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Mónica Domínguez Ávila*

Three and a Half Centuries Of Mexico-Texas Relations

The USMCA has promised to encourage the supply of North American merchandise, simplify customs procedures, reduce costs, and facilitate all manner of exchanges of goods and services. In general, however, people think that these transactions are homogeneous among signee countries. The reality is different.

According to Mexico's Ministry of the Economy, in 2023, 57 percent of trade with Mexico was concentrated in three U.S. states: Michigan (10.4 percent), California (11.9 percent), and Texas (34.2 percent). These figures are far from those of other states like Illinois (3.9 percent), Tennessee (2.5 percent), Arizona (2.5 percent), and Ohio (2.5 percent), not to mention the rest of the country, which represents the remaining 32.1 percent. And, if we adjust our analysis even more, by November of last year, trade between Mexico and Texas came to US$252.63 billion.[1]

Lately there have been political tensions between the two partners, since current Texas Governor Greg Abbott's severe immigration policies have sparked different responses by the Mexican government, ranging from simple comments to legal action. The most recent example of these frictions was the presentation of an *Amicus Curiae* brief in March 2024 by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration to support Joe Biden's legal battle against Abbotts's SB4 anti-immigrant law.

The Mexican government has taken diplomatic action in the face of other incidents involving Mexican citizens. The case of Gabriel Cuen, murdered at an Arizona border ranch in March 2023, or of Éric Durán on the streets of Sacramento, California, in January 2024, have had a huge impact in Mexico due to the indignation they sparked. However, those events —and those that continue— have a special component because of the place they occupy in the beliefs about Mexicans produced in two centuries of bilateral relations with the United States.

This is why it is no coincidence that the war with Texas in 1836, and particularly the taking of The Alamo, are frequent themes in historical periodicals and academic university publications. They are the product of a double narrative that has emerged around these events. On the one hand, Mexico's eternal claim that Texas was stolen from it, and, on the other hand, the epic story of resistance by Texan secessionists, which has in turn fed the golden leg-

* Mónica is a proffessor at the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters; you can contact her at monica.dominguez.av@gmail.com.

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end of the unstoppable expansion of the United States until it became the world power it is today.

However, the history of relations between Texas and Mexico is much older than most people imagine. It begins when Martín de Pinedo explored the coasts of today's Gulf of Mexico in 1519 and sighted what we now know as Texas. A shipwrecked Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca wandered the shores of Texas in 1528 and later wrote a book of his travels; that book inspired then-Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza to send Friar Marcos de Niza in 1537 to head a failed expedition, followed by another headed by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1540.[2]

Hernando de Soto ventured near Texas in his expedition from the east, from Florida, which began in 1539. From this immense, unknown territory, he was the first to notify the Crown of the existence of the Caddo nation. However, when he received no help from them and no longer had the conditions needed to continue his expedition, he returned to the Mississippi River, where he died in 1542.

These continual disasters in the far north of New Spain led the viceregal authorities to stop sending other explorers. The discovery of silver mines motivated expansion toward the northeast of the viceroyalty, indefinitely putting an end to exploration to the far north, until news about New Mexico and its fabulous cities once again caught their imagination, ending in more similarly failed expeditions.

Texas continued unexplored except for rare military forays and those of Franciscan monks who entered from the New Kingdom of León in the first half of the seventeenth century. In 1673, French explorers Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet discovered that the Mississippi River opened into the Gulf of Mexico and not the Gulf of California, as they had expected. Nine years later, in 1682, René Robert Cavelier de la Salle explored this region and formally named it "Louisiana" in honor of their King Louis XIV, claiming the region that De Soto had explored a century before.

La Salle died in March 1687 and the Spaniards establish themselves in Texas in 1689, awaiting the arrival of military and Franciscan reinforcements, who arrived from New Spain in 1690 under the command of Alonso de León and Friar Damián de Massanet, the founder of the San Francisco de los Tejas Mission. They remained for four years, but in 1693 they all had to flee the indigenous peoples' hostility: initially the native peoples had accepted them, but relations soon deteriorated with the many forms of indigenous people's resistance.[3]

New efforts were made again beginning in 1709, and in May 1718, the emblematic mission in Texas history was established: San Antonio de Valero. The Texas border expanded in 1719 thanks to the Marquis de San Miguel de Aguayo. In 1727, Brigadier Pedro de Rivera was able to provide more precise information about Texas, and in 1731, the San Antonio settlement was reinforced with immigrants from the Canary Islands. Between 1747 and 1755, José de Escandón advanced north from Querétaro, founding the province of Nuevo Santander, touching the south of what is today Texas and reinforcing its flank.

When Europe's Seven Year War (1756-1763) ended, Louisiana passed into Spanish hands, and no longer had a border with Texas. This change forced the Crown to improve management of its possessions in the Americas and to create the Internal Provinces of New Spain in 1776. In 1786, they became part of the enormous San Luis Potosí Intendancy. This was the state of things when the Revolution for Independence broke out in 1810, when its proximity to the United States played a fundamental role in Miguel Hidalgo's early political and diplomatic projects.

After disastrous 1810 and 1811 military campaigns, the revolutionaries thought about asking the U.S. Americans for help in the fight against the Spanish Crown. Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara joined the cause, and Hidalgo gave him his first tasks with the promise that he would meet him in San Antonio. Hidalgo was unable to keep his promise, however, because he and the other insurgents were caught and shot. Gutiérrez did manage to contact James Monroe, Thomas Jefferson's secretary of state, to ask for his help, but Gutiérrez rejected Monroe's exorbitant conditions and returned to Texas in 1812.

In 1813, Texas declared its independence from Spain, formed the Mexican Republican Army of the North, wrote a constitution similar to that of the United States, and kept the flame of revolution alive. In 1821, it became part

of the First Mexican Empire, as stipulated in the Act of Independence, and recognized Agustín de Iturbide as emperor in 1822. Gutiérrez was the one who made the pact with Stephen Austin for the cession of lands held by the Spanish Crown to U.S. colonists settled in Texas, and other regulations were passed to facilitate the colonization of the province.

In general, the increase of the Anglo-American settlers, the failure of colonization policies, the ambiguities surrounding slavery, the lack of attention to the northeastern border, and Mexico's political instability were key elements in forging Texas independence from Mexico. To try to bind the province, the Anastasio Bustamante government (1839-1841) took measures through Minister of Foreign Relations Lucas Alamán such as restricting immigration from the United States, regulating trade and nullifying certain land grants; this sparked anger among U.S. citizens residing in Texas.

As was to be expected, war was the result of all the contradictions between Mexico and Texas. The rebellion broke out in 1835, but Mexico's response was slow in coming and its disorganization led to independence being declared. After nine years of petitions to the U.S. Congress, the United States accepted Texas as another state of the union in 1845. Mexico protested and the response was a war that not only reinforced the possession of the former province, but also resulted in the United States annexing the territories of New Mexico and California with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

In the 1850s, Texas increased its population with Anglo migrants and more slaves. With the beginning of the War of Secession, in 1861, it separated from the United States and became part of the Confederate States of America. Its status was undefined when the North triumphed over the South in the Civil War in 1865. Meanwhile, in Mexico, the Second Empire was collapsing, and the Republic was being restored; Texas was entering Reconstruction, which lasted until the 1870s, when it was readmitted to the Union. From then on, relations with Mexico normalized, although that did not mean they were free of tensions.

Cattle rustling, indigenous "rebel'" incursions, and occasional territorial complaints or escaping slaves were settled diplomatically. Even so, certain fascinating stories emerged. One was the case of William Ellis, an escaped slave who posed as a Mexican and became a rich banker with a residence in Mexico City and an office on Wall Street. Aside from all this, Texas and San Antonio became an important economic center for Mexico and continued as such until the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1909, Mexico's Porfirio Díaz made a presidential visit to El Paso, an unprecedented diplomatic gesture, and the following year, San Antonio became the center of operations for Francisco I. Madero, who forged there the Mexican Revolution that triumphed in 1911. San Antonio and El Paso were an axis along which revolutionaries and reactionaries interacted, and, of course, Texas was of interest during World War I (1914-1918). Toward the end of the war, in 1917, Germany offered Mexico the recovery of Texas and all its lost northern territory in exchange for entering then conflict, a proposal that Venustiano Carranza rejected.

In the 1920s, Texas-Mexico relations intensified, with an increase in trade and Mexican migration. Some migrants were agricultural workers, but intellectuals also came, such as Martín Luis Guzmán and José Vasconcelos, who lived in San Antonio and Los Angeles, respectively. The large presence of Mexicans in the latter, for example, motivated consular authorities to inaugurate the commemoration of the battle of May 5, 1862, turning Cinco de Mayo into an official holiday and its spread little by little to other locales.

The entry of the United States into World War II in 1941 led to increased investment in the traditional economy of a huge war machine. Mexico played a fundamental part in this by sending workers, in turn fostering industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the industrialization of agriculture. The main destination states were Texas and California, and when the war finally ended in 1945, this left a curious balance sheet: U.S. American cities with a large number of Mexican residents, where interesting efforts were made, such as the foundation of the UNAM San Antonio campus in 1944.[4]

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population of Mexican origin demanding the recognition of their rights. One outstanding figure in this movement was César Chávez, who dedicated his life to the defense of agricultural laborers. This struggle lasted throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, coinciding with mobilizations in defense of African American rights and the sexual revolution of women, movements that transformed U.S. society.

Around 1980, different economic and social factors dynamized trade relations of Chihuahua, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas with Texas, producing a rise in the Mexican population in the U.S. South. In 1986, the border crossings at Tijuana-San Diego, Ciudad Juárez, and Laredo-Nuevo Laredo were the main migratory ports of entry: the gradual adoption of neoliberal economic policies in Mexico in the early part of the decade contributed to the expulsion of Mexicans toward the United States. For example, starting in early 1990, at least 500,000 Mexicans a year began entering the U.S.[5]

When the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect in 1994, exports, imports, and foreign direct investment rose both in Mexico and the United States, but the economic gap between Mexico's North and South grew larger. While the North had infrastructure, education, and public services, the South lacked all these advantages. This intensified regional asymmetry and migration from the South. Texas also felt the effects: in 2000, its exports to Mexico came to US$24.62 billion, or 35.80 percent of all U.S. exports to its southern neighbor.

The 2007 fight against the drug cartels by the administration of President Felipe Calderón, a member of the National Action Party (PAN), unleashed a spiral of violence that continues to have effects, such as the radicalization of migratory policy along the Texas-Mexico border. Even though in the decade of the 2010s, productive and trade integration between Mexico and the United States' second largest economy consolidated, political and immigration issues prevailed in public discussion. This was especially the case when Donald Trump took office in 2017 after his electoral campaign had been based on a systematic attack on Mexico.

For his part, from 2018 on, the administration of Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) behaved cautiously in the face of the different positions posed by the Trump government. It did, however, respond firmly to declarations of Texas Governor Greg Abbott, particularly to those stigmatizing Mexicans, the militarization of the border, and the highly controversial immigration laws such as SB4. In the six-year presidential term that has just come to an end, the Mexican president's rhetoric has been based on the defense of Mexicans in the United States, but also in the judgment of history.

In May 2022 and December 2023, AMLO reminded Abbott that Texas had belonged to Mexico, connecting the 1846 U.S. invasion to several tragic events that have involved Mexicans. The abuse of the historical narrative of Mexico-Texas relations —and, by extension, Mexico-U.S. relations— is such that fake news frequently circulates about Mexico's president supposedly supporting Texas independence, using fragments of the historical lessons he sometimes offered in his daily morning press conferences.

The tour of Foreign Minister Alicia Bárcena to the Mexican consulates in El Paso, San Antonio, Eagle Pass, and Laredo in April 2024 is a sample of just how enormously important the Mexico-Texas relationship is. San Antonio, the former provincial capital, was given special recognition by considering it "Mexico's northern-most city" and home to 900,000 Mexicans, and as the strategic point that has historically defined the binational relationship and the profile of a friendship always prone to combat, whether narratively or legally. VM

Notes

1 Gobierno de México, *Monitor comercial del T-MEC* (Mexico City: Secretaría de la Economía, 2024), p. 5.
2 Donald Chipman, *Spanish Texas, 1519-1821* (Austin: Texas University Press, 2010), p. 39.
3 Lino Gómez Canedo, *Primeras exploraciones y poblamiento de Texas, 1686-1694* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1968), p. 134.
4 Miguel García Audelo and Paula de Gortari, UNAM *San Antonio. Historia* (San Antonio: unam San Antonio, 2024), pp. 147-176.
5 Roberto Zepeda, "Neoliberalismo, desempeño económico y mercados laborales en Latinoamérica: un enfoque comparativo," *Ánfora*, vol. 35, no. 20 (2013), pp. 13-40.