

# Felipe Calderón and the U.S. New Coordinates for the Bilateral Agenda

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Convincing the White House to promote a comprehensive immigration reform cannot and should not be President Felipe Calderón's most important challenge in his relations with the United States. Calderón's tactics have to be pragmatic since realpolitik demand that the Mexican president create a new relationship with the U.S. Congress, and the Democrats are now the real power in Washington, at least for the next two years.

President Bush and the Republican Party's defeat in the November 7 midterm elections left

the White House without the political and moral authority needed to impose the parameters of legislation for the next 24 months. For Calderón this is a great opportunity to reformulate relations with the United States which during the Fox administration erroneously concentrated on acquiescing to Washington's political clout, dominated by the Republicans.

Senator Harry Reid (Nevada) and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi (California), Democratic majority leaders in the two houses of Congress that opened their sessions in mid-January 2007, control their country's political agenda. Mexico's attention will center on three issues: immigration, trade and the fight against drug trafficking.

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Mexico's insistence on the issue of immigration that the Fox administration zeroed in on in its relations with the U.S. makes no sense to the Democratic leadership. This is obvious from Representative Pelosi's decision to leave the comprehensive reform of immigration legislation off the list of priorities for the new Congress. Reid did exactly the same thing.

When President-elect Calderón visited Washington last November 9, he realized this and sent the Capitol a message that his administration would focus more on efforts to keep Mexicans in Mexico than on justifying the economic errors he was inheriting from Fox. There continues to be, however, a need for the United States to amend its immigration legislation to benefit the community of seven to eight million undocumented Mexican immigrants who have lived and worked in that country for many years now.

Pelosi said that President Calderón's vision was interesting and timely, and at least more responsible, and that she hoped he did what he said he was going to do.

Even if it is not one of the Democrats' priorities, U.S. immigration reform is a necessity. Unfortunately, however, it does not have the least political-electoral weight, as could be seen in the November 7 elections in which the Iraq war was the fundamental issue that fueled the Democrats' spectacular defeat of Bush and the Republicans. For that reason, Pelosi did not include immigration on her list of priorities: the Speaker of the House has her eye on Iraq, the social agenda and the U.S. economy because they will play a vital role in deciding who comes out on top in the 2008 presidential race, which the Democrats are determined to win.

The Calderón administration seems to have understood the political message sent by the Bush/Republican defeat. It was right to put U.S. immigration legislation reform low on its list of priorities because it knows that sooner or later, with the Democrats holding the balance of power in Washington, Capitol Hill will have to pass a law dealing with it, without it being a radical or racist blow against Mexican immigrants, since it was the Republicans, with support from the White House, who tried to criminalize them.

Last November 8, Bush became a lame duck president, centering only on finding a way to live with the Democrats that will not affect his own party

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even more, which the polls and experts say runs the risk of losing the White House in 2008.

The Calderón administration should deepen, broaden and improve its relations with the Democrats in the U.S. House and Senate. This means that it really needs to choose someone with a political profile, even if he is a member of Mexico's Foreign Service, as ambassador to Washington.<sup>1</sup> Mexico's U.S. embassy needs to be thoroughly cleansed of anything smacking of Foxism. Carlos de Icaza, the outgoing Mexican ambassador, is a perfect example of our foreign policy's ineffectiveness over the last six years.

It is said of De Icaza, a wooden, arrogant diplomat, that he "was born and grew up an ambassador," by way of justifying his ineffectiveness; because of his lack of political acumen, he became a simple puppet of former Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez.

The lack of the initiative that a political ambassador would have brought to the job was noticeable in the way relations with Democratic legislators were neglected during the entire Fox administration. This led directly to Pelosi's decision to eliminate immigration reform from her list of legislative priorities.

The most urgent issue the Calderón administration will face in its relations with the United States is that old saw: the war against drug trafficking.

Drug-trafficking-related violence, which has grown and taken root throughout Mexico, including in the capital, is a disease the Americans do not want to catch. On Reid and Pelosi's list of social priorities, the fight against drug consumption and dealing is urgent for a simple reason: Bush has ignored it all these years because he concentrated almost entirely on Iraq and the war against terrorism.

Drug consumption in the U.S. silently rose 15 percent from 2003 to 2005 according to Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) figures. This is read on the Hill as the Mexican government's failure in the fight against drug trafficking, and as always, the producing or transit countries get more of the blame than the consuming country, which is directly responsible for the increase in demand.

"The fight against organized crime will be my administration's most difficult challenge," said Calderón last November 9 in Washington, D.C. The Democrats and even the White House

will be paying close attention to progress made in this area because once Iraq changes course, the Republicans' electoral interests in 2008 will be to distance themselves completely from the president, who will not be able to reciprocate in order to not create the image of a divided party.

In this context, once again the Mexican government will come under the watchful eye of some of the United States' federal agencies like the DEA, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which will take note of the Calderón government's slightest actions against organized crime, hoping even to investigate cases of alleged involvement of highly placed military officers, politicians and members of the president's family in drug trafficking, which were ignored during the Fox administration.

Because of the implications and violent consequences of drug trafficking, even if Washington were more self-critical in its assessment of the increase in drug consumption, narcotics will once again become all-pervasive in Mexican-U.S. relations like they were during the Institutional Revolutionary Party presidencies of Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-1988), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994-2000).

The United States' southern border is a latent concern for the White House because of its fear of contagion from Mexican drug-traffic related violence. During the Fox administration, Bush relegated criticisms, demands and denunciations of this violence to Tony Garza, his ambassador in Mexico City. With the Democrats as the new power in town, the panorama changes.

When the Democratic Party had the majority in Congress during the

De la Madrid and Salinas administrations until 1994, Capitol Hill made the sharpest criticisms of the Mexican government's fight against drug trafficking, sometimes causing a radical cooling of bilateral relations.

If he does not take a hard, impartial stance in the war against organized crime, Calderón will face a situation similar to the one the PRI presidents did when Washington dubbed them corrupt beneficiaries of the drug cartels.

In a House of Representatives led by the Democrats, some legislators, particularly from border states, continue to try to reestablish the certification of the Mexican government's anti-drug efforts, a practice discontinued in 2001 as part of a pro-

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ject to get Latin America to improve its anti-drug production and trafficking efforts without pressure from Washington.

The other priority in the new Mexico-U.S. relations during the Calderón administration is pending trade issues: transportation and agriculture. In these areas, Calderón is obliged to defend Mexican interests that Fox put on the back burner in favor of concentrating on the immigration issue. Sometimes they were not even mentioned for fear of irritating the Republicans and the White House, which in turn hurt perspectives for immigration reform.

The enormous trade advantages the Americans have over Mexicans that

were promoted by Bush and the Republicans in frank violation of NAFTA provisions are and will continue to be common practice under a Democratic Congress. The U.S. transportation industry and farmers continue to be economically untouchable because of their electoral and political importance for both Republicans and Democrats.

Calderón's pragmatism would be an essential tool for dealing with issues like corn and other grains, where Mexican farmers have been displaced and hurt by existing U.S. farm subsidies. This issue could be the measure of the Mexican president's tolerance *vis-à-vis* Washington, more than the war against drugs in which the Mexican government must participate because of its national interest. The U.S. Congress and the executive have trampled on many trade interests since 1994.

The World Trade Organization could be the ideal forum for Calderón to defend Mexico's rights and interests from U.S. incomppliance and violations of NAFTA mandates. If Calderón handles relations with the United States astutely and pragmatically, following closely the cannons of international diplomacy like Argentina, Chile and Brazil do, for example, Mexicans and particularly undocumented migrants could benefit from the change in political power in Washington, which with the Democrats has gone from a bellicose conservative radicalism represented by Bush and the Republicans, to a self-critical conservative liberalism with a view to the 2008 presidential elections. ■■



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By the close of this edition, Calderón had nominated Arturo Sarukhán as Mexico's ambassador to the United States, a young politician whose profile fits the author's description. [Editor's Note.]