

Obama and Mexico New Paths of Hope

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On November 4, 2008, in Obama's acceptance speech in Chicago, he said something that moved his fellow citizens and the world: the American dream was in danger, and the response of a majority was that, regardless of racial, socio-economic and gender differences, the United States was betting on giving that dream new impetus and on providing world leadership.

The social base that gave him the victory had opened up a space for hope. The majority of practically all social groups except white Protestants supported the Democratic candidate. Hispanics, who had favored Senator Clinton more in the primaries, finally voted for the first Afro-American with serious possibilities of winning.¹

Outside the United States, Obama has sparked hope among many that the world can change for the better, and

Mexico is no exception. The climate of hope that his win has created is inversely proportionate to the profound disappointment that George W. Bush's Republican administration created for Mexico's democratic governments. The political experience of alternation in power after so many years of Institutional Revolutionary Party administrations was literally ignored by the Republican government as an opportunity to reduce the traditional mistrust between the two countries. In addition, the region's economy has suffered a great deal because of Bush's strategic decisions.

Obama has taken on the immediate task of working on reactivating the economy, and to do that he has called on the most brilliant minds of economic science under the leadership of Paul Volcker. His international policy will be led by former Senator Hillary Clinton. The two together guarantee that there will be no spectacular changes, but a return to the general lines of the William Clinton administration.

Initially, the economic package Obama proposes includes the possibility of creating 2.5 million jobs and putting "Main Street" at the center of his concerns. He has committed US\$7.5 billion, of which US\$1.7 billion would be directly loaned out by the government; US\$2.8 billion would be invested directly—for a country that does not believe very much in state intervention in the economy, this is a lot of money; and US\$3.1 billion will be collateral for the financial system to get moving. An enormous effort. If divided among U.S. citizens, the total proposed until now would be enough to give a US\$25,000 check to every inhabitant (including children) or pay off half the mortgages in the country.

If the economic recovery plan is effective, the United States could become the driving force for the world economy, while simultaneously restoring its multilateral leadership. At the same time, the regional integration model and particularly the relationship with Mexico are issues that have still not been clearly outlined.

Mexico was not a point of interest in the U.S. 2008 electoral debate. Mention of Mexico was only marginal in the presidential campaign debates. During the primaries, then-presi-

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dential hopeful Barack Obama's foreign policy platform planks stated that in the case of Latin America—from Mexico to Argentina—the United States had failed to deal with concerns about migration, equity and economic growth.² That's it.

The president of the United States' life and political experience makes him unfamiliar with Latin American issues, particularly Mexican ones. His knowledge of Spanish is extraordinarily superficial: despite saying he studied it in his first years of school, he is incapable of stringing three phrases together. He is also not known to have traveled to the region for personal or work reasons or for tourism. A high-level Mexican diplomat who twice had access to Mr. Obama commented that he is not a man especially concerned with Mexican issues. However, he has shown great interest in deepening the relationship and has formulated the right questions for generally improving relations between the two countries. In an oft-quoted interview done during the campaign and published in the Chilean daily *El Mercurio*, Obama stated that Mexico would become a priority of his administration. He said that it was very important to strengthen ties to the Mexican government in a way that the Bush administration had not, to discover what was needed on the other side of the border to promote economic development and job creation. He emphasized that more jobs in Mexico meant fewer undocumented migrants crossing into the United States.

In 2008, more than 5,000 people died in Mexico as a result of the war among the drug cartels. Obama knows it and thinks that consumption in the United States is also part of the problem. He stated that he would not legalize marijuana, but that he did think that the amount of drugs in the United States has to be reduced.³

Actually, regardless of any knowledge of or even interest in Mexico Obama may personally have, it is clear that he will inevitably have to deal with four issues. The first is making an initial gesture about the kind of relationship he wants to establish with the Felipe Calderón administration. There are already some indicators about this: the Mexican president had a first telephone conversation with Obama in which he congratulated him for his win, and Obama expressed his condolences

for the death of Juan Camilo Mouriño in an airplane accident. By unfortunate coincidence, the two events took place on November 4, 2008. Obama was on his way to the big party in Chicago, and Calderón was attending the funeral of his closest collaborator. Ironies of fate. In the first days of January, Felipe Calderón was the only head of state in the world to personally meet with the president-elect, just a few days before the inauguration.

In the coming weeks, the new president's gestures will be especially important for initially taking the temperature of the relationship. It does not look like we are going to see a torrid beginning, like the one which began with the start-up of the Bush and Fox administrations, which, it should be said in passing, came to very little at the end of the day, since relations with Mexico were abandoned or relegated to the back burner. Nevertheless, Obama has said that Mexico is a foreign policy imperative that the Republican government did not handle properly.

Mexico is a priority for economic reasons in two ways. Its economy depends greatly on its capacity to export to the United States and the latter's competitiveness depends on the complementariness that Mexico's economic structure offers it. For Mexico, the U.S. economy's revival is crucial. Until now, President Barack Obama has unveiled an ambitious economic program which, as mentioned above, includes an important injection of resources that should have both direct and indirect effects on the Mexican economy's performance.

I think it is highly improbable, for purely pragmatic reasons as well as based on the evaluation of the careers of the members of the economic cabinet, that an instrument like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will be revised after 14 years in place and which, with its pros and cons, has become the flagship model for hemispheric integration that the United States offers the world. Denouncing or reopening such an important trade agreement with a country considered an ally on security issues would in fact be equivalent to saying that the integration strategy it has been offering the world since the collapse of communism and that was particularly strongly supported by William Clinton is a failure. It would be like recognizing that there is no specifically North American integration model—which is probably true, but which brings up a basic question: If the basis for integration is not free trade, what would be the crosscutting issue that links the United States with the countries in the region?

The millions of dollars traded annually between the two countries could find themselves in a conceptual *cul-de-sac*.

Mexico has free trade agreements with Europe and Japan, to mention only two regions, and, in the remote eventuality that the North American market were reconfigured, Mexico should reorient its traditional functioning targeting North America, with a grave cost for many actors and sectors of the economy. It goes without saying that U.S. investments in Mexico would meet with incalculable obstacles of their own government's making. Therefore, it is very unlikely that the treaty's main tenets will be revised. If a review is considered, we can also imagine a progressive agenda that includes improvements in the ecological and labor spheres of the region.

A Mexican economy with severe growth problems will have more and more difficulty creating jobs. In fact, sources of employment are likely to be dismantled, and therefore migratory pressure will escalate in a scenario in which U.S. labor markets are incapable of absorbing new workers. It is also probable that this will at the same time create tensions internally and along the border with Mexico, and in general in bilateral relations. With such a complicated agenda outside the region, with burning issues like Iraq and Afghanistan, it does not seem a good idea to set off a conflict on the United States' southern border.

During his campaign, the new president proposed that he would deal with the immigration issue relatively quickly. He has the political capital and an important number of legislators to take on a reform of the immigration system that the previous administration was unable to process. If the reform goes through, we will probably find that former Arizona Governor, now Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano will provide the guidelines. Based on Napolitano's performance in Arizona, we should expect a combination of rigorous security measures—we must not forget that she stationed the National Guard along the border with Mexico—and a very pragmatic vision that includes the needs of labor markets and assumes as a given the fact that millions of undocumented migrants already live almost permanently in the United States, which means that mass expulsions would be a factor for instability and seriously wear down bilateral relations.

With regard to security, the relationship is also dominated by difficult-to-ignore issues. It is highly probable that both Felipe Calderón and Barack Obama will decide to deactivate the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). However, the central issues it includes will continue to be the axes of the relationship. In this same context, the two countries' cooperation in securing the North American security

perimeter is unavoidable as long as the terrorist threat continues to exist. Thus, all the cooperation and convergence that has been achieved in recent years to guarantee levels of aeronautical security and against the entry of potentially dangerous foreign nationals to the region must be maintained.

The level of convergence for guaranteeing border operations and citizen identification systems is a trend that has been consolidating in recent years and would be very impractical to reverse. It is also clear that cooperation around bio-security policies and disaster relief is of interest to both countries, regardless of the sympathies of the two presidents or of the priority Mexico may have on President Obama's new international agenda.

In relation to the fight against drugs, it would be very difficult to change the bilateral accord expressed in the Mérida Initiative in the short term. The U.S. president has said that the high consumption levels of illicit drugs in the United States have caused a grave security problem in Mexico. The principle of co-responsibility cannot be avoided, making it perfectly feasible that the Democratic administration will emphasize a great deal more than its Republican predecessors the need to prevent human rights violations as a pretext for starting an all-out war against organized crime.

It is also to be expected that Obama will start to formulate a series of precise observations about some policies of border states that cooperate at the negotiating table, but allow their police and security forces to maintain links with organized crime. We may well hear increasingly critical comments about the links between the political class and organized crime in Mexico.

The relationship between the two countries has so many points and there are so many shared interests that it is difficult to imagine important changes. It is in the two governments' interests, for practical reasons and given their respective domestic situations, to build up the economy and improve the region's general competitiveness, reduce drug consumption and levels of violence (in the case of Mexico) and ensure that another terrorist attack cannot strike the region again. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Enrique Alduncin, "¿Quién puso a un afroamericano en la Presidencia?", *Este País* 213, December 2008.

² Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2007), p. 11.

³ See http://grupotransicion.com.mx/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=398&Itemid=27&lang=es.