

NAFTA summit papers over divisions between US, Mexico and Canada

Rafael Azul
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This week's meeting in Guadalajara between Mexican President Felipe Calderon, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and US President Barack Obama ended without any agreement on confronting the deep economic crisis that has swept the North American continent. Instead, it exposed the impact of this crisis on the free trade alliance between the three signatories of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as each of the partners turns to protectionist and anti-immigrant policies.

Four issues dominated the short summit—it lasted barely 20 hours—the crisis in Honduras, militarization, immigration and protectionism. The results of the summit were presented in a brief press briefing Monday in which only three questions were taken. Despite efforts to present a consensus, significant differences emerged, albeit couched in the language of diplomacy.

Calderon opened the briefing saying: “We coincide in pointing out that in an age marked by globalization, the challenges can only be overcome jointly—thus the importance of keeping the dialogue, trust and cooperation amongst our three countries. Americans, Canadians, and Mexicans have reiterated that the values upon which our societies are founded are democracy, freedom, justice, and respect of human rights.”

In truth, the “values” that dominated this summit were unilateralism and contempt for human rights and democracy.

A commentary in the Mexican daily newspaper *La Jornada* pointed out that the Mexican and Canadian leaders rallied around the White House's line on Honduras. The three leaders ignored the events in Honduras itself—saying nothing about the intensifying repression there—while pledging to support the work of the Organization of American States (OAS) and others to restore Zelaya to office, if not to genuine power. The coup conspirators have essentially ruled out all contact with OAS negotiators as well as Zelaya's return for any other reason than to be tried for treason.

President Obama said: “We have been very clear in our belief that President Zelaya was removed from office illegally, that it was a coup, and that he should return. We have cooperated with all the international bodies in sending that message.”

The reality is that the US State Department has yet to declare Zelaya's June 28 ouster and expulsion from the country to be a coup, a definition that by law would trigger economic sanctions. Zelaya, who looks to Washington to come to his aid, had asked Calderon to plead with Obama to stop all economic assistance to the Honduran regime. The US State Department has repeatedly made it clear that it will not do that.

The usually impassive Obama took the occasion of the summit to

lash out at those who have condemned US policy toward Honduras, accusing Washington of providing covert support to the coup while claiming to support a “democratic” resolution of the crisis.

“The same critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say that we're always intervening and the Yankees need to get out of Latin America,” said Obama, who accused these critics of “hypocrisy.”

No, hypocrisy is Washington's pretense of opposing the coup of June 28, while refusing to define it as a coup so as to avoid legally required sanctions against the dictatorial regime. Hypocrisy is the commissioning of a “mediation” effort by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias that serves the purpose not of negotiating Zelaya's return, but rather of running out the clock on his presidency.

Finally, hypocrisy is the pretense that US intervention in Honduras began with Washington's token cut-off of minimal aid programs and the denial of visas to a handful of the coup regime's officials. This, under conditions in which the US maintains its largest military base in Latin America on Honduran soil and represents the country's largest trading partner and foreign investor.

Moreover, Washington has intervened in the country's internal affairs repeatedly over the course of more than a century, backing coups, military dictatorships and death squads, while using Honduras as a base for attacks elsewhere in the hemisphere, including against the people of Nicaragua and Honduras in the 1980s.

The Canadian leader came to Obama's defense, denouncing opponents of the coup for calling for US “intervention” on Zelaya's behalf, while at the same time commending the US for establishing US military bases in Colombia. “If I were an American, I would be really fed up with this kind of hypocrisy,” said Harper. “You know, the United States is accused of meddling except when it's accused of not meddling, and the same types who are demanding the United States to somehow intervene in Honduras, the same type of people who would condemn longstanding security cooperation between Colombia and the United States, which is being done for legitimate security and drug traffic reasons.”

Much less effusively, President Calderon praised Obama for the manner in which the latter confronted the question on Honduras while reiterating the Mexican position that this matter should be resolved by the OAS.

The second issue that dominated the summit was the war on the drug cartels being carried out by the Mexican government. The US Congress has been holding up \$400 million earmarked for the Merida Plan to combat the drug trade pending resolution of human rights issues. Behind this measure is concern that the continuing brutality against ordinary citizens will lead to increasing social instability.

The Mexican military has a long history of human rights violations, which are invariably ignored by the government, the courts and the military establishment itself. At the press briefing, however, Calderon denied such violations exist and challenged anyone to prove otherwise. Such a statement has no credibility. Mexican human rights agencies, including the official human rights ombudsman, have amassed incriminating evidence implicating the Mexican military in a rising number of killings, disappearances, rapes, illegal detentions and other forms of repression and brutality against the civilian population.

President Obama reiterated his administration's commitment to the Merida Initiative, under which Washington has pledged \$1.4 billion to the Mexican government and military. Harper announced that the Canadian government will provide some training for Mexican police.

Not surprisingly, none of the economic differences that divide Canada and the United States from Mexico were resolved. The summit papered over the fact that none of most important decisions affecting the North American economies are being taken in consultation among the NAFTA partners. Behind the veneer of cooperation and a commonality of interests, increasingly issues of free trade, border security and immigration are driven by the national interests of the ruling elites in Canada and the United States, presented to Mexico as accomplished facts and grudgingly accepted by the latter.

This is exemplified most clearly in the immigration issue. Both Obama and Harper defended US and Canadian immigration policies that increasingly restrict the movement of human beings across international borders, policies that are in essence protectionist. Furthermore, immigration policies are being imposed without any consultation with the other NAFTA partners.

Both Canada and the United States had made it clear before the summit began that they would not budge on immigration issues and, in the case of the US, on lifting a prohibition on Mexican trucks from operating freely inside the United States. This ban is in direct violation of the NAFTA agreement

The meeting took place nearly a month after Canada unilaterally imposed a visa requirement on Mexicans visiting Canada. The Harper administration claims that the measure was necessary due to Canada's liberal refugee policy, which, it says, was being abused. The new visa is proving more difficult to get and more expensive, and lasts for a shorter duration, than a similar US visa. Mexicans already living in Canada may not be able to return from visits to their relatives. Mexican students in Canada may not be able to obtain visas on time for the fall semester. Harper saw no need to consult, much less to negotiate on this, with the Mexican government.

The Canadian action is an indication of callous disregard for those Mexicans that are driven by desperation to seek jobs, under conditions in which the Mexican economy faces Great Depression-like conditions—it is expected to contract by 10 percent or more this year. The Mexican manufacturing sector has been particularly hard hit, with a 26 percent decline in industrial exports between June 2008 and May 2009. This has been accompanied by an 8 percent reduction in industrial employment and a sharp drop in real wages. More than half a million Mexican workers in the formal sector have lost their jobs.

In response to a question, President Obama declared that the US Congress would take up a legalization law for undocumented workers in 2010. President Calderon obsequiously praised Obama for bringing up the issue “with valor and depth” and declared his hope that US and Canadian investments in Mexico would someday make it unnecessary for Mexicans to cross the border “out of hunger.”

Obama indicated that Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano would conduct bipartisan negotiations with congressional leaders to draft such legislation. Napolitano was part of the US delegation to the Guadalajara Summit.

As is his style, Obama provided no details. However, an announcement on Tuesday by Napolitano is a clear indication of the reactionary legislation that the White House may have in mind. Napolitano announced that her department was pledging \$30 million in grants to border states to beef up border security. The \$30 million comes on top of \$60 million appropriated in June for the same purpose. In addition, Napolitano ominously announced that her department is re-activating immigration rule 287-G that allows law enforcement officials to track down undocumented workers and arrest them on other offenses.

Napolitano's announcement was anticipated by an unprecedented escalation of raids, deportations, and the expansion of detention and deportation jails and camps for undocumented workers and with the termination of parental rights for immigrants about to be deported.

Given these attacks on the undocumented in the US, Obama's promise of an immigration reform law designed to grant permanent status to some 11 million undocumented immigrants represents a new level of cynicism

Obama's words on immigration—like his verbal opposition to the Honduran coup—are in fact a velvet glove covering up an iron fist. While Napolitano and the Department of Homeland Security organize the round up of immigrants across the United States, Obama makes humane pronouncements.

Similarly on Honduras, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the State Department provide tacit support to the ruling junta, and pretend that they are not even sure whether a coup took place, Obama declares his support for the deposed President Zelaya's return to office. Finally, while the US secures the use of military bases in Colombia, the American president insists that his government will not be pressured into “intervening” in Latin America.

For his part, Harper raised concerns about the “buy American” provision in the US stimulus package. Canada's economy, which has been contracting at a rate of 3 percent per year, is facing a rising tide of business bankruptcies, in part as a result of the bailout of the US auto industry. Canadian businesses, which rely heavily on exports of natural resources and manufactured goods to the United States, are also very concerned over protectionist provisions that may be incorporated into the Clean Energy and Security Act.

Obama cavalierly dismissed the issue, joking that Harper brings the issue up every time they meet. He suggested that bilateral negotiations would minimize the impact of these protectionist measures.

In the end, this summit of the so-called three *amigos* is one more indication that—as in the 1930s—the global financial crisis is pushing every capitalist government toward protectionism, militarism, an assault on immigrant rights and beggar thy neighbor policies.



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