U.S. neighbors turn away

The wages of indifference

By Andrew Reding

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Much has been made of the split that developed in Europe over whether to join the United States in its war with Iraq. Almost unnoticed, though, has been the split that has developed in the Americas, leaving the United States virtually isolated in its own backyard.

To put it bluntly, France never got a chance to cast its Security Council veto because opposition from the United States’ closest economic partners in Latin America ensured that the resolution could not pass. France may be the scapegoat, but Latin America was the resolution’s undertaker.

Both of the United States’ partners in the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada and Mexico, have broken with Washington over Iraq. Elsewhere in Latin America, the only sizable nation whose leadership backs Washington is Colombia, a war-torn nation that is the third-highest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel and Egypt.

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien of Canada, whose proposed compromise UN resolution was labeled a nonstarter in Washington, says he will not back the military effort in any way. His natural resources minister openly criticized President George W. Bush, saying “I think he’s let down not only Americans, but the world, by not being a statesman.”

As recently as last November, Bush said that “the United States has no more important relationship in the world than the one we have with Mexico.” Bush’s first presidential visit abroad was to Mexico, and the Mexican president, Vicente Fox, was the first foreign leader to be feted with a state dinner at the Bush White House.

That relationship has now soured, however. Fox was disappointed by the White House’s unwillingness to pursue immigration reform following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. By May 2002, Fox was telling the Council of the Americas in New York that, “There can be no privileged U.S.-Mexico relationship without actual progress on substantive issues” and “there will be no substantive progress without comprehensively addressing the issue of migration.”

In January the Mexican foreign minister, Jorge Castañeda, quit in frustration after failing to secure concessions on migration by aligning Mexico more closely with Washington on foreign policy issues, such as human rights in Cuba.
Mexico gained a two-year seat on the United Nations Security Council in October 2001, so support was crucial to passage of the Bush-Blair resolution authorizing use of force against Iraq. But Fox declined, ultimately forcing abandonment of the resolution.

It is not hard to see why. Public opinion in Mexico is overwhelmingly opposed to war with Iraq, and Fox’s conservative National Action Party faces difficult parliamentary elections in July. In the absence of a major concession from Washington, such as a deal on migration, a Yes vote would have been political suicide.

The other Latin American country with a seat on the Security Council, Chile, likewise said No, even though it is the only other Latin American country to have concluded negotiations for a free trade agreement with the United States.

With the exception of Colombia, the other major countries of the region – Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Venezuela – opposed the resolution. Besides Colombia, only the tiny Central American nations of Nicaragua and El Salvador lined up with Washington.

This is not the first time the Bush administration has found itself isolated in Latin America. When the White House briefly gave its blessing to the abortive military coup against President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela last April, Mexico led 19 Latin American nations in condemning the coup. Only El Salvador lined up with the United States.

Frustrated in its attempt to develop a new relationship with the “colossus of the north,” Mexico is again turning southward, reassuming its traditional leadership role in Latin America, and cultivating ties with the European Union. Short of a major change of attitude in Washington, Latin America will pursue its own path toward economic integration, with rising hostility to the United States.

“Anti-Americanism” has been signaled as a primary source of concern in the post-Sept. 11 world. As “anti-Americanism” rises throughout the Americas, it is clear that Washington’s indifference to the concerns of its continental neighbors is beginning to compromise its own interests.

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