

Canada Shouldn't Be an Afterthought

COMMENTARY By Eric Farnsworth March 22, 2023 3:00 am ET

The U.S.-Canada partnership is a powerful and enduring strategic asset that deserves a larger frame. Canada is the United States' top trade partner, its largest energy supplier, a global economic and security partner and shared guardian of the world's largest undefended border, and a champion for democratic values in diverse and complicated locations from Afghanistan to Venezuela. The bilateral relationship that Washington and Ottawa maintain is arguably deeper and more diverse than any other, to say nothing of the untold local and state-to-province and cross-border civil society relationships that knit together the full tapestry of interaction and engagement.

Healthy relations require tending, and President Joe Biden will travel to Ottawa for meetings with his counterpart, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, on Thursday and Friday. It will be Biden's first trip to Canada as president, although the two leaders have already met several times elsewhere and connected via Zoom in the administration's earliest days. Nonetheless, symbolism matters in diplomacy, and Canadians will see the president's visit as an important if overdue acknowledgement of their position in Washington's eyes.

The agenda is full. On the economic front, supply chains, borders, critical minerals, and the smooth functioning of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada economic agreement (USMCA in the United States, CUSMA to Canadians) will be top-of-mind. On security matters, support for Ukraine, NATO, modernization of the joint aerospace defense organization NORAD, and a renewed push by the president for Canada to lead an international force in Haiti. The environmental agenda will include energy transition and Columbia River management.

Still, it's difficult to shake the feeling that the agenda remains incomplete given Canada's vital importance to Washington's broader interests. Developments suggest it's time to increase our ambitions for strategic partnership.

China is meddling in Canadian politics and social issues, according to multiple reports, contributing to a political crisis pressuring the Trudeau government and complicating democracy. Chinese cyber adventurism continues to probe Canadian security, worrisome given Canada's inclusion in the Five Eyes group of nations most trusted on intelligence gathering and sharing. Chinese balloons have drifted over both Canada and the United States.

Presumably, joint activities have long been underway to identify and counteract Beijing's aggressive actions. And the United States and Canada have just held an inaugural Indo-Pacific

Dialogue. Even so, despite being a Pacific nation integrated fully with U.S. defense capabilities, Canada has not been invited to join either the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) or AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), two groupings committed to advancing military and security partnership to check Chinese security ambitions. A more expansive vision for strategic partnership would suggest near-term Canadian incorporation, strengthening alliances and contributing directly to collective security.

Similarly, the Biden administration's signature regional economic initiative, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, does not include Canada, most likely a result of bureaucratic stove-piping on geographic lines. This despite Canada's intimately networked economy with the United States and the expanded partnership that both nations were developing through the Trans-Pacific Partnership before President Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the agreement. Canada has instead been offered membership in the Biden administration's economic initiative for the Americas, APEP—not the mythical ancient Egyptian demon of chaos but rather the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity—a proposal first mooted at the Los Angeles Summit of the Americas in June 2022 that has not yet advanced off the drawing board.

But it's not just omissions that create distance between neighbors, partners, and friends; it's also own goals. For years, environmental concerns have stalled the effort to expand energy relations for both nations' benefit. In the administration's early days, consummation of the Keystone XL pipeline was a long shot at best given the Biden team's focus on climate change. And that was before Russia's assault on Ukraine roiled global energy markets, returning energy security to prominence. Washington has since been on a quest to increase global oil and gas supplies to reduce Russia's energy income while keeping a lid on inflation. It's a scenario tailor-made for Canada to expand its critical role in energy markets, particularly in the short term. Yet Ottawa has watched in disbelief as the United States instead appears to be prioritizing increased production from nondemocratic sources that, it's safe to say, do not meet ESG best practices.

Canada should be a first thought not an afterthought on these and other issues, but the country's broad strategic importance to the United States is too frequently overlooked by too many observers. The president's visit offers an opportunity to change this reality, clearly and forthrightly recommitting the bilateral relationship to the core of U.S. strategic interests. It's time now for Washington and Ottawa to pursue a bigger vision of mutual success.

About the author: Eric Farnsworth is vice president of the Americas Society/Council of the Americas.