seek close relations with the Bush White House (Covarrubias, 2005: 20-26). Part of the effort to build friendlier relations with the United States has been Mexico’s willingness to sacrifice its historical relationship with Cuba, exemplified by its more critical language and actions at the UN Human Rights Commission meetings in Geneva. Put simply, cordial relations with Cuba are far less important and, in fact, can be downgraded, especially if Mexico is looking to enhance and deepen relations with the United States (Moore, 2004: 145-161).

Since expanding commercial relations with the United States are of the utmost importance for Mexico, it has minimized the significance of maintaining substantive two-way trade with Cuba.¹⁴ Given Cuba’s economic and financial difficulties during the special period, and as the statistical evidence supports, Mexican exports to Cuba have barely grown over the years, businesspeople have withdrawn investment from the country, and even the number of Mexican tourists has dropped.¹⁵ And when all of these economic developments are combined, it is not hard to see that the importance of Cuba in Mexico’s external relations has diminished accordingly. Lastly, the island country has slipped in terms of Mexico’s foreign policy calculations because it, unlike Cuba, has sought to situate itself within the larger global economy and thereby look beyond its immediate perimeter of trade partners.

Indeed, the changing regional dynamic has also factored into Cuba’s depreciating value to Mexico.¹⁶ For one thing, Cuba’s status as a leading regional player in the Americas has been overshadowed by Brazil, it is still experiencing economic and financial difficulties, and finds itself the odd country out in a hemisphere of transitioning democratic regimes. Mexico does not need to maintain close bilateral ties with Cuba in order to demonstrate its policy independence in the wider region. There was also the fact that once the civil strife in Central America came to an end in the mid-1990s, Cuba’s value (especially given Havana’s close connections to the leftist insurgency movements in these countries) from a Mexican foreign policy/regional standpoint declined accordingly (Klepak, 2005: 93-97). In fact, regional considerations have taken somewhat of a back

seat to larger concerns about solidifying Mexico's image as a functioning and consolidating democracy, accomplished in part by criticizing Cuba's record on human rights and lack of democratic pluralism (Cameron and Wise, 2004: 301-323).

In domestic political terms, Cuba has lost some of its shine in the eyes of a younger generation of Mexicans, and this has manifested itself in official government policy. While there still exist some affection and fraternal attachments to revolutionary Cuba, they are certainly not as robust as they once were. Anecdotally, there appears to be less interest on the part of the Mexican citizenry in Cuban culture and music, in the status of the Cuban revolution and Fidel Castro's critical remarks about the United States, or in selecting Cuba as a desirable tourist destination.¹⁷ Put another way, the Fox's administration is not restricted by domestic political imperatives from downplaying diplomatic contacts with Cuba. The road to a tougher stance toward Havana is, therefore, largely unencumbered by any electoral roadblocks or impediments.

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In addition, the lack of political, economic and regional constraints acting upon the Mexican political leadership have effectively allowed the idiosyncrasies of political personalities to play a larger role in shaping the country's tougher Cuba policy. In the case of Vicente Fox, his longstanding business and market-friendly background, his strongly pro-US bent and conservative ideological leanings certainly helped to infuse Mexico's Cuba policy with more of a preference for isolationism than a tone of fraternalism. Indeed, even when he was campaigning for the presidency in 2000, he made the off-hand comment that "[Fidel] Castro ya está muy viejo. Hay que darle un empujoncito para que se muera" (La Jornada, 2004). Moreover, former Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary, Jorge Castañeda, and, to a lesser extent, Luis Ernesto Derbez, have both sought to tilt Mexico away from Havana and toward more friendly relations with Washington. The more negative tone toward Cuba, then, cannot be divorced from the key personalities who were (and still are) setting Mexican foreign policy, particularly its greater emphasis on respect for human rights and continentalism.

One should not forget to mention how the Cubans themselves factor into this larger comparative picture. During Cuba's ongoing "special period," Havana has been clearly looking to have cordial and mutually beneficial relations with both Mexico and Canada. As of this writing, though, Canada appears to be the more willing partner, offering Cuba a certain degree of international legitimacy and respectability, cooperation and development assistance and professional economic and administrative expertise, as well

as high-spending tourists, and high-tech goods and consumer items. Of course, Canada also presents the Cubans with an opening to highlight the absurdity of US policy toward Cuba, and to have the Canadian-Cuban relationship stand as a minor source of friction between Canada and the US.

As for the Mexicans, revolutionary Cuba has traditionally sought to achieve the same kind of advantages or benefits, more or less, as it has for Canada. But from the Zedillo's years onward, and particularly under the Fox's administration, this is no longer the case. Instead, the Cuban government has sought to strengthen its position internally as well as regionally by pointing to Mexico's tougher position toward Cuba. As Mexican political scientist Ana Covarrubias rightly points out: "Cuba and Mexico seem to be serving their [domestic political] interests at the expense of the bilateral relationship" (Covarrubias, 2004: 5).

CONCLUSIONS

Not surprisingly, then, the similarities in the approaches toward Cuba of Mexico and Canada are decreasing just as the differences between them appear to be growing. While these differences may be a function of the current political leadership in Mexico City, and thus Mexico's current estrangement from Cuba could well change under a PRD-led administration, there could be more to this. It is possible that Mexico is seeking to burnish and fortify its image as a democratic country by openly and directly criticizing Cuba. Moreover, as Mexico looks increasingly toward the United States for its commercial well-being and is more focused on North America overall, relations with Cuba are bound to receive less governmental attention. And as trade and investment links decline in importance, in conjunction with less interest in Cuban things by Mexicans themselves, stress and tension in bilateral relations could increase. The more significant concern is that future Mexican governments, particularly those formed by conservative elements of the PRI or PAN parties, might be willing to take a harder line toward Cuba in hopes of scoring some political points in Washington (thereby leading to the negotiation of a coveted agreement on migrant workers and a deepening of the NAFTA).

Equally important, as their respective Cuba policies grow apart, their own bilateral relationship is becoming closer economically and more formalized politically (Del Castillo V., 1995: 35-53; MacLean, 2000: 35-55). While the two countries have obviously grown closer and more integrated over

the last fifteen years or so, and as political institutions and structures have been put into place to manage the overall relationship, regular diplomatic consultations and exchanges have not approached anything resembling policy harmonization (Jiménez, 2005: 12 and Torres, 2005: 15). And there is certainly no evidence of any “convergence” or common policy position toward Cuba; nor is there any sense that the two NAFTA partners would be interested in coordinating their actions toward the Cuban government.¹⁸ Both countries prefer to craft their own individual approaches toward Cuba, and largely do so based on their own narrowly-conceived calculations of national interest.

The Cuba policies of Mexico and Canada, then, are unlikely to change radically in the short to medium term. The fact of the matter is, there are no compelling international or regional variables driving them to do otherwise, and there does not exist any powerful domestic pressures advocating change, thereby relegating each of them to a “wait-and-see” posture. In addition, the actions of the Cuban government (either domestically or externally) have done little to prompt a meaningful review of existing policies, let alone precipitate any dramatic shift in policy orientation (Grajewski, 2005: 12). Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that there is much in the way of creative thinking with respect to Cuba going on within these governments. One either engages Cuba across a wide variety of issue-areas, minimizes diplomatic exchange out of displeasure with Havana, or isolates the island completely. And one should not expect this pattern to change substantially in the near future.

As for Canada, former Prime Minister Paul Martin’s Cuba policy has resembled “the muddling through” approach perfected by Jean Chrétien in his waning years in office. In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that Martin’s position toward Cuba, or newly-minted Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s, especially in light of his minority government situation after the late January 2006 federal election, will significantly change from what Canada’s position has been since the early 1990s. Since the core determinants of the Canadian-Cuban relationship still remain largely in place, the overall direction of bilateral relations should continue unaltered. Officially Ottawa, then, remains adamant about the following: the restoration of some normalcy in the bilateral relationship is up to the Cubans themselves; they have to demonstrate, presumably through their actions on the political and economic front, that they are ready to resume a full-blown relationship of constructive engagement.¹⁹ But there is the possibility that Ottawa may be open to a more critical stance toward Cuba in the wake of Canada’s decision to stay out of the 2003 Iraq war, its non-

participation in US President Bush's ballistic missile defense scheme, and its desire to resolve long-standing bilateral disputes in the areas of softwood lumber and Canadian beef exports. More than likely, though, the chill in Canada's relationship with Cuba will remain, just as the overall relationship continues to be on "cruise control" or in a semi-permanent holding pattern (McKenna and Kirk, 2005: 79-82).

Notwithstanding the obvious similarities and differences in approaches, it is unlikely that any valuable lessons will be learned by Ottawa or Mexico City from each country's respective policy toward Cuba. The fact of the matter is that governments almost invariably fail to learn from both their own actions and from the experiences of other nation-states. This, in part, explains why Mexico and Canada are not prepared to work in concert with one another on joint policy initiatives toward Cuba or to facilitate a peaceful democratic transition in Cuba.²⁰ Instead, the two countries tend to continue along the same well-traveled path as before, rejecting valid or counter-arguments and justifying their own policy approaches on the basis of the same old thinking. It is almost a given that Ottawa and Mexico City will inevitably make their policy calculations not on the basis of what others have done or not done, but rather on the basis of advancing their countries' own unique mix of domestic and foreign policy interests. For this reason, Mexican-Cuban and Canadian-Cuban relations are sure to get bogged down in the misreading of diplomatic signals, the lack of high-level political attention and the possibility of being viewed primarily (and thus negatively) through a US prism.

NOTES

- ¹ There were calls for Cuba to permit the visit of the Personal Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to view the human rights situation in Cuba. United Nations Office at Geneva, "Commission Adopts Six Texts On Violations of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Around the World," April 14th 2005, pp. 9-10.
- ² Venustiano Carranza, a one-time Mexican president in the early 1900s, embraced the key principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Mexico or any other country. The Estrada Doctrine of the 1930s, named after Mexican Foreign Secretary Genaro Estrada, codifies this same tenet and also ensures that Mexico's diplomatic recognition is not made conditional on any specific criterion.
- ³ It is worth noting that President Carlos Salinas did meet with Cuban

exiles Jorge Mas Canosa and Carlos Alberto Montaner during the course of the NAFTA negotiations. Covarrubias, p. 4. But it was Zedillo's government that was the first (in over a decade) to abstain at the UN Human Rights Commission meetings in Geneva in 1999—breaking with a long tradition of voting against US-backed resolutions singling out Cuba's rights record.

- ⁴ It is worth noting that Mexico itself is no paragon of democratic virtue—as seen in the seven decades of one-party rule, continuing human rights abuses, and an enormous gulf between the country's elite and the majority of impoverished Mexicans.
- ⁵ Bilateral tension was also heightened by Cuba's tardy response to some \$450 million in debt owed to Mexico's National Bank of Foreign Trade (Bancomext).
- ⁶ In April of 2005, President Castro recommended that Fox should retire early given the controversy surrounding the unfounded allegations against Mexico City mayor, López Obrador.
- ⁷ Since 1994, some \$65 million in official development assistance—from providing school books and medicine to setting up Cuba's tax system and working with Cuban NGOs—has flowed to the Cuban government.
- ⁸ See the transcript of closing comments by Prime Minister Martin at the special Summit of the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico, January 13 2004.
- ⁹ Havana has argued that Canada and Mexico should first get their own houses in order. In terms of social human rights, the treatment of Canada's aboriginal population, and discomfiting child poverty numbers all reveal severe problems. In the case of Mexico, there are significant abuses in terms of civil and political human rights and in the deplorable socio-economic conditions faced by a majority of the Mexican population. Cuba refrains from criticizing these shortcomings, however, believing that it is up to Mexico and Canada to resolve them.
- ¹⁰ Cuba's Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, responded to these particular diplomatic flaps by noting "Cuba and Mexico are living their worst moment in more than 100 years of diplomacy." A Foreign Ministry statement read on Cuban state television also referred to Mexican charges as "inspired by arrogance, haughtiness, obstinacy and lies." See Lisa J. Adams, "Mexico, Peru Recall Ambassadors From Cuba", *The Washington Post* 3, May 2004 and John Rice, "Cuba Denounces Mexico Move on Relations", *The Washington Post* 5, May 2004.
- ¹¹ For some, Canada's conduct has amounted to little more than the coddling of a dictatorship. See Yvon Grenier, "Our Dictatorship: Canada's Trilateral Relations with Cuba," in M.A. Molot and F.O. Hampson

- (eds.), *Canada Among Nations 2000: Vanishing Borders* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 247-273.
- ¹² In actual fact, trade between Canada and Cuba reached record levels in 2004—amounting to roughly \$925 million (up considerably from \$630 million in 2003.) Government of Canada, *Trade Data Online* (Ottawa, Industry Canada, 2005).
 - ¹³ In a bizarre, almost surreal situation, the United States still prohibits trade with Cuba, while at the same time Cuba has imported \$US 1.2 billion worth of food products over the past three years. Almost one-third of US governors, and hundreds of businesspeople, have made the trek to Havana to ply their wares.
 - ¹⁴ Significantly, two-way trade between Mexico and Cuba amounted to a paltry \$173 million in 2004 (up from \$163 million in 2003), while trade with the US has grown exponentially to a staggering \$275 billion in 2004 (up from \$252 billion in 2003). See Mexico's Ministry of Economy, "Trade Intelligence," (Government of Mexico, 2005). One Mexican official confided that there "is not a great interest within the private sector regarding Cuba." Confidential correspondence with a Mexican foreign policy official, August 2, 2005.
 - ¹⁵ In part, Mexican investments have declined out of fear of US policies like Helms-Burton. See Chronicle on Cuba, *Cuba Source* (January 2005), p. 1. The number of Mexican tourists visiting Cuba has dropped over the years—going from 98,000 in 2000 to 79,000 in 2001. See "Cuba busca recuperar turismo mexicano que cayo 9% a 2004", *La Crónica de Hoy* (Monterrey), May 31, 2005.
 - ¹⁶ One could also argue that Mexico's shifting focus on North America contributed to Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Derbez's failed effort to secure the top job at the OAS—as key member states in the region, especially Brazil, threw their support behind the Chilean candidate.
 - ¹⁷ While there does not exist any definitive study or public opinion survey on this specific question, interviews with both senior Canadian and Mexican government officials in the spring of 2005 lend credence to its plausibility.
 - ¹⁸ Confidential interviews and correspondence with Canadian and Mexican government officials from April 12 to May 31, 2005.
 - ¹⁹ Interestingly, the Cubans have launched an extremely successful campaign in Cuba to raise Canada's profile throughout 2005—marking the 60th anniversary of the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

²⁰ In fact, Fox's harder line may have nullified any opportunity that Mexico may have had to influence the Cuban transition process.

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