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Mexico-United States: To Cooperate or Not to Cooperate

Joe Biden's administration priorities have been clearly established. On several strategic thematic fronts, it has shown — not without some difficulty — its determination to once again take up the multilateral issues that his country had put forward as central spaces for maintaining its preeminence in the world order. It has also aimed to generate momentum to ensure that multilateralist impetus not only allows it to achieve this goal, but also, for example, to put strategic doctrine objectives of its international policy on the agenda.

While before Biden, the issue of security was reduced to the different aspects represented by the country's coun-

terparts (for example, Iran and Cuba), today, in my opinion, the gamut broadens out significantly by the recognition of different security problems as multifactorial.

In his explanation of how power is exercised in a domestic or international democratic order, the theoretician of power Joseph Nye, alludes to the meaning and weight of leadership in guiding political and economic governance.¹ He posits that the attraction awakened by intelligent guidance of the governed is fundamental for obtaining the legitimacy that leadership in a democracy requires, since the absence of that kind of legitimate leadership generally steers to a vacuum of power and mistrust and arrogance of the leader in question.

President Biden needs — and will continue to need — to exercise power effectively, affirmatively, and broadly, in light above all of the anomalous leadership exercised by Donald Trump, which continues today and does not

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take into account the consequences of how wearing this is for his presidency and for the intrinsic strength lost regarding government functionality and, in the last analysis, regarding governance during his four-year term. Since Trump left behind vacuums, it was only to be expected that Biden would take maximum advantage of them after his victory.

In his time in office, Biden has been characterized by his vocation for effectiveness and by fostering a government of national unity. At least for now, despite many difficulties, he has attempted to overcome the damnable saga that Trumpism left to the United States. It is clear, then, that he has used his time to reverse that weighty legacy and define a domestic and external geostrategy that would bring with it the outline of a new geopolitics that will surely be announced in the coming months.

It should be mentioned that this could be even more realistic if we consider the reelection variable Biden has introduced into his discourse, as clearly seen in his first press conference on March 25, 2021. However, he was rowing against the current in his first few months in office. The domestic crisis caused by the centrifugal forces of Trumpism and the health emergency have permeated U.S. relations abroad.

He arrived as an “internationalist president,” accustomed to working in global issues from his time as senator and vice-president. When he had only recently taken residence in the White House, he found himself caught up in the bilateral game fabricated by Trump and Mexico’s President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. From the very start, his team focused on sorting out bilateral relations, which had become deeply demagogic. In this sense, the current Mexican government’s lack of interest in dealing with some historic aspects of this relationship is particularly worrying.

Disappointments

The anomalous relationship between López Obrador and Trump — but ultimately pleasant for both of them —, the former’s slipshod behavior toward Biden, and the U.S. political process went so far that the Mexican president did not recognize Biden’s victory and never properly congratulated him. Neither did he condemn the vandalism of the Trump hordes at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

He argued that his government did not interfere in other countries’ internal affairs, a weak argument given that most U.S. allies, starting with Canada, explicitly condemned it, celebrated Biden’s victory, and expressed solidarity with U.S. democracy.

The new U.S. administration also received a terrible message via Mexico’s offer of asylum to Julian Assange in January 2021 in accordance with our country’s traditional asylum policy. In evaluating the provocation by López Obrador and Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, we must not forget that, when he was vice-president, Biden himself had classified Assange as a technological terrorist who had gravely affected U.S. cyber and national security by publishing information in WikiLeaks. This made for another huge provocation, among others, such as the elimination of cooperation with the DEA or the Mexican government’s political blackmail to achieve the release of General Cienfuegos in California, undermining the bridges of trust between the two countries. Apart from this, “the Biden administration does have a strategy about what it wants *vis-à-vis* Mexico, not only regarding traditional agenda issues, but also new ones, such as the pandemic, the economy, unemployment, energy, climate change, and human rights, among others.”²

Despite its counterpart’s clarity, the López Obrador government has shown no signs of having any idea about how it wants to deal with foreign affairs and with the United States, understood as two different policies because the relationship with our northern neighbor is “intermes-tic,” that is, given the geographical and political proximity, it is both domestic and international. In any case, a comprehensive foreign policy strategy is opaque either internationally or toward the United States. This was made clear with four recent actions: 1) not having prosecuted General Salvador Cienfuegos in January 2021; 2) delaying congratulations to Biden as the president-elect of the United States in November 2020; 3) López Obrador’s mes-

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sage at the seventy-fifth anniversary session of the UN in August 2020; and 4) making a working visit to President Trump during the electoral campaigns in July 2020.³

It is worrisome that among the big issues on the bilateral agenda, Mexico is carelessly unconcerned or indifferent about relations with Biden's United States. With this, we contributed to an openly asymmetrical relationship for cooperation given the lack of interest in strengthening ties, which have been weakened by this attitude, at the same time that others should be built that would make it possible to construct a common agenda to face the risks that current circumstances impose on the relations between our two countries.

The Big Issues

After the long night of Trumpism, classical liberal internationalism is reborn as the basis for U.S. foreign policy. This is a space in which multilateralism and international institutions like the United Nations will seek to reach economic, political, and social agreements by consensus to provide certainty and balance to global governance. It is also a broad front that the Western allies tended to strengthen over time; this trend historically defined relations between Mexico and the United States as allies and strategic neighbors.

The three major issues for the two countries in the current century and part of the last are migration, trade, and security. These are the bases for the main spaces of bilateral relations and are windows of opportunity and conflict that have prevailed in both societies. Although the three touch upon each other in some ways, in the strictest theoretical sense, each has its own thematic and functional sphere, despite the insistence of Trump's and even Biden's Washington today to link them together, with Mexico's acquiescence.

In this sense, and particularly since the September 11, 2001 attacks, immigration policies have been tied to se-

curity. So, since the time of Barack Obama's presidency, the United States has catalogued undocumented migration as a security issue. This is more a result of the tensions in Washington's domestic politics than a factual, legitimate demonstration of a link between the two dimensions of bilateral relations. However, Mexico has done nothing to neutralize this link-up with its own migration narrative.

As already mentioned, during Trump's presidency, Mexico subordinated its migratory policies to the U.S. executive's intentions, all of which carried over into Biden's administration. This has meant that, on the ground, Mexico has turned the recently created National Guard into a police force in charge of repressing Central American and Caribbean migrants entering our territory to travel to the North as irregular migrants. Mexico has become, *de facto*, the third safe country that it so vehemently refused to recognize during the 2018-2019 migratory crisis.

The Big CHALLENGES and the Future Of "Intermestic" Geopolitics

Biden has clearly defined his global strategies, despite the failed exit from Afghanistan—due to how rushed it was—and he has kept them up progressively.⁴ Outstanding among them has mainly been the decision to rebuild close relations with traditional allies relegated by Trump. In this sense, the re-encounter with Europe has been satisfactory and is moving the Western alliance to several safe ports, above all regarding the tensions with Russia, whose president seems more willing than before to provoke open clashes with Brussels and Washington, even more given the brutal invasion of the Ukraine.

The migratory crisis sparked by the Byelorussian government along the Polish border, flagrantly supported by Putin, and the conflict created with the Ukraine seem to be two acts with which Moscow insists on changing the geopolitics of post-Cold-War Europe. This stubbornness, to be expected and imagined on the part of Vladimir Putin, has led, as we know, to a clash with the Western alliance. Nevertheless, Biden's decision to reestablish the institutional relations with Europe and the rest of the world could become a containing wall sufficiently strong to pressure Russia into putting an end to its aggression against Kiev. This is in regard to Washington's international alliances.

In order to have a perspective on the geopolitical dimension of U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations for the next three years, the recent cooperation agreement made December 14, 2021 must be mentioned. Dubbed the “Bicentennial Understanding,” this agreement replaces the Merida Initiative and aims to fight arms trafficking, with both governments formally beginning a new stage in bilateral security cooperation. It is set in the framework of the activities of the High-Level Security Group, which will theoretically divide into five sub-groups: one will deal with protection of the citizenry; another will aim to prevent cross-border crimes; a third will pursue criminal networks; a fourth will report to the armed forces; and the fifth will be made up of the binational cooperation committee. This initiative will re-start the two countries’ strategic alliance, which will impact bilateral geopolitics.⁵

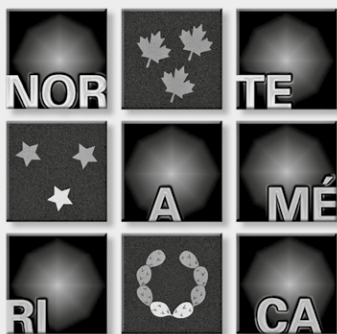
The extent to which this will improve the chaotic cooperation on security, borders, and migration between the two nations remains to be seen. Meanwhile, we can say that the commitments taken on board do not include the United States’ modifying the Merida Initiative to Combat Illicit Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008. For that reason, the Bicentennial Understanding is just a name change. The only modifications—actually updates—are an emphasis on fighting arms trafficking and people smuggling, less severe treatment of consumers of illicit substances, and the mandate to fight online criminal activities.⁶

Bilateral relations with the United States are Mexico’s most important foreign relationship since 80 percent of our trade is with that country. This does not seem to be very important for Mexico’s president if we look at his

profoundly contradictory statements on the issue, made to retain radical sectors of his electoral clientele and his inner circle, who think that maintaining a hard line on the United States can be politically beneficial. Above all, it is of major concern that this, together with the fact that Mexico’s president has shown himself to be unpredictable, means that Washington has little confidence in its Mexican counterparts, not to mention the lack of confidence inspired by a foreign minister and a president who decided to move “behind the scenes” to obtain supposed economic benefits in exchange for a reckless relinquishment of sovereignty on migration such as that analyzed in this article. **NMM**

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Notes

- 1 Joseph Nye, *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 2 Susana Chacón, “Sombras en el entendimiento inicial,” in Olga Pellicer and Hazel Blackmore, comps., *Relaciones México-Estados Unidos en 2021: ¿un punto de transición?* (Mexico City: ITAM, 2021), pp. 185-186.
- 3 Jorge A. Schiavon, “La debilidad institucional ante la relación con Estados Unidos,” in Pellicer and Blackmore, op cit., p. 207.
- 4 Steve Coll and Adam Entous, “The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,” *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2021.
- 5 Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, “México y Estados Unidos dan inicio al Entendimiento Bicentenario,” Joint Communiqué on Security and Foreign Relations, December 14, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/sre/prensa/entendimiento-bicentenario?idiom=es-mx>. [Editor’s Note.]
- 6 Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, “HOJA INFORMATIVA. Entendimiento Bicentenario sobre Seguridad, Salud Pública y Comunidades Seguras entre México y los Estados Unidos,” Government of Mexico, October 8, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/sre/documentos/hoja-informativa-entendimiento-bicentenario>; and The White House, “Fact Sheet: U. S.-Mexico High-Level Security Dialogue,” October 28, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/08/fact-sheet-u-s-mexico-high-level-security-dialogue/>.



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