



Little expected at Montebello meeting

But business boosters have great ambitions for post 9/11 initiative to become NAFTA-plus

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The Security and Prosperity Partnership's third annual meeting, to be held in Canada for the first time, starts tomorrow amid controversy.

The SPP was launched in Waco, Texas, in March 2005 by U.S. President George W. Bush, then Mexican President Vicente Fox and our Paul Martin. It's both an attempt to continue the NAFTA process and a structure to deal with security concerns coming out of 9/11. Hence "security" and "prosperity" in a partnership.

It emerged from an initiative Canada took to the Americans in the weeks after 9/11 – the Smart Border Accord. Much of what the SPP deals with is a continuation of things in the accord with bureaucratic acronyms like FAST, for "Free and Secure Trade Program," which deals with FAST lanes at border crossings.

At the upcoming meeting in Montebello, Que., an hour's drive from Ottawa, the leaders are likely to announce a joint strategy for dealing with pandemic disease. The SPP, for now, is addressing obvious and bureaucratic measures, and like the accord, reassures the Americans by turning problems into a partnership.

The SPP has no time frames for realizing goals, and responsibility for achieving targets is not conferred on any organization. It largely consists of existing activities and policies across a number of government departments placed under a single rubric.

This third meeting is about checking in, not big announcements. At the second meeting in Cancun in March 2006, the leaders promised to "co-ordinate, advise and consult on issues of joint concern." While a number of bureaucratic sails are partially on one platform, they are not sailing any ships of state.

Why is a routine undertaking causing such a fuss? For two reasons. One is that it's a slippery slope between a FAST lane and a customs union; both

speed things up at the border. How do we draw a line between the mundane and the monumental?

The other is that the process is being advised from civil society exclusively and somewhat secretly by business groups with names like the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the North American Competitiveness Council.

While there is little wind in the SPP's sails, some business leaders have great, and as yet unfulfilled, ambitions for the partnership.

In the two years after 9/11, there were 13 proposals from the continentalist right to go beyond NAFTA to take the next step with a big idea, a grand bargain.

These groups, realizing no such deal was emerging, started thinking about creating the necessary preconditions for what they often term a NAFTA-plus – advancing the concept of a North American community. For them the SPP is about incremental steps leading to a customs union of common external tariffs and perhaps even a monetary union with the U.S.

There is a huge gap between the rhetoric and ambitions of the SPP's business boosters and the reality of the partnership.

What opponents of the SPP are mostly making a fuss about is the privileged access, secret meetings and grand ambitions of the partnership's advisers from business. And with this brush they are tarring the SPP.

Together in an unwitting dance, opponents and proponents are sowing confusion as to just what, at least currently, the SPP is.

It's true that the SPP is an opportunity to retrofit NAFTA, and opponents in Canada such as the Council of Canadians are right in flagging a potential danger, even if it is relatively moribund.

For Canada, the SPP, as it is currently manifest, is largely a response to our needs and interests, not our ideologies. The U.S., as the saying goes, "is our best friend, whether we like it or not." We are in an enduring relationship best subject to careful management, not big solutions.

The SPP, of no dramatic results and lots of controversy, is caught in a polarized right-continentalist/left-nationalist debate that has a lack of reality to it, with the debaters talking past each other.

We are suffering an abdication by our policy-making community of its responsibility – with Tom d'Aquino, president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, infusing the SPP with grand objectives and Council of Canadians' chair Maude Barlow earnestly sounding the alarm.

The reality is that there is not a generalized appetite for the SPP to be much more than it is. The bulk of Canadian opinion is skeptical, the U.S. is very protective of its prerogatives and U.S. state legislatures are passing resolutions denouncing it, and in Mexico, NAFTA has perhaps been the least successful.

A dramatic departure from the SPP's current format will require a lot of public debate and parliamentary engagement, something that is not on the agenda of politicians in any of the three countries.

The political systems of these countries are far too complex and multifaceted to think that just because their leaders are meeting that a dramatic outcome must follow. This, we often forget, is particularly true of the U.S., with its rigorous division of responsibilities and powerful Congress.

While the Security and Prosperity Partnership is not insignificant, it is much less than what its boosters want and what its detractors fear.

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