

Canada, Mexico and America's Reality

by George Friedman - November 8, 2021

The United States lives in a fundamentally unique geopolitical reality. It's the only major power that doesn't face the risk of a land war, so it doesn't need a massive force to defend the homeland. Instead, it can concentrate on maintaining control of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. If it retains control of the seas, the only threat to the United States would be air and missile attacks. These are not trivial threats, but they are far more manageable without having to worry about an invasion by land or sea. The United States itself has offensive options it can indulge in – even if it doesn't always use them prudently, and even if it leads to defeat elsewhere. The U.S. has not faced a foreign presence on its soil since the 19th century. Even nuclear weapons are countered by mutual assured destruction, which has protected the U.S. homeland for over half a century.

This happy condition is the foundation of American power. During the harshest of wars, World War II, where much of Europe and Asia was torn asunder, the American homeland remained untouched. This is such an obvious fact that it tends to be neglected.

So too are the geopolitical reasons behind American security. Any attack on the United States must either be an amphibious assault from across the sea or a land assault from either Canada or Mexico. The U.S. fought numerous times with Mexico in the 19th and very early 20th centuries, and in the 1960s, the Quebec independence movement prompted fears in the U.S. that an independent Quebec might align with the Soviet Union. But today, neither country can attack the U.S. itself, hence the first layer of American security. The second layer is that neither country wants to align with powers hostile to the United States. Had Germany secured their allegiance in World War II, or had the Soviet Union in the Cold War, or had China in the past few decades, the risks to American security would have soared, and the U.S. invulnerability to war on the homeland would have evaporated. American history would have been very different, along with the history of humanity.

Therefore, in any discussion of American strategy and of its strategic priorities, the most important issue is not the South China Sea or NATO but the maintenance of relations with Canada and Mexico. It's true that at the moment each country has an overriding interest in maintaining their relationship, for reasons ranging from trade to social links. It's also true that the United States could impose its will militarily on either country. However, waging war on neighbors is dangerous and exhausting. America is a global power pursuing global interests, and its domestic stability would be

the first casualty of a land assault against Canada or Mexico.

On the surface, this whole line of reasoning sounds preposterous. But the fact that it seems so arises from the misconception among Americans that the current relationship with Canada and Mexico is unchangeable, and thus requires no care. But one of the most obvious observations of history is the speed at which the apparently obvious dissolves and a new normal takes its place. Given the overwhelming importance to the U.S. that neither neighbor shift its national strategy, the comfortable assumption of continuity is perhaps the most reckless element of U.S. policy. Certainly, there is no current danger of a shift, nor any danger on the horizon. But this is precisely the time when a prudent power devotes significant attention to an issue. Reversing a shift in policy is far more difficult than preventing one.

There are forces driving the U.S. apart from these two countries, countries that are not in a position to cause a break, but which in the future, when other issues are added to them and enticing new relationships show themselves, might change the equation. In the case of Canada, the manner in which the United States canceled the Keystone XL pipeline, a project that was important to Canada, signaled a profound indifference to Canada's interests. There was little consultation, no offer of compensation, nor any attempt to create an alternative project. By itself, this is not enough to cause a break with the United States, but it certainly reminds Canada that Washington sees it as subordinate to its interests rather than as the object of its interests.

In the case of Mexico, the U.S. obsesses over immigration, an issue that is nonessential to Mexican interests. There has been a surge of migrants at that border, most on their way to the United States, but all creating significant problems on their way north. The United States views Mexico as a source of illegal immigration. Mexico sees the problem of immigration as having its origin at Mexico's southern border with Guatemala. Mexico has therefore requested American help in closing its southern border, which has been refused. Instead, Mexico is demonized for the immigration the U.S. will not help stop. (I have no interest in the question of which country is right. All such matters are complex, and every nation is certain that another nation is at fault.)

For the United States, obsessing without alienating either Canada or Mexico is essential to its national interest, if not its national policy. The physical security of the United States and its trade system depends on these two countries. A rational policy of extreme awareness of their internal processes and a willingness to indulge their needs even to the disadvantage of the United States is a low-cost, high-return policy. When someone takes a client to lunch, he picks up the tab, even if the client has ordered the most expensive items on the menu. The cost of lunch is vastly less than the

business you will get.

The most interesting part of geopolitics is that a current state of affairs feels eternal. Nothing in geopolitics' past should give anyone that confidence. Maintaining a beneficial status quo requires effort, painful until the alternative is considered. But since the belief is that nothing will change, then no effort is needed. The U.S. is a dominant global power because its homeland is secure from attack. Its homeland is secure because Canada and Mexico secure it. The failure to understand that they have options – and are far from exercising them – means their treatment is determined by America's passing interests. From a geopolitical point of view, this is understandable: Power blots out vulnerability. From a policy standpoint, it ignores reality.

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