

The Canadian Geopolitical Dynamic

by **George Friedman** - February 24, 2020

Canada is being wracked by what appears to be a moderately important internal crisis over First Nations' objections to the construction of a natural gas pipeline in British Columbia. This crisis gives me a chance to write about the geopolitics of North America, with particular focus on Canada. Normally, we would not need to address such problems because Canada is generally a country in which conflict is contained in a predictable framework. At the moment, the conflict remains within that framework, but it is not impossible that it will break out. That would affect the United States, and things that effect the United States frequently wind up in a different framework in a place far away. Since I doubt the U.S. has any plans to occupy Canada (actually, I can't be sure), and most of the security issues involving the U.S. and Canada revolve around scheduling joint training, I regard Canada's problems as internally manageable. Still, there is value in using this as an opportunity to consider the Canadian dynamic.

Center of Gravity

According to our model, the center of gravity of the global system shifted after the fall of the Soviet Union to North America. Note that I said North America rather than the United States because, as in Europe over the course of centuries, the leading nation on the continent can vary. The United States is enormously powerful, but it shares the continent with two other significant powers: Mexico and Canada. All three countries share a single characteristic: They are continental powers that have access to both the Atlantic and Pacific. It is this geographical reality that makes the dominant North American nation the center of gravity. Asia does not have ready access to the Atlantic, nor does Europe have ready access to the Pacific. North America has access to both.

Neither Canada nor Mexico is in a position to challenge American dominance today. But it is their long-term potential that makes them important. Mexico exists in a condition we might call stable instability. It faces drug cartels and regional disputes, but it has faced such things for a long time and has developed processes for living with them. An instability that exists for decades has its own way of creating a certain type of stability.

Of the three major countries in North America, the one that has been least interesting from a geopolitical standpoint has been Canada. It has not had stable instabilities, or ambitions to expand, or fears of subjugation. It had some internal problems, but, with some very limited exceptions, those

problems were settled without crisis. Canada was a country that could contain itself, in some ways more like a Nordic country that has learned to live well in spite of being close to where wolves may come from. For the Nordic countries, the wolves came from the European Peninsula. For Canada, the wolves that could threaten the homeland would come from the United States.

The stability of Canada was the guarantee of American disinterest on which its national security rested. If it got involved in war, that was its choice. Canada was in Afghanistan. It refused to be in Iraq. It fought alongside the U.K. in the two World Wars of the 20th century but was never itself threatened, nor was it ever the country doing the threatening.

We are therefore at a moment when Canada might dramatically change, and in unexpected ways. Canada is a vast country, with few people and many competing interests. The Maritime Provinces still take their bearings from the first settlers: the English and the Scots. Newfoundland was a British colony until after World War II. This region is the poorest part of Canada outside the Arctic regions and the most isolated. Then, there is Quebec, a province that had been settled by the French, then defeated by the English, leaving behind an entity that was French, hostile to the English and the greatest threat to Canadian stability. Ontario is the anchor of the Canadian federation; it is English but now filled with immigrants. To the west, Alberta and Saskatchewan are in a historical sense one vast province that more resembles the America south of their borders than the provinces to the east or to the west, although British Columbia's culture resembles that of the American West Coast.

The Pipeline Dispute

This would seem to be a prescription for conflict, but to this point (save for Quebec) the worst there has been is mutual irritation, which is healthy in all countries.

But Canada is now facing two problems, rooted in diverging ideologies and interests. Ottawa has tended over recent years to adopt ideologies that have troubled some parts of Canada. For example, there are boards that review speeches or writings that search for hate speech and penalize those who committed it. They have raised the question of whether differing views on immigration, multiculturalism and indigenous rights are legal. There are also differences of opinion on global warming and the role of hydrocarbons. There are then rules on the rights of indigenous people, officially called First Nations, combining a sense of guilt with the obligation to make restitution.

Canada is multicultural, which means that many Canadians adopt differing views on these subjects. In general, nowhere is this feeling more deeply held than in Alberta, whose central industry is oil

production, and whose ability to transport oil to China, for example, has been blocked by British Columbia. This is also a province whose culture is similar to the American non-Pacific West. They resent the language boards deeply and feel that compensation to the First Nations is out of hand.

The current crisis has to do with an interesting evolution in the First Nations issue. Protesters who oppose the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline, which runs across land in British Columbia to which the Wet'suwet'en First Nation has historical claims, have blocked railways and other transport links. Alberta is of course outraged. But joining it in its outrage is Quebec, which is running short of propane it needs for heating and is demanding that Ottawa do something to end the blockade.

Thus we now have two provinces confronting what they regard as a blatant disregard for their most pressing interests. Both provinces (and Saskatchewan as well) have expressed common interest in this issue, and both are being torn by economic issues that are fundamental to them. From their points of view, there is a sense that their interests would be better served outside Canada even if for different reasons. Quebec came close to secession in the 1990s but was contained. But the sensibility of secession is still there. Alberta, meanwhile, has been bitter about Canada's equalization program, which transfers money to provinces with weaker economies (including Quebec). What truly enrages Alberta is that Quebec uses the money for what is seen as lavish social services, such as cheap day care, and then criticizes other provinces, like Alberta, for their more meager services. It's like Thanksgiving dinner, with all the in-laws, all the bad memories and very loud voices.

But this time, it is serious. Alberta can't withstand the status quo. Its oil interests are fundamental to both its economy and its identity. Ottawa's valuing First Nations claims over Quebec's need for fuel demonstrates, according to people in Quebec, the reason secession was a good idea. And Ottawa, in trying to placate interests in Ontario and British Columbia for which these values are central, is incapable of crossing the chasm.

At the moment, Quebec can't secede. Its economic situation is poor, and France will not subsidize it as Charles de Gaulle once promised. When I was last in Alberta, I got the sense that the talk of secession was simply letting off steam. At this point I am not sure. In being inflexibly hostile, those opposing the use of hydrocarbons are limiting Alberta's well-being. The most dangerous are those competing interests that encompass economic and ideological interests.

Support for Secession

Geography and temperament limit an alliance between Quebec and Alberta. But Albertans talk fondly about joining the U.S. That is far from unthinkable, but it challenges another American interest, which is that its northern frontier be quiet and secure. Quebec used to alarm the U.S., because it could not predict Quebec's foreign policy and because the alliances it might make could be dangerous. It has been a long time since the U.S. worried about this. At the same time, if Alberta seceded, there is some chance Quebec separatism might revive, and that would resurrect old questions.

The U.S. encouraging Alberta, therefore, would at least destabilize Washington's relationship with Ottawa and joint projects like NORAD. At most, it would create an unpredictable nation on the New York border. It would also isolate to a great extent the Maritime Provinces, which are strategically important to U.S. control of the Atlantic and for whose security the U.S. might have to pick up the bill.

We are far down the road now, but not so far as to be preposterous. Contrary to what some in Canada have said to me, the U.S. does not want to destabilize Canada. Alberta and the U.S. have much in common, but Alberta's secession would create a geographical nightmare in Canada, potentially blocking access to British Columbia.

My point in addressing secession is to point out that it is unlikely. Not being Canadian, it is not my place to offer advice on internal matters, but given that Canadians never tire of the sport of advising Americans, I will simply point out that confederation requires balance. The balance may not rest in the demographic status of regions, but in balancing the interests of all parties, which means moderation on core values.

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