

Embassy Magazine

Canada's regional Americas strategy at a crossroads

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In 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper designated Latin America as a foreign policy priority. He appointed a minister of state for the Americas and embarked on a high-profile visit to the region.

The record of action to date has been narrowly focused on trade, at the expense of deep engagement on such important issues as development, security, corporate accountability, democratic governance, and human rights.

Canada's narrow approach probably won't be well received at the upcoming Summit of the Americas, which is to take place in Colombia on April 14 and 15. It flies in the face of a tide of governments hungry for new, homegrown approaches to hemispheric co-operation and integration including Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, and Bolivia.

Mr. Harper's trip to the summit, to which 34 heads of state are invited, is an opportunity for him to signal that Canada is willing to modify its approach.

In the months leading up to the summit, the government consulted with dozens of Canadian civil society organizations. These groups have years of experience in Latin America and, collectively, are connected to thousands of women's, labour, human rights, peasant, church, and indigenous organizations across the continent. Civil society has provided the Canadian government with an array of recommendations to improve the Americas strategy going forward.

Towards a new approach

What would a reinvigorated Americas strategy look like? It would focus on four key elements. Free trade agreements would be premised on compliance with international human rights standards. Democratic governance would be actively promoted. Corporate accountability would be a top priority. Militarization would not be seen as the solution to drug and criminality problems.

First, Canada would refrain from concluding free trade agreements with countries that have poor human rights records. Free trade deals tend to increase the kinds of investment that are most associated with violence and forced displacement, such as gold, oil, and plantations for biofuel.

Last year, Canada concluded a free trade agreement with Colombia despite the widespread presence of paramilitary groups that use violence to displace people from their lands for lucrative projects. Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for union leaders, stifling workers' ability to maintain or improve their working conditions.

Second, although it was one of the three pillars of the 2007 Americas strategy, the promotion of democratic governance has been largely absent. In Honduras, for example, since a coup d'état in June 2009, hundreds of regime opponents have been intimidated, arbitrarily arrested, disappeared, tortured, and killed. Instead of condemning these violations and pushing for a verifiable improvement, Canada has adopted a business-as-usual approach, signing a trade deal with Honduras and unequivocally endorsing its highly criticized truth commission.

Third, a revamped Americas strategy would put more emphasis on corporate accountability for Canadian companies operating in Latin America. Canadian mining companies hold over 50 per cent of the mineral exploration market in Latin America. As a market leader, Canada must also become a leader in addressing the social and environmental ills that so often characterize the extractive sector. Civil society has long promoted the pursuit of corporate accountability through Canadian regulation and law. Bill C-300, which was narrowly defeated in Parliament in 2010, would have been a useful step in this direction.

Finally, a revitalized Americas strategy would analyze the root causes of drug and criminality problems in the Americas and recognize that militaristic approaches are often detrimental to public security. Since the war on drugs in Mexico was declared in 2006, there has been an unprecedented rise in crime and violence in the country, with over 47,000 people violently killed in the past five years. Innocent citizens are caught in the crossfire every day, and the drug war is often used as an excuse for impunity and increasing violence against women.

The Summit of the Americas is an important opportunity for Canada to signal a broader, more genuine commitment to the hemisphere and to restore its status as a global champion for human rights. Can it rise to the occasion?

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