

Felipe Calderón's Foreign Policy

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Nelly Salas/Cuartoscuro

Minister of Foreign Relations Patricia Espinoza with President Calderón.

The Felipe Calderón administration has delicately begun to unfold its foreign policy, without too many sudden moves. The president has gradually tried to reduce the intensity of four big issues that brought down heavy criticism on his predecessor: Venezuela, Cuba, relations with the United States and foreign policy in general. Let us consider each of these in turn.

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VENEZUELA AND CUBA

A great deal of the background noise behind the launch of the Calderón administration stemmed from the public differences that the Fox administration had with Venezuela and which led to the withdrawal of ambassadors from Caracas and Mexico City. The situation has still not been normalized because Hugo Chávez's radicalization has impeded its going any further. On the one hand,

Chávez was the only one who, though ambiguously, played with the possibility of backing the hypothesis that the 2006 elections had been fraudulent, a hypothesis put forward in Mexico by the Coalition for the Welfare of All headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and therefore with the idea of not recognizing the legitimacy of Felipe Calderón's government. On the other hand, the new wave of nationalizations in Venezuela has come very close to affecting Mexican interests.

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At the beginning of his term, President Calderón publicly differentiated himself with certain aspects of the Chávez Bolivarian regime's economic policy. The most critical moment came during the January 24-28, 2007 Davos World Economic Forum meeting when Calderón participated in the January 26 panel "Latin America Broadens Its Horizons" with the president of Brazil and the OAS general secretary. On that panel, Calderón said that Mexico was a country that he thought had surpassed the false state/market dilemma and that he did not consider nationalizations the solution to regional problems. Criticisms from the opposition rained on the Mexican president for clearly expressing this position. Broad sectors of the public thought that putting things this way was an incentive for worsening bilateral relations and reducing Mexico's weight in Latin America, and that, in the last analysis, gained little since the markets had already differentiated what Mexico does from what Venezuela does perfectly well.

In this way, once the difference was marked, Calderón recapitulated and weighed three objectives of his foreign policy strategy that seemed notably weakened after the position he took at Davos. The first was to lower the intensity of the confrontation with Venezuela; the second, to weave a sufficiently generic Latin Americanist discourse that would not cause unnecessary rivalries or pro-

tagonism. After all, if you aspire to exercise leadership, there are certain things that you cannot say in public, and Mexico could not continue to lose its ability to dialogue with its Latin American brethren. The third was the reactivation of the opposition of Mexican revolutionaries. Mexico's Congress rarely discusses foreign policy, but the Institutional Revolutionary Party uses the sensitive issues of Cuba, Venezuela and the United States to pontificate about how foreign policy was managed when they were in office. For Calderón, there were already sufficient potential points of conflict with the opposition without adding Venezuela to the mix.

In the same month of February, in London, Calderón decided to retouch his position and, in more conciliatory coded language, he coined what some have called "the spirit of Dorchester" (the name of the hotel where he made the speech). Succinctly, this implied promoting two ideas: the first was that for Mexico, harmony with Latin America was a priority, despite Hugo Chávez's unfriendly tone; and the second was that there were different economic policy options and Mexico defended its right to follow the one it had chosen, but that this should not be an insurmountable obstacle for deepening integration in the region.

With the Venezuelan front a little quieter, the relationship with Cuba has tended to be handled less stridently.

After a series of diplomatic incidents ranging from the bus entering the Mexican embassy in Havana, the grave accusations and resulting expulsion of alleged Cuban agents the Mexican government accused of engaging in activities incompatible with their migratory status, to the well known phrase, "You eat and you leave,"¹ clearly the Fox administration was in no position to try to change the trend. Calderón has dealt with relations with Cuba cautiously: he preferred to leave to one side democracy and human rights on the island as a priority and has opted for pragmatic courtesy, putting the relationship on its way to getting back on course without incident.

THE NATION'S MOOD

By opting to reduce the level of confrontation with these two countries, Felipe Calderón has correctly interpreted the feelings of an important sector of the Mexican public, and, of course, of the political class and diplomatic corps, who think it a positive that Mexico's discourse propose tightening ties to Latin America and leave behind the frictions inherited from the Fox administration.

In this way, he has managed to exclude foreign policy from the field of daily confrontations between the opposition and the government. Without Chávez making daily declarations about Mexico, foreign policy once again returns to the extremely low profile that political parties have assigned it on their agendas. The appointment of ambassadors has generated some debate, but until now, Foreign Affairs Minister Patricia Espinosa's reports to Congress have been quite uneventful. The risk is that in order to avoid domestic confrontations, foreign policy could lose vigor and be-

come less and less important in the country's political life.

THE U.S. FACTOR

It is true that the United States was scrupulously careful to not meddle in Mexico's 2006 elections. Although we could suppose that for ideological reasons, Calderón's victory must have sat better with them, they did not give in to the temptation of trying to sway the balance, a very wise decision.

As we know, relations between our two countries are enormously complex and often flow regardless of the frictions or misunderstandings that may exist between us.

What was difficult to hide was that in the last part of the Fox administration, relations were mutually unsatisfactory. For the Mexican government, it was clear that no significant gains had been made on the issue it had decided to put a priority on from the beginning of its term: migration. What is more, not only had there been no advance, but at the end of the term, it had to put up with the material and symbolic impact of the famous fence between the two countries. A worse scenario for a president whose sympathies lay to a great extent with that country could not be imagined.

The United States had a harder and harder time dissimulating its dissatisfaction with the lack of real progress in controlling violence along the border. Ambassador Antonio Garza's public statements were increasingly clear and put the Mexican government in the sad position of repeating the old refrain of co-responsibility. These were moments of tension and nervousness that contributed little to re-launching other aspects of bilateral relations.

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THE FIRST STEPS

Once in office, Felipe Calderón has begun to make some decisions that we can only hope he will sustain in the years to come. The first was to take on board the so-called "spirit of Dorchester" and foster pragmatic cordiality with Latin America as a general concept. The second consists of looking at the Latin American dimension as an optimal operating scale in the continent since with Colombia and the countries of Central America, we have broad agreement on issues like infrastructure, competitiveness and relations with the United States. The April 2007 Campeche summit and the incorporation of Colombia into Puebla-Panama Plan activities are proof of the importance he will place on the region.

In his closing speech at the January 9, 2007 18th Meeting of Ambassadors and Consuls, Felipe Calderón outlined his conception of what he hopes will be Mexico's profile during his administration. The main idea—forgive the paradox—is both simple and complex: that Mexico be "a winner country." He adds, assuming that he is expressing the desires of all Mexicans, that "we want Mexico to not only compete, but to win; we want a Mexico that doesn't try to change the world, but changes itself; a strong, self-assured, winning Mexico."

Three problematic central items can be identified in the presidential message.

The first is the agenda for competitiveness, which presupposes a complete revision of the country's economic structure and its human and technical capabilities. The second, linked to the idea of winning, makes defining national objectives and goals a precondition. Victory or success are always relative and can only be measured in terms of pre-established goals. The third is Mexico's role in the world. We can be observers or the agents for change. In the former case, it would suffice to move as inertia takes us as we did to a great extent during a large part of the twentieth century; this position is broadly supported by traditional forces. If we opt for a more active role, Mexico would have to have a detailed agenda for the regional, hemispheric, Ibero-American and global spheres, which still has not been set.

With regard to bilateral relations with the United States, the first stage has been marked by decentralizing migration discussions. This start for an issue that is unlikely to offer tangible short-term results opens up the way for some decisions to begin to be made without so much political pressure, but Calderón has yet to make a detailed statement about the country's central foreign policy agenda issues. What has been sketched out until now is absolutely generic; for the time being, that may be useful, but as the presidential term progresses, it will be necessary to make de-

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cisions about the other issues on the bilateral agenda.

In the fight against drug trafficking, policy has been more direct. A spectacular number of extradition orders for high-level drug kingpins in February 2007 was complemented by an express request that there be more control of arms trafficking into our country. In his speech welcoming Bush to Mérida, President Calderón particularly emphasized U.S. drug consumption. Our U.S. ambassador, Arturo Sarukhán, was more direct when *The Washington Post* asked him what he thought the United States was contributing to the fight against drugs: his answer was “zilch.” It is unusual for a Mexican ambassador to use this colloquial language to speak so frankly about such a sensitive issue.²

Bush’s March 2007 visit to Mérida made it clear that while bilateral relations continued to be solid with regard to the main issues, there is nothing like euphoria or high expectations. Mexico is taking very specific steps without expecting anything in exchange because, it should be pointed out, the last president got nothing from the man who publicly presented himself as his “friend.”

Perhaps the tone of the relationship is to guarantee mutual compliance with obligations without any kind of enthusiasm and with the necessary rigidity of two actors who know that at least until there is a new resident in the White House, what already exists should be

managed without creating any additional problems.

THE DILEMMAS

With the topic of foreign policy in a less agitated phase, without a doubt, the Calderón government will have to make more important decisions in the medium term and can opt for one of the poles of an old dilemma that has divided us for the last two decades. On the one hand are the traditionalists who think it is necessary and a good idea to go back to a very courteous, low-impact foreign policy without making any statements about aspirations that might cause frictions with other countries. On the other hand are those who believe that because of the country’s economic, demographic and cultural weight, it should participate more actively in the international concert. Of course, there is no consensus about what the optimum degree of participation would be, but what seems to be clear is that given the international context, it is increasingly difficult to isolate ourselves from the globalized world. It would also be more costly to try to not play a growing role in the international system, particularly given that ours is an important country in several geo-political groups: Latin America, North America and the Pacific Basin.

Although it is not very popular among our political class, it is imperative that

we open up a major debate about the role Mexico can and wants to play in the world, since, even if only with minimum objectives, we have to know what we want. Saying that we will try to get along well with everyone is a good start, but at some point we are going to have to begin talking about goals, and that is when the frictions and conflicting interests will come into play. The job of leading foreign policy will look more like that of a gardener who has to take care of his plants and their surroundings than that of a public relations executive who lives with a smile plastered on his face, proclaiming himself to be the ideal neighbor who lives and lets live. Our size makes us a country that can upset the neighborhood, since we also have aspirations and interests beyond our own borders.

As we have seen, by reducing the importance of the issue of migration, the tumor planted by former Foreign Relations Minister Jorge Castañeda—in the form of an *enchilada*—has been excised. The influence of the “whole *enchilada*” was so great that many observers took it more into account when evaluating the last administration than even Mexico’s participation in the UN Security Council during the Iraq crisis and its systematic defense of multilateralism.³ Now, without the “whole *enchilada*” in the collective imaginary, there will be more space to evaluate more calmly other fields of relations. The main thing now is to define what objectives we have in North America: deepening the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP); keeping things as they are?

The initial position with regard to Latin America is appropriate for reducing the noise made at the beginning of the new administration. Proclaiming

closeness to Latin America is always very useful, particularly domestically. The traditional parties and a broad segment of the public are comforted by these positions. What is not so clear is if, besides “peace and love” with Latin America, any other projects exist. But once they have been defined, I suppose that we will have to decide which forums we can use to put them forward in the best way (the Ibero-American Summit, the Rio Group or the Organization of American States).

With regard to many issues, like relations with the Caribbean, we can float along with the ambiguity that was so useful in the past, but there is one matter we cannot elude: Cuba. I suppose that at this point the discussions about what Mexico would have to do if it wanted to influence the Cuban process

are very advanced. Not only Caracas, Washington and Madrid have direct interests and proximity to the island; for different reasons, Mexico cannot put its head in the sand in this case, and it had better begin specifying what our interests are *vis-à-vis* the new situation on the island.

In short, the priority focuses will be, of course, the United States, Cuba and Latin America, without forgetting the commitment we made to multilateralism that continues to be one of our foreign policy’s main assets and consensuses. External pressure is increasingly clear in the sense that there is a basic contradiction in proclaiming ourselves the champion of multilateralism and not taking on the responsibilities to guarantee peace and security for the planet that that role implies. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Presidents Fidel Castro and George W. Bush were both slated to attend the 2002 Monterrey Development Summit. In a phone conversation, President Fox told the Cuban president that, of course, he could attend the summit, but on the day Bush arrived he would have to leave right after lunch. The Cuban leader’s security team taped the conversation, considered a serious insult on the part of Mexico, and released it to the media. [Editor’s Note.]

² About Arturo Sarukhán’s statements and the U.S. government response, see articles by Karen De Young, “Mexican Envoy Highly Critical of U.S. Role in Anti-Drug Effort,” March 23, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/22/AR2007032201853.html> and Marcela Sanchez, “Kid-Glove Diplomacy. Mexico Takes New Tack on Immigration after Lofty Promises Founder,” March 30, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/29/2007032901677.html> [Editor’s Note.]

³ This refers to Mexico’s position in immigration negotiations that former Foreign Relations Minister Jorge Castañeda dubbed “the whole enchilada,” or going for broke. [Editor’s Note.]



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