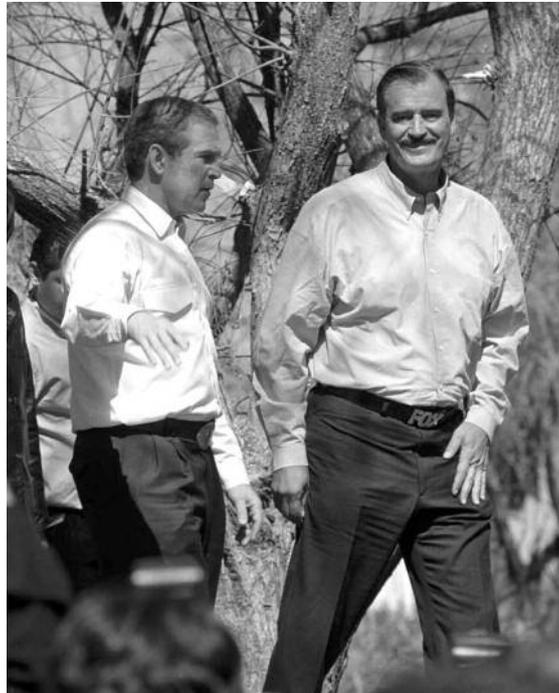


Perspectives for Mexico-U.S. Bilateral Relations

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The following analysis is a reflection on bilateral relations since the beginning of the current administration.¹ I think it important to scrutinize this period given the change in Mexico's government since 2000, a change in the party in power with Vicente Fox in the presidency. It is a good starting point because it can illustrate how in the brief period of a little over two and a half years, bilateral relations can evolve from euphoria to total disappointment.

On July 2, 2000, when Vicente Fox was elected president of Mexico, a new

man came into office, a man unknown abroad, who brought in an administration also made up of new faces different from the usual cast of characters in Mexico's international relations, particularly in relations with the United States. We should remember that every 12 years the presidential elections in both countries coincide. 2000 was one of those years. On July 2 it still was not clear who would win in November in the United States. In fact, it was not clear until after President Fox took office December 1. However, contacts between the two transition teams began immediately to set up a bilateral meet-

ing between the two presidents-elect and to estimate if "a new spirit" really existed, the kind once called the "spirit of Houston" and this time called the "spirit of San Cristóbal." The fact is that what I would call "good chemistry" existed between the two new presidents' teams. This obviously is related to their personalities, but also to the fact that to an important segment of the U.S. population, Vicente Fox represents the realization of a much-desired change, the need for which had been discussed in U.S. academic, governmental and business circles, a change that would substitute a years-old system stiff with age.

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Fox represents that change. I think that the so-called “democratic bonus” plays a fundamental role in the way in which his election was perceived in the United States, as a peaceful, ordered and calm transition, despite the fact that some observers predicted the opposite. That transition is considered a great leap forward, an achievement in the process of consolidation of a democratic system. The fact that Bush and his team came up with what they called their “new agenda” in January 2001, naturally radically different from the previous Democratic administration’s agenda, also plays an important

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role. It was a new neo-conservative agenda that put into practice all of that political current’s ideological and theoretical tenets, as has been made clear in the over two and a half years since then in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan and North Korea.

However, at that time it was only stated in the writings of the neo-conservative thinkers of the so-called “Bush circle”, who among other things, see Mexico as a benchmark for the future of Latin America: a country that is moving peacefully toward democracy, that is betting on its economic relations with the United States, that puts issues like democracy and human rights among its first priorities, etc. Even though for the United States, Mexico always represented a more or less stable country with political continuity, with the possibilities for doing business and a good repository for its eco-

nomical interests, it continued to suffer from a series of problems underlying its political, economic and social structures that were seen in the North as obstacles to its stability, above all on its southern border. That was what things were like at the beginning of the two current administrations.

As president-elect, Vicente Fox traveled to the United States and Canada in autumn 2000. He presented Bush and Jean Chrétien with a very fresh, novel and even audacious vision of relations among the three countries, a vision that goes beyond the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

He spoke of the creation of a North American Community, of opening up the borders not only to goods and services, but also to the free transit of persons; and he put forward the beginning of a new stage, whose main objective would be taking relations among the three countries toward a model that he defined as European. This vision caused an enormous commotion in the other two countries. For the Washington establishment, the cause of the agitation was the surprise more than the content of the proposal itself: nobody had forewarned them—as diplomatic courtesy usually dictates—about what Vicente Fox was going to propose when he suddenly launched the original idea and captured the attention of the media and the public. In Canada, which was not undergoing a change in administration, officials were not so disconcerted, but they were irri-

tated by a proposal that was incompatible with Chrétien’s policy of making his bilateral relations with the United States a priority vis-à-vis an eventual trilateral accord. Therefore, before thinking about the free flow of persons and customs openings and unions—all of which is very thorny—when Chrétien met with Fox a little later, he took it upon himself to explain that Fox’s proposal was not a priority for Canada.

Although the proposal was not well received in either country, I think it had a positive effect. It meant that for the first time the bilateral agenda was set by Mexico and not the United States. I think that this is a fundamental change, since for the first time, Mexico adopted an active role, defining what it wanted to discuss in terms of regional policy; among the consequences of this is that these issues were taken up by the media, academics, diplomats and research centers in Mexico, in Toronto, in Washington and in New York. For three or four months, Fox’s proposal became the center of the debate, displacing issues that had been central to bilateral interests like migration, drug trafficking, crime on the border, extradition, etc. That is, the issues that the United States had put on the agenda were replaced overnight by a much more philosophical one: the destiny of Mexico, the United States and Canada once NAFTA comes into full effect in 2009 and a decision has to be made about the next step in integration.

Given the generally negative response, President Fox modified his discourse and instead of talking about his vision of a community as an immediate aim, he established a time scale of 20 or 30 years for its implementation, defining it as a long-term goal, as an invitation to the three governments, the

three societies, to start out on a road that might be beneficial for all.

The initiative was important because it put Mexico and Fox himself in an outstanding place on the international map; and Washington's official response, although vacillating, was not as vacillating in the media and before the public. To many it meant a big change in bilateral relations, moving from relations of adversaries-friends to those of real partners because the proposal implied a series of changes in international policy not only by the United States and Canada, but above all by Mexico. Therefore, according to specialized observers in the United States, it could be in the interests of the three countries for taking the next step after NAFTA. In the United States, the trade agreement is also to a certain extent understood as a way of tying Mexico to a free market system, a system of economic opening, political democracy and transparency, in short, everything they think the United States represents.

After Fox's initial statements, the two presidents began a honeymoon period. They met several times, came to agreements and established a relationship based fundamentally on new issues and not on the litany of traditional, conflictive issues.

The first of these new issues—or of new focuses on old issues—is migration. I will not go into this in great depth. Suffice it to say that the presidents were presented with a new proposal from a high-level working group—a working group that I had the honor of co-presiding in the name of Mexico—to base migratory negotiations on a series of original parameters that were of great interest to Mexico. At the end of 2000 (Bush was still president-elect),

we proposed a change in migratory relations that included several elements of Mexico's position:

- Fully regularizing all the several million undocumented Mexicans living in the United States.
- A temporary worker program to cover the quotas of workers who would emigrate anyway so that they could do it legally.
- A program of economic and financial aid for the creation of the infrastructure Mexico needs in order to deepen the social content of the relationship and reduce migration.

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- A change in the visa regime to substantially increase the number of Mexicans who can aspire to legally emigrate to the United States, in addition to the temporary worker program.

The two presidents welcomed this plan and began negotiations by creating a High Level Group presided over by Secretary of State Colin Powell, Attorney General John Ashcroft, Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda and Minister of the Interior Santiago Creel.

Negotiations for the migratory accord began at this very high level in February 2001 and continued until September 11, with a series of advances and concrete proposals from both sides. Though the negotiations did not conclude, they did bring the positions much closer and led to a different vision about the migration issue both in Washington and in Mexico.

For years our government's official position has been that Mexicans can travel both domestically and abroad and enter our territory with complete freedom, with no restrictions whatsoever and no actions by the Mexican state to impede that free transit. Those who defend this position do so based on the constitutional principle of freedom of transit, very conveniently forgetting that this precept is qualified in the Constitution itself by the never-mentioned phrase, "subject to regulations adopted by the federal executive." In this case, this refers to the Population Law, which clearly stipulates that

Mexican immigration officials must be sure that when someone intends to leave the country, he/she does so with the documents required for entry into the countries he/she is traveling to. All this has been overlooked and those who implement these policies do so with a very nationalist bias, attempting to show that it is not a Mexican problem, but above all a problem of the United States.

Regardless of this, the commitment that the High Level Group (basically made up of academics and non-government personnel) proposed to the two presidents was that, in exchange for regularizing Mexicans' status in the United States, the temporary worker program, resources for infrastructure in Mexico and more visas, the Mexican government would promise to ensure that its citizens leave the country legally. Mexicans do not emigrate North

without documents because they want to; they do it because the United States does not grant them the proper papers. The key to the negotiations was to open up more possibilities for Mexicans to legally enter the United States in exchange for Mexico's cooperation to ensure an ordered, secure border.

The second issue the High Level Group negotiated was the drug trafficking certification process. For years, Mexico, like other countries, was subjected to a totally arbitrary, unilateral and even demeaning yearly process of being "certified": that is, it was evaluated by the United States with regard to its cooperation in the fight against

traditional agenda, backing away from the negative and going toward the positive.

The third matter was trade problems, some older than NAFTA and others that emerged precisely because of NAFTA itself, unresolved until now. For example, one famous issue was trucks, which for some time should have been allowed to cross the border; another was avocados, which for many, many years have been subject to "sanitary dispositions" that prevent their entry into the United States. There were half a dozen cases that had caused trade disputes, which the two presidents put a new spin on.

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drug trafficking. The first proposal made to George Bush in San Cristóbal was to cancel unilateral certification (whose main effect was bad relations with the countries certified) and move to a system of multilateral evaluation.

As a result, Mexico proposed that the Organization of American States (OAS) Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism be used to evaluate all the countries in the region, their willingness and effective actions in the fight against drugs, including the U.S., the main consumer and basic cause of the drug trafficking problem. The United States accepted and, in fact, the U.S. Congress cancelled certification as a mechanism. For the last two years, cooperation against drug trafficking has been dealt with in the OAS. This achievement is also a consequence of Mexico's policy of seeking to turn around the

The fourth matter —also new— was Bush's desire to build a new relationship with Latin America as a whole, not just with Mexico. Given that its relations with the region had deteriorated in recent years because of Venezuela's Chávez government, Colombia's internal problems and Argentina's already visible economic crisis, the U.S. government, and Bush in particular, asked Fox to arrange ways to get closer to Latin America. With exception of the matter of Cuba, about which a fundamental discrepancy persists between both nations because Mexico opposes the embargo and the Americans are not willing to change that policy, with regard to the rest of the cases, a very close dialogue began between the U.S. and Mexican governments, dealing even with the issue of integration.

Finally, the Fox administration's fifth new issue was its agenda of fundamental reforms to our country's institutional structure (on fiscal, labor, political, energy and all the other issues), of which we still have seen nothing. However, his government is committed to them, which improves the perspectives for bilateral relations from the point of view of the Americans.

However, September 11 happened. Bilateral issues began to lose strength vis-à-vis Bush's main priorities: homeland security and the war against terrorism, which allow for no concessions on migration because it means the entry of a larger number of persons to the United States. They also do not favor the discussions about drug trafficking because terrorism and drug trafficking have sometimes been related. The resolution of trade problems also bogged down because the United States decided to close its borders. The flow of trade was interrupted and relations with Latin America were put on the back burner. The agenda was totally replaced by the war against terrorism, later Afghanistan and then the war in Iraq. In my opinion, and from a non-traditional perspective, the Americans have one major defect: they do not like to deal with two large problems at the same time. They are incapable of it. It is either Iraq or North Korea. It is either Mexico or Afghanistan; or either Afghanistan or the Middle East. But they do not get involved in two or three issues at the same time. In fact, today the issue is once again the Middle East. The day before yesterday it was Iraq; three days before it was North Korea; and, therefore, the Mexico issue has been relegated to the past.

I think that Mexico's feeble response to the events of September 11

also played a role in this. I am one of those who think that the response should have shown more solidarity and been swifter and more visible to Americans. The internal debate about whether we should show solidarity or not, how much and with what kind of actions, finally resulted in President Fox and his administration not being present, in the eyes of U.S. public opinion, as other nations were in supporting the U.S. government and people. This undoubtedly had an important influence in the deterioration of the new positive agenda that was being built. Relations became distant immediately after September 11. The fact that President Fox did not ask for a minute of silence in the Zócalo Plaza on September 16, Mexico's Independence Day, shows it. This, together with a series of other events, led to a relatively significant disappointment in the United States about how Mexico had reacted at a moment when it came under terrorist attack.

Almost at the same time, another position of the Mexican government caused irritation in U.S. circles of power: the denunciation of the Río Treaty, signed by the majority of countries in the Americas. After September 11, the United States sought the support of the international community to relatively minimize the unilateral nature of the response it began to plan by giving it a multilateral character. To that end, it called on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries to comply with Article 5 of the treaty; this article says exactly the same thing as the corresponding article in the Inter-American Mutual Assistance Treaty, which stipulates that an attack against any member country is an attack against all and, therefore, demands a

military response in solidarity from all signatories. They invoked this article in NATO in Brussels and asked a good Latin American friend, Brazil [before Lula] to convoke the Río Treaty in Washington to declare that the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon had been an attack on all members. I will not go into any depth as to why Mexico could not accept this proposal. Suffice it to say that our country had, and continues to have, serious objections to the Río Treaty, often invoked by the United States to legitimize its own interests and its unilateral actions in Panama, the Dominican Republic and other places, which Mexico also

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opposed. Mexico opposed not only Brazil's invocation of the Río Treaty, but had already denounced it a few days earlier (September 7, during President Fox's state visit to Washington). A regrettable coincidence.

To finish with September 11, I must mention Mexico's action vis-à-vis Iraq. I can only say here that Mexico's role in the UN Security Council was outstanding. I have no doubt that as members of the council, we have to play an appropriate role. The idea is not to fight to be a member and then hide when an uncomfortable issue comes up.

Mexico had to make a decision that put it at loggerheads with the United States, Spain and Great Britain. Its position was perfectly consistent with its foreign policy, which opposes legitimizing the use of force under conditions not foreseen by the UN Charter.

Therefore, it opposed the resolution presented by the United States, which, of course, had a negative impact on our bilateral relations. I believe, however, that with regard to Iraq we made some mistakes. The first was to try to please everyone, domestically and abroad. Internally, the government was very aware that public opinion was overwhelmingly against the war, but at the same time there were sectors—notably from the business community—who thought that it was a priority to accompany the United States in its adventure. The truth is that there was an attempt to “navigate the waters” to please the greatest possible number of contradic-

tory points of view, and I think that this lack of definition was wrongly interpreted by the United States, which thought at one point that Mexico might come up with a different decision than the one it finally made. For the United States, the disappointment was enormous.

The second mistake was that Mexico played a leading role in New York, not only in the Security Council, but also through its ambassador, who, of course together with the ambassadors of the other countries, played a fundamental role in mediating a series of issues that led undoubtedly to the ominous defeat of Spain and the United States in the Security Council. A third mistake was the lack of a clear explanation about Mexico's position. A partial explanation was given in which we declared ourselves opposed to the war, pacifists; this argument was not

valid, above all because this was a much more profound matter that had to be decided on the basis of a discussion in the United Nations, and pacifism was not at that time reasonable or acceptable to anyone. I think that these errors exacerbated the situation and caused Presidents Bush's and Aznar's negative reaction to Mexico's position. At the same time, we should not make this a bigger problem than it is. We were not the only ones to take this stance. Many other countries took similar positions. Our decision put us on the right side. Of that I have no doubt whatsoever. We could never have seconded

Brazilian President Lula da Silva is the new star, the new symbol of change. If today the U.S. has its eye on a continental leader, it is Lula, who has taken the place that once belonged to President Fox, to a great extent because Fox has already been in office three years and is therefore a known entity. In addition, I reiterate that the United States' dialogue with Colombia and even with Cuba and Venezuela are now bilateral.

Our anti-Americanism is and will always be an obstacle to our relations. We cannot escape it. In my view, this is regrettable because it always comes

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the U.S. proposal. However, all these events have affected bilateral relations, as President Fox himself, Foreign Minister Derbez and President Bush have all said many times.

All of this leads me to the central issue: perspectives for Mexico-U.S. relations. For me, prospects are mixed. On the one hand, I think that, given other priorities, the United States will pay little attention to Mexico and Latin America for the rest of the current administration. The reconstruction of Iraq, the Middle East, the threat of North Korea: all these are the issues that are going to capture their interest.

Another important point regarding prospects for bilateral relations is that the United States today, in contrast with the beginnings of the Bush administration, has its own dialogue with other actors in Latin America and no longer relies on Mexico to facilitate dialogue.

up again just when we think we have overcome it. In the United States, the perception is that in Mexico, every time a decision has to be made about their action, this anti-Americanism blossoms, like in the recent case of the proposal to negotiate an opening in migration in exchange for an opening in oil. Then both nationalism and anti-Americanism come to the fore and everyone rends their clothing and turns into fervent defenders of sovereignty. This is why it has not been possible—and it will not be possible in the short term—for the United States to see us as partners; they continue to consider us neighbors—sometimes at ease with us and other times ill at ease—adversaries in some cases, cohorts in others, but never partners. Like, for example, they do see the British. They do not perceive anti-Americanism in Canada either, except sometimes in the small

region of Quebec. In Mexico, they do see it, and they see it as something that permanently affects bilateral relations. This is one of the reasons that I believe that prospects are not particularly encouraging and will not be at least until there is a qualitative change in the relationship that transcends these feelings. Another factor, of course, is the ideology of the two administrations. The neo-conservative ideology of Bush and his team is incompatible with Mexico's deep-seated nationalism, which dictates that the internal affairs of every country should not be known to other countries; for the Bush Doctrine, meanwhile, intervention is valid in cases urgent and necessary to the international community. With this ideology, they justified their entry into Iraq, their efforts to influence the change in regimen in Cuba, etc., all of which is counterposed to the traditional thesis of Mexico's foreign policy: non-intervention, sovereignty and the peaceful resolution of controversies.

I think that something fundamental is lacking for the long-term improvement of bilateral relations: dialogue with actors in both countries other than officials already involved in each capital. For example, there is no dialogue with the millions of Mexican Americans and Mexicans who live in practically all states of the United States. One way or another, all these states have influence in relations with Mexico, but we always go to Washington without taking into account the fact that in the United States power is very decentralized. We should negotiate with governors; we should influence the local media; we should establish contact with state chambers of commerce; we should take into account local legislatures, etc. And we do not do any of this; we tend

to concentrate our attention on the federal government, which is not necessarily the best way to achieve our aims. Just for example: NAFTA was approved in the U.S. Congress thanks to the work the federal government did with the rest of the political actors, on state and local levels.

I want to conclude with six recommendations about how to manage relations with the United States from now on. First, we should try to reduce the level of nationalist, anti-American rhetoric because it is useless for bilateral relations, particularly because in the United States it has no impact. The nationalist discourse is for domestic consumption and even in Mexico it has lost credibility.

Second, I think that we should concentrate our lobbying efforts a little more outside Washington: we should go to Texas, California, the Midwest. For example, Texas is very important, not only because many Mexicans reside there, but also because the president of the United States is a Texan and, above all, because it is a very important player in U.S. politics with whom there has never been a real exchange. For similar reasons, it is important to strengthen our relationship with California, a state which also has a very important Mexican population and has great influence on the country's political decisions. I think that much more can be done with the governors, particularly those from the South, and not only the president, but also the cabinet, the media and legislators.

Third, we should seek new alliances. We have natural allies in the United States. They are not always sitting in Washington, but can be found in the media, for example, *The New York Times*. Obviously, we also have the Hispanic

community. We have allies among the business communities, which are interested in Mexico succeeding and in their businesses prospering in our country. We have to take advantage of all these alliances; the truth is that neither the public nor the private sector has made the most of them.

Fourth, we have to play a new hand. There are other aces in our deck. I am not going to enter into the debate about our priorities, but we have to play the hand of the post-September-11 period because, in the last analysis, U.S. security does depend to a great extent on its two neighbors. Their territory will never be secure if their borders with Canada and Mexico are not also secure. This is something we should make the most of, for example, to develop border infrastructure, to develop investigations that tell us what is happening along the border so that the border is no longer the misfortune it is in some cities. For example, we should come to agreements about the environment and energy, among other matters of interest to our neighbor in which oil and other natural resources play an important part.

Fifth, with regard to migration, like on other conflictive issues, we should seek partial agreements because, given the current international climate, it is not possible to negotiate "the full enchilada." I myself prepared "the enchilada", together with colleagues in the United States, and we would have liked very much for it to have been the basis for the negotiation, as it was until September 11. But, we have to be realistic: circumstances change. Today, "the full enchilada" is not viable. But, in contrast, there are aspects of "the enchilada" that could be advanced. I will mention only three: broadening

out the regimen of visas for Mexicans by taking Mexico and Canada out of the U.S.'s general migratory arrangement and establishing an agreement for agricultural workers (which was very near completion), as well as allowing the majority of Mexicans who are already in the United States to legalize their presence there. These kinds of accords are feasible and very much to everyone's advantage, even if they are not everything we would have wanted. Each one can make for a smaller number of Mexicans at risk, like those unfortunates who have died trying to cross the border illegally.

Lastly, we should not forget that there are other priorities. Without a doubt, the United States is Mexico's main foreign policy priority, but it is not the only one. We should pay attention to other parts of the world. The first and most important is, of course, Latin America. The current administration began with a public decision to strengthen ties with Latin America, something which has not been achieved above all because we are always immersed in relations with the United States. We have to get closer to the Brazilian government and the new administration in Argentina and set up negotiations with Mercosur and the other nations in Latin America. Of course, Mexico cannot neglect its negotiations with Europe and Asia, which are the other two points on the geo-strategic compass: to the north with Canada and the United States; to the Atlantic with Europe; to the Pacific with Asia; and to the south with Latin America. **MM**

NOTES

¹ This article is a summary of a lecture presented to launch the advanced course "Mexico-U.S. Relations" in the UNAM in 2003.