

A Single Reality?

The Reasons Behind Different Perceptions of Mexico-U.S. Relations

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Historically, Mexico-United States relations have been very complex and asymmetrical in terms of power, and, today, they are markedly interdependent in a number of fields. The relationship is defined by the geographical proximity between the most powerful country in the world and a developing nation.

The complexity of the relationship is increased by the role that each plays on the international stage. Both nations perceive, value and interpret the bilateral relationship and the world that surrounds them from their own perspective. They each act on the basis of their own cultural values and beliefs and to preserve the permanent or temporary interests that they pursue through their foreign policy.

Internationalists like Carlos Rico and John Coatsworth point to the importance that the formation of perceptions has on the decision-making process in world politics, saying, “The behavior of international actors is conditioned by the cultural filters through

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which each receives and interprets information about the other players. Culturally conditioned images, even stereotypes, thus exert a powerful effect upon decision-making.”¹ This explains why Mexico and the United States frequently interpret a particular event differently, as in the case of the Riverside incident in 1996.²

The formation of cultural perceptions or stereotypes in each country depends on the level of global influence that each has worldwide and a series of geographic, cultural, historic, economic and political conditions coming

together. At the same time, these characteristics are the source of the formation of each country’s profile as perceived by the other. This article summarizes these elements as they apply to the specific case of Mexico-United States relations.

AN ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP

The asymmetry of the relationship is determined by the influence and leadership role that each country plays in the world, as well as the international responsibilities each society has taken on and accumulated historically. Ours is a bilateral relationship between a country that has the world’s greatest aggregate of interests, commitments and responsibilities and another that plays the leadership role of a medium-sized power, and consequently has assumed a series of regional interests, responsibilities and commitments. It is the meeting and relationship between countries with asymmetrical leadership roles and potentials.

It is worth asking ourselves how a power with global interests relates to one with regional influence and vice

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versa. The United States' commitments and responsibilities force it to concentrate and divide its attention in the areas of the world where its priority interests lie, and only then concern itself with those regions or countries where it has second-level interests, like Mexico. By contrast, historically and even today, the United States has been and will continue to be Mexico's priority in matters of foreign policy. This explains the difference in the degree of interest that each country attributes to bilateral issues since what is important to Mexico is not always important to the United States. That is why we can say that the asymmetry of the relationship conditions the formation of mutual perceptions.

PROGRESSIVE INTERDEPENDENCE

To paraphrase Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye,³ the international order built in the 1970s has been characterized by the establishment of progressive interdependence among nations. In this sense, the notion of interdependence is understood as mutual dependence or reciprocal effects among two or more countries involving their vital interests and in which all participants are affected by the actions of the others.

In the last three decades, Mexico-U.S. relations have been expressed through a broad, growing network of governmental and nongovernmental, political, economic and social channels. On many occasions, the situation arising from this overshoots the institutional or legal framework set up to deal with it, such as in the case of migratory flows or money laundering. These kinds of links show the mutual

dependence in different areas like trade,⁴ investment, drug trafficking, migration or the environment, with reciprocal effects for both parties. Given the trends in this relationship, we see that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the two countries' interdependence will be even stronger and will therefore be an important source in the formation of perceptions.

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HISTORICAL CONDITIONING FACTORS

The national histories of Mexico and the United States would each be inexplicable without the other. Common periods of historical development of each nation have determined the way we have perceived each other, becoming perhaps the most important source of the formation of perceptions. Obviously, this process has been explained differently in each country, according to the interpretation that their governments and historians have wanted to give to a shared history.

In tune with the asymmetry and interdependence of the bilateral rela-

tionship, the historical legacy of the United States presence in the life of Mexico is much greater than the reverse. The loss of more than half of Mexico's national territory to its northern neighbor, the different U.S. invasions of Mexico, including the most recent, the 1914 invasion of Veracruz, and the constant U.S. attempts to extend its borders even further (the McLane-Ocampo Treaty) have left a deep mark in the historical consciousness of the Mexican people and created a defensive, distrustful attitude with regard to Mexico's northern neighbor and the international scene in general.

For the United States, on the other hand, Mexico has been a second-level priority in its global perspective. As Rico and Coatsworth say, "The United States is much more a real and concrete part of Mexican reality and political discourse than vice versa. In fact, the United States constitutes a crucial variable in the definition of Mexico's modern political culture....The United States holds a central place in the history of Mexico; Mexico's place in U.S. history is quite limited."⁵

GEOGRAPHICAL PROXIMITY

If Mexico and the United States did not border on one another, would their histories have intertwined? Would the bilateral relationship be so special, complex, interdependent and often tense? Would the migratory problem between them be so acute? Undoubtedly, their sharing a common border, which goes back to the frontiers established by Spain in the eighteenth century, has been a determining factor and has conditioned their relationship right up until today. This geographic proxim-

ity has spurred events that still have an impact on daily relations between neighbors. U.S. territorial expansionism at the cost of its southern neighbor, the uninterrupted migration of Mexicans north, the controversial definition of boundaries, the inclusion of Mexico in the area of U.S. strategic security or the creation of a trilateral market together with Canada would hardly have happened if the individual histories of these two countries had not coincided or had as a backdrop the geographical proximity.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Mexico and the United States are heir to totally different cultural traditions expressed in marked distinctions between their economic systems, political ideas, social organization, ways of thinking, day-to-day attitudes, philosophy of life and systems of values and beliefs. They perceive each other, then, and therefore their bilateral relations, very differently.

Certain traits mark the cultural contrast between the two. In Mexico, the values of the Catholic religion, mestizo ancestry, the pre-Hispanic past, the public figure of caudillos or strongmen and the formation of a national consciousness that has had its historic relations with the United States as a catalyst are all held in high regard. In contrast, Americans generally place value on Protestant values and decentralized organization; they take pride in being part of a majority white population with Anglo Saxon origins and a history of successes that has made them a leading power in the world today and given them an optimistic view of the future. They have

formed a national identity molded by only the remote possibility of foreign intervention by European powers; Mexico has never really represented a threat to their sovereignty. These factors have been cultural filters through which both countries see the world.

As Rico and Coatsworth point out, while it is true that perceptions do not totally determine government

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decisions, they do influence them.⁶ This argument makes sense in that cultural stereotypes of other countries are believed by large parts of society, and the leaders of these nations take their voters' opinions into account, as is the case with Mexico and the United States. Also, when perceptions are not bolstered by information and accompanied by a culture of tolerance that can clarify them, they can become prejudices or simply misconceptions that can have an influence on bilateral relations.

In that sense, it is worth remembering the observation of Mexican diplomat Matías Romero, twice ambassador

to the United States in the nineteenth century, who said, "My experience has taught me...that on both sides there are prejudices born of the lack of sufficient knowledge of the other, but that could be eliminated to reach greater understanding." This comment could well describe current relations between Mexico and the United States, at the beginning of the new millennium. ■■

NOTES

¹ John H. Coatsworth and Carlos Rico, "Images of Mexico in the United States," *Dimensions of United States-Mexican Relations* vol. 1 (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, 1989), p. 61.

² This refers to the U.S. Border Patrol's extremely violent treatment of two undocumented Mexican migrants in Riverside County, California, April 1, 1996. The incident was widely covered in the media because it was filmed by television cameras. The interpretation of the incident on the two sides of the border was totally different and, in some cases, diametrically opposed.

³ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence. World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), Chapter 1.

⁴ Just to give one example, the border between our two countries is recognized as having the world's greatest amount of border traffic, with approximately one million crossings daily and a great many important economic activities.

⁵ John H. Coatsworth and Carlos Rico, op. cit., p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.