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Integration a force that must be managed

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A week from today, Prime Minister Paul Martin will sit down with the presidents of the United States and Mexico in Crawford, Texas, to discuss further, post-NAFTA integration, or what the White House euphemistically calls "enhancing our common prosperity."

No matter what they decide, or don't agree on, integration is happening. And for Canada it's happening with the United States.

For Canada, Mexico distracts us from what's really going on.

Most people talk about Canadian integration into North America. That's misleading.

For Canada, what's going on, in the first instance, is Canadian integration into the U.S.

The flow of trade between Canada and the United States is more than \$1.6 billion a day, up from less than \$1 billion 10 years ago.

Trade between Canada and Mexico is equal to 13 days of trade between Canada and the United States.

Pre-9/11, we were taking significant steps to coordinate border issues with the United States — a process that gained additional vigour after 9/11. Post-9/11 coordination means now, for example, that Canada is unlikely to accept the kinds of refugees it did from Chile in the 1970s.

Integration and coordination with the United States means we are harmonizing with them.

We are moving more of our diplomatic efforts from Washington and driving them deeper into the American political process, in an attempt to identify and shape issues before they arrive for resolution inside the beltway.

You've got to ask where all of this is leading, regardless of what comes out of the meeting in Crawford.

A big danger for Canada is that our domestic debate on this — one of two central issues in our nation's life, the other, of course, being Quebec — is wanting.

On one side are the integrationists, and on the other their less influential, often knee-jerk opponents.

Canadians seem to understand the situation better than the elites debating the issue. Polls show most Canadians maintain, perhaps, the paradox of being wary friends.

They neither love nor dislike Americans. Those leading the debate seem to be saying, rush into further integration or reject the Americans at every turn.

The debate needs to be reframed.

We derive great benefit from our relationship with the Americans, but also at some peril.

Free trade — NAFTA and the CUFTA (Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement) five years before — brought restructuring of parts of the economy and real hardship to many families.

It has also, 15 years later, put money in our pockets.

Integration should be thought of as a force of nature of whose benefits we must be discerning.

Free trade was to include a mechanism for settling disputes; we find that, for the time being at least, the U.S. is unwilling to honour those provisions, consistently rejecting findings against it on softwood lumber. Such a mechanism was a decisive argument for entering into free trade.

The real concern is not what the Prime Minister agrees to later this month.

The drive for affluence, or what the White House calls "enhancing our common prosperity," is unrelenting in what has perhaps always been, basically, one piece of real estate.

Integration, in many ways, is happening all around us. Some urge us to carelessly embrace this force of nature and others to blindly resist it. Both are wrong.

The path of prosperity and of Canadian sovereignty lies in understanding we are faced with an impetus that must be managed and, if possible, tamed.

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