

Canada's policy towards Latin America: perceptions from the south

Raul Rodriguez Rodriguez

Introduction

Canada's relations with Latin America have gone through different stages from the economic, political and social standpoint. And so have Latin America's perceptions of Canada. In the pre-confederation days, the driving force behind the initial contacts was the desire of the British North American financial capital to diversify its foreign trade in order to advance its nation building process vis-à-vis the British economic disengagement and the United States expansionism.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, pre-confederation Canada's links with the area of Latin American and the Caribbean were conditioned by the domination of European powers, namely Spain, France and Britain. Since the second half of the 19th century, the relations of the Dominion with the nascent Latin American republics have been conditioned by Canadian political and diplomatic links to the British Empire and the hegemonic designs of the United States in the western hemisphere.

The founding of the Confederation in 1867 did not bring fundamental changes nor future prospects to the relations of the Dominion with the nations to the south of the western hemisphere. Indeed, for the first one hundred years after the passing of the British North America Act, the Canadian foreign policy was more focused on Europe, namely Great Britain and the Commonwealth, than on its geographically closer area, the western hemisphere.

Needless to say, the world order of international relations dominated by the cold war made this hemisphere a totally different area in 1968. It was then when a new chapter in Canadian Latin American relations began, with a foreign policy review, and careful policy process was put in place. Most scholars agree that even in 1968 the main objective of the Canadian policy towards Latin America was the same as it was one hundred years before, diversifying the Canadian foreign trade and reducing the vulnerabilities of dependence on the United States market for the Canadian export oriented economy.

The post-1968 period also marks the increasing Canadian government and Canadian NGO involvement in Latin America with its highest point in Central America in the 1980's when Canadian mediation, refugee policy and aid was positively acknowledged by the countries of the sub region and, by extension, the rest of Latin Americans.

In the post-cold war world, Canadian relations with Latin America enter a new stage with the final incorporation to the Organization of American States to sit on the proverbial empty chair that many Latin American countries had urged Canada to occupy since the 1920's.

In the 1990's, in the context of the formation of regional economic blocs, Latin America gradually became the only area where Canada could diversify its foreign trade¹; therefore, Canadian policy makers have finally accepted Canada's western hemisphere geography in a process of integration to the region and participation in inter American affairs that has no signs of reversibility.

By the end of the 20th Century Canada was showing an increasing involvement and engagement with the region, hosting hemispheric economic, political and cultural events such as an O.A.S. general assembly, Pan-American sports games and the Summit of the Americas. Canadian government officials were publicly speaking of how Canada has had to overcome the challenge of accepting its destiny of being connected to the western hemisphere.

However, the post- 9/11 world has had an impact in Canada's relations with Latin America as Canada seeks to

maintain its multilateral and internationalist engagement with the region as well as its relationship with the United States which emphasizes security and demands unwavering cooperation from its allies.

A brief literature review

When looking for information and academic studies on political science and international relations one is likely to find that most scholars who have written about Canadian/Latin American relations have done it from the Canadian perspective, thus the emphasis is placed on Canada's perceptions of Latin America as a region. Most studies basically define the relations as intermittent, distant, and ambivalent especially before 1989. Jack Ogelsby (1976) in *Gringos from the Far North*, wrote that, with the exception of some isolated encounters, the region of Latin America was considered a far problematic region². More recently, as Canada's policy towards the hemisphere evolved in response to the changing world situation, a number of studies proliferated. James Rochlin, in 1994, described the role of Canada as a minor one in the hemisphere until recently³. Peter Mckenna characterizes Canada's relations with the countries belonging to the Inter American system in this way: *All along the history of Panamericanism Canada was more a passive than an active observer*⁴. Finally, Brian JR Stevenson analyses Canada's foreign policy towards the region since 1968 as a point of inflection when Canada started playing a more active diplomatic role in Latin America that culminated with the membership in the OAS⁵.

From the Latin American perspective, one may find studies on aspects and issues of the Canadian reality that are in tune with the evolution of Canadian policy towards specific countries in the region. In Mexico, especially after 1994, there are a number of important studies by economists and international relations experts about Canadian Mexican relations in the context of NAFTA. In Cuba, Canadian Policy of constructive engagement and the triangular relation that includes

the United States has been a source of interest by scholars and, in Argentina, one finds frequent comparative studies.

Latin America's perceptions of Canada: A historical overview

Perceptions are important in terms of relations among the states as main actors in the international system. A perception, in this case, is how a nation is seen by other nations or groups of nations.

Since the early days of the Confederation up to 1968, with the exception of a few commercial missions, the work of missionaries and the opening of a small number of embassies⁶ in the region in the 1940's, Canada remained distant from Latin America and the Inter American institutions. Nevertheless, there are strong indications that Canada was perceived as a natural member of the hemispheric community, at times even a possible actor that could be a balance to the U.S. increasing economic domination of the region. This perception may be based on the results of contact with the early trading missions that traveled to some Latin American and Caribbean countries as early as 1866.

The free trade winds blowing in Great Britain led, in 1846, to the unilateral decision to eliminate all preferences to wheat and other products from its North American provinces to access the British market⁷, a heavy blow to the British Canadian merchants who had for long benefited from the great advantages by having Canadian staple industry consigned for England⁸. A few years later, in 1865, the United States administration of Andrew Johnson announced the abrogation of the repeal of the Elgin⁹ Treaty of commercial reciprocity between the British North American provinces and the United States.

In response to that, the Canadian founding fathers sought to find more markets in anticipation of the Confederation by sending a trade mission to the Caribbean, which visited Cuba on March 17, 1866, still under Spanish colonial rule, but increasingly developing commercial and socio-cultural ties with

the United States. This was part of a traveling mission that would also visit Mexico and Brazil.

There is plenty of evidence of efforts that were encouraged by representatives of the ruling elites of the Dominion to promote trade and even to present the newly – created confederacy as a competitor of the United States for markets in Latin America and the Spanish West Indies, in the “Report of the Commissioners From British North America Appointed to Enquire into the Trade of the West Indies, Mexico and Brazil”. In a letter signed after the meetings in Havana and delivered in person by a trade commissioner to the Intendente in Cadiz, the intention is made clear to the Spanish authorities.

But is it prudent, is it wise, for Spain to allow her rich West Indian possessions to remain wholly dependent for many necessities on a single source of supply, and the source is the United States... will it not be a sound policy to encourage and foster a competing source of supply in British North America, the provinces of which when united in one government as it is now contemplated, will form from the outset a confederation of about 4 million people, well qualified to establish in the continent of North America a check and counterpoise to the aggressive and absorbing principle which seems to animate the democracy of the United States.¹⁰

This may very well have been the first time attempt at developing a distinct diplomacy by the soon-to-be Dominion of Canada, the efforts of the ruling elites of the British North America to diversify trade and compete with the United States for the markets of the Spanish West Indies and other regions of Latin America.

The statement also reflects an important divergence in terms of foreign policy projection by establishing a clear difference between the British North America and its southern neighbor, the United States, whose foreign projection was by then defined by the Monroe Doctrine. This may have led to a positive perception of the British North America on the part of the nascent Latin American Republics, however it never materialized into real trade possibilities.

There were other subsequent attempts to establish

commercial linkages and open up markets since the early years of the Dominion to which the same triangular rationale may be applied. As early as 1876, Prime Minister Alexander McKenzie wrote to Sir Alexander T. Galt, former Finance Minister and Ambassador at Large:

I have been informed that you intend to visit part of the West Indies soon; I have long thought that we could extend our commerce to that region... Trade with Cuba and Saint Domingue is due to *its magnitude more important that the rest of the islands*¹¹.

The intention of diversifying trade in the new context of the second half of the 19th century never became a reality. That finding contributed to Canada's position to remain aloof for the remainder of the 19th Century.

From the political aspect, British North America was perceived as a desired model of relations with the metropolis by some reform-minded intellectuals in the colonial territories that Spain still held in Latin America, such as the case of Cuba.

The United States tried to legitimize the Monroe doctrine in the hemisphere by the end of the 19th century with the creation of the Inter American system around the western hemisphere idea that rejected the European presence in the hemisphere.

The United States, as an architect of Pan-Americanism, strongly rejected the notion of Canada's incorporation to it. The position of the United States was based on the perception that the dominion of Canada would be an agent of British interests largely due to Canada's strong links with the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth of Nations. Only a symbolic gesture, a chair with the name Canada, was prepared by initiative of the United States Government to add to the plenary room when Canada would become a member of Pan-American Union.

However, a number of Latin American nations favored Canada's integration into the interamerican institutions. This almost unanimous position was based on the different perception of Canada and the role Canada could play in the region. For Latin Americans, it was precisely the British

connection and Canada's potential that led to the perception that the northern country could act as a counterpart to the growing hegemony of the United States in the region.

Well into the 20th century, a number of countries formally and repeatedly asked Canada to become a member of the Pan American Union: Chile in 1923, Brazil in 1925 and 1941, Mexico in 1928 and 1931, Argentina in 1929 and 1941 besides the Dominican Republic¹². This had an opposite effect to what some Latin American nations leaders expected: it did reinforce the U.S. opposition to Canada's involvement in the region and it also made Canada be cautious and opt for aloofness in terms of Interamerican affairs.

In the 1940's, there was some evidence that Canadian policy makers had begun to appreciate the potential of Latin America as a trading partner in replacement of its European links: a 1941-trading mission to South America recommended more attention to the region. This move had a diplomatic expression as new embassies were opened in some Latin American countries, although this decision had more to do with an administrative rationale than an essential policy change.

Canada's participation in the Second World War came to reinforce the perception of Canada as a country with strong European links despite its geographic location, for Canada was involved in the conflagration since the very beginning, understandably on the side of the British, while the Latin American republics mostly followed the United States position of initial isolationism.

The end of the Second World War did not bring a change to that perception, despite the fact that Canada started to move towards closer relations with the United States in the economic, defense and security sphere in the context, of the new order of international relations that resulted from the conflagration, the cold war. In this context Canada becomes an active participant in the process of creation of the international institutions, such as the United Nations Organization, the institutions of Bretton Woods, N.A.T.O., and G.A.T.T. Canada also participated in the Marshall plan as a contributor to the reconstruction of the British economy.

All the changes in the Canadian international policy projection notwithstanding, for Latin Americans, Canada continued to be perceived as a country with no clear policy towards the region. Perhaps the most widely used quote, from one of the most famous Canadians in the field of international relations illustrates Canada's position and feelings towards Latin America: Lester B. Pearson spoke of Canada's greater political affinity with Holland, Denmark and Norway than with Chile and Argentina.

It must be rightfully added that the Latin American perceptions were not only the result of Canadian actions and the lack of a defined policy towards the region, or the hegemonic position of the United States in the region, but also the vision of the Latin American ruling elites whose economic interests were closely linked to United States capital and therefore the western hemisphere mostly ended in the northern frontier of the United States. In most cases, the Latin American ruling elites acted as surrogate agents for United States neo colonial domination over the region.

Thus, Canada, as a country of American geography but European mentality, behavior and performance in the international relations was the dominant perception of the Latin American ruling elites after the Second World War up to the end of the 1960's.

Latin American perceptions of Canada post-1968

Scholars would agree almost without hesitation with the assertion that 1968 marks a major turning point in Canadian Relations with Latin America. The Third Option promoted by the Liberal Government of Pierre Trudeau was aimed at promoting trade and reducing economic and political dependence upon the United States. That appeared to be a common ground on which Canada could develop stronger ties to the region. However, the decision of political recognition and continued economic linkages with the Pinochet regime in Chile contributed to the failure of the Third Option despite the

positive steps such as becoming an observer in the OAS, visiting several Latin American countries and becoming a member of the Interamerican Development Bank.

By the end of the 1970's the initial enthusiasm of the beginning of the decade had died off on both sides. Canada continued to be perceived as a middle power with no hegemonic designs over the region but still a country of the North.

The beginning of the 1980's ushered in a period of unprecedented engagement Canadian government in the region in part due to the Canadian NGO's pressure to oppose Reagan policies in the region and reverse Canadian look-the-other-way initial position towards the Central American conflict that was then the deepest and most crucial crisis in the hemisphere. Canada's policy was then based on the belief that the Central American problem was a north-south problem, not an east-west one as the U.S. was approaching it.

Both Liberal and Conservative, despite the latter being considered by many one of the most pro-American governments in Canadian recent history, were able to mediate the Central American peace process, and Canada was able to strike a delicate balance between U.S. and Latin American positions and establish a distinct Canadian policy.

This was the highest point in terms of a positive perception of Canada by most Latin American governments as non-hegemonic middle power Canada, though clearly on the side of the west in terms of cold war speak, was able to establish a position that did not follow the United States policy towards the sub-region.

Canada's Latin America policy in the post-cold war

The end of the cold war brought about, among other things, the end of the east-west confrontation that had framed hemispheric relations from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the 1990's. In this new context, transnationalization, formation of trading blocs, the north-south

debate became more relevant in international relations. The Canadian traditional orientation to multilateralism and middlepowermanship is currently replicated in the western hemisphere.

Latin America and the Caribbean become the only regions where Canada can integrate, therefore Canadian policy makers finally come to grips with Canadian American geography. This behavior is due to the important changes that happened in the international politics in the last years.

In this context, Canada is showing the attitude of a mediator, a conciliator, a human rights and democracy protector with new definitions of the interamerican relations that tend to form a community of western hemisphere nations and acknowledge the asymmetries in the region.

The Canadian governments, regardless of being liberal or conservative, have adopted a foreign policy that has been based on the respect to national sovereignty of states, political pluralism, democracy and human rights coupled with the pursue multilateral actions and peaceful resolutions of conflicts that would contribute to generate a favorable climate for increased trade and investment. The use of military force and intervention has not been Canada's method to obtain economic space or territorial expansion. In that way, for most Latin American governments the new role of Canada in the hemisphere, since the early 1990's, has been perceived as a positive force for the development and economic diversification and hemispheric integration. An independent foreign policy in the context of the hemispheres is always positively perceived by the Latin American states.

Canada was not only welcomed to occupy the proverbial empty chair in the OAS. The Canadian active participation in the Interamerican institutions, the Summits of the Americas, and Canada's engagement with Cuba in the 1990's were positively perceived by Latin Americans because it broadens the prospects of action and contributes to deal with the hegemonic power of the region.

Latin American perceptions of Canada's policy on human rights and human security

Perhaps one of the most controversial examples of the emphasis on human rights in the Canadian foreign policy toward Latin America is the case of the Canadian Cuba policy and how this policy is perceived.

Canada never broke relations with Cuba in the early years of the revolution despite intense pressure from the United States government to force the Canadian government to support its policy on isolation of Cuba, and the high level of economic and political involvement of the two countries. Canada and the United States were close allies in N.A.T.O. and N.O.R.A.D as well as increasingly major trading partners. The fact is that the United States and Canada shared common ideological positions and values in a world of heightened cold war confrontation between the two super powers, the Soviet Union and the United States.

In that context it would seem the right thing to do, for Canada, to fully support the U.S. policy. Cuban officials acknowledged that fact while, at the time, they perceived the Canadian willingness to maintain political relations and trade despite the U.S. disapproval without much consideration of the motives of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker government to pursue an independent policy to that of the United States.

In the 1990's, the liberal government of Jean Chretien sought to establish a closer relation with Cuba; the policy of the Canadian government was defined as that of constructive engagement as a means to bring about positive change in Cuba. The passing of the Helms-Burton Bill by the United States congress met the reaction of the Canadian government in the passing Foreign Extraterritorial Measures Act.

In short, in the 1990's, the Liberal Canadian government continued to basically play the same triangular game that the Conservative Canadian government had played in the early 1960's. Havana, just like in the early sixties positively perceived Canada's unwillingness to give in the face of U.S. pressure albeit acknowledging that Canada's actions derived

from a sovereign act rather than support for Cuba. Domestically in Canada, headlines from the 1960's, such as "Can We Do Business with Castro's Cuba"¹³ and "Is Canadian foreign Policy Made in Washington"¹⁴, seemed to come back to the forefront.

As the United States pursued a post-cold war recycled Panamericanism (its main forum being the Summit of the Americas), it is currently seeking to extend its model of governance and its neo-liberal economic formula and ideology in the era of globalized markets all over the western hemisphere. Meanwhile, Canada has sought to play a larger role in the region.

The Canadian Government questioned the selection of Miami as the city to host the 1st Summit of the Americas in 1994 and applauded the efforts towards the reintegration of Cuba into the region's institution under the auspices of then-newly elected Colombian president Cesar Gaviria, now former president.

In the 1990's, the U.S. continued its zero-sum Cuba policy. It is human rights and democracy that have become the centerpiece of the U.S. policy towards Cuba and as a condition to improve relations and the only "explanation" to maintain the 42 year-old policies that many, even within the very U.S., deem outdated and ineffective.

Consequently, the issue of Human Rights is of crucial importance and a special connotation for Cuba for a number of reasons:

1. The government of Cuba sees the issue as a domestic policy matter. So no government has the right to condition improvement of relations to human rights and democracy, thus it may be perceived as interference in Cuba's internal affairs;

2. The issue of human rights is the main pretext of the United States to justify its aggressive policy against Cuba while keeping fulsome relationships with countries that have a far worse record than Cuba in terms of human rights and have no democratically elected governments;

3. The human rights crusade against Cuba is led by the right-wing Cuban American group in congress¹⁵ whose main agenda is to bring about political change which is not

necessarily in the best interests of the Cuban people on the island.

As the Canadian government position moves to stress human rights and democracy as a condition for Cuba's integration into the Inter American institutions as it has recently done it may be perceived as a U.S.-style policy both domestically in Canada and from the Cuban government standpoint.

Perceptions of Canada's human security agenda

On the other hand, Canadian emphasis on human security has broader connotation. Publicly, most members of the Latin American political elites accept Canadian concern for human security. However, it is also a matter of concern, as for some it is perceived as an attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of the Latin American states and a departure from Canada's historical positions. There are four main reasons that support this perception. Atanasio Hristoulas summarizes them in an excellent way:

1. Security is seen in a realist way, that is, the states are the centers of the international relation system so threats are to the security of the states not the individuals
2. Latin American decision makers tend concentrate in the military dimension of security; there are still border disputes, paramilitaries and drug traffickers.
3. The region of Latin America has been vulnerable to U.S. intervention for more than 150 years, so the principle of non-intervention is paramount
4. Most political systems in the region do not have a high level of participation of the civil society and the public opinion in the foreign policy process as Canada does¹⁶.

Another important aspect to include when analyzing the perceptions of the Canadian human security agenda is the fact that although there are undeniable problems in the region of

Latin America, especially after a couple of decades of neo-liberal structural adjustment programs that have resulted in a greater number of human beings not having access to human living standards, the general perception of the population, with the notable exception of Haiti, is that a foreign intervention would not bring a long term solution.

Conclusions

Latin American perceptions of Canada's policy towards the region have gone through different stages, some initial perceptions have changed over the decades, such as the one of Canada as an actor that could counterpoise the United States hegemony in the western hemisphere and of Canada as a country with an American geography but a European policy, mind and behavior in international relations.

Other perceptions has not changed over time: Canada as a country with no hegemonic designs, a defender of multilateralism and peaceful resolution of conflicts as well as Canadian constant efforts to develop a distinct Canadian approach to its policy in the region.

Canada is now perceived as an actor from the economic and political points of view, despite the fact that trade and investments, even with Mexico and Chile, are relatively marginal.

Canada is perceived as a country that ultimately belongs to the north. The perception of being too dependent on the U.S., thus vulnerable to U.S. pressure may be an obstacle to the advance of Canada's interests in a region where the neo-liberal model is clearly showing signs of exhaustion. Latin Americans may come to view Canada as a Trojan horse for Washington's trade and foreign policy interests - too dependent economically to be considered an independent actor

NOTES

1. KLEPAK, Hal. *What's in it for us? Canada's Relationship With Latin America*. FOCAL Papers, 1994
- 2 OGELSBY, JCM, *Gringos From the Far North: Essays in the History of Canadian-Latin American Relations, 1866-1968*. Macmillan, Toronto, 1976.
- 3 ROCHLIN, James, *Discovering the Americas: The Evolution of Canadian Foreign Policy towards Latin America*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 1994.
- 4 MC KENNA, Peter. *Canada and the OAS: From Dilettante to Full Partner*, Carleton University Press, 1994.
- 5 STEVENSON JR Brian, *Canada, Latin America and the New Internationalism 1968-1990: a foreign policy analysis*. McGill University Press, 2000.
- 6 The embassies were opened as Canada had to close its legations in Paris, the Hague and other European capitals that had fallen to the Nazis.
- 7 HART, Michael, *The Road to Free Trade*, Carleton University, 1998.
- 8 CREIGHTON, Donald, *The Commercial Empire of the St Lawrence. 1760-1850*, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1937.
- 9 For an excellent study on this period see. Callahan, James M, *American Foreign Policy in Canadian Relations* McMillan, New York. 1927.
- 10 Report of the Commissioners From British North America Appointed to Enquire into the Trade of the West Indies, Mexico and Brazil. Quoted in Boyer, Harold. *Canada and the Cuban Revolution: a Study in International Relations*. University of British Columbia. 1972.
- 11 SKELTON, Oscar D. *The Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt*, Oxford University Press. Toronto, 1920.
- 12 ROCHLIN, James , op. cit. pp12.
- 13 The Financial Post October, 29, 1960.
- 14 Canadian Business July, 1961.

15 One of the most outstanding, active and outspoken member of this group is Cuban American Rep Illeana Ros-Letinen of Florida, whose past and present actions do not legitimately earn her the title Human Rights Champion.

16 HRISTOULAS, Atanasio, WOOD, Duncan & DENNIS, Claude (eds). *Canada: Política y Gobierno en el Siglo XXI*, Instituto Autonomo de Mexico, Ciudad de Mexico, 2005