

Love and Distance Fox and the United States

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Pool/News/Reuters

Fox with Arnold Schwarzenegger talking about migratory accords.

Mexico may be very confused and debate may rage about its role in the world, but nobody doubts that its most important relationship is with the United States. The two countries have one of the most complex bilateral relationships in the world. A history of distance and misunderstandings, affronts and prejudices combines now with a strategic trade partnership and a shared population of several million people. It is a relationship that also has diverse institutional development and extremely varied levels of dialogue, but that globally has tended to become more

complex and to move with an initial awareness of interdependence —asymmetrical, but interdependent all the same.

Astrology is not compatible with international relations, but we can borrow the metaphor of the alignment of the stars. At the beginning of the Fox administration, everything seemed propitious for thinking that there would be a significant deepening of economic integration and better understanding between the two countries. To the perennial concern about Mexico's stability was now added another element: alternation in office. The Bush administration began its term with a politically and economically stable neighbor that had become a democ-

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racy governed by a party that supported the ideas of the open market and free enterprise. As good as it gets. In addition, Mexico's new president was Bush's friend and, in theory, that would simplify things.

In the heat of this idyllic state of affairs, the Mexican administration decided to play hard ball and put forward three major issues in a very short time. The first move was proposing a migratory accord with the United States that, among other things, would regularize the situation of the millions of Mexicans living and working there. The second was part of hemispheric affairs: Mexico's withdrawal from the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR), an old instrument dating from the Cold War. The third was linked to multilateral issues: our entry into the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member.

It is not very useful to think what would have happened if September 11, 2001 had not occurred. Perhaps things would have been a bed of roses, but reality reared its ugly head, showing that 9/11 was disastrous for Mexico in many ways. In the first place, our round-about, twisted answer to the gravest tragedy our neighbors had ever experienced smashed the idyllic beginnings. The friendly, but severe reproaches that then-U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow aimed at us for our inability to offer our affection and solidarity still echo in the hallways of the offices where people were making miserable political calculations about what was convenient to say or not to say about the tragedy.¹ To complete the outrage, the Brazilians invoked the TIAR, which, to our great misfortune, we had denounced a few days before, in order to back up the injured United States in every way.

Enmeshed in secular prejudices and political futurism, as well as being out of the game, Mexico could not have been in worse conditions.

It is true that the emotional response was not what our neighbor could have hoped for, but undeniably, from the first days, Mexico became a trustworthy partner in unfolding the border defense strategy, control of foreigners and safeguarding freight and transportation in the entire region.

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integration labeled "NAFTA Plus" were frozen out. Neither the political conditions nor the mood existed to reexamine the issues constructively. Bush's unfortunate decision to invade Iraq with no evidence and even contrary to the evidence of the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction complicated things. In the UN, Mexico maintained a very coherent position defending international legality and the system of inspections headed up by Hans Blix, but the frictions with the White House were important and added yet another spot to the tiger.

Relations between the two countries are so broad that even on lower levels

of priority, they continue to have their own dynamic and not all go through government offices. Beyond hurt feelings and mutual misunderstandings, North America exists as an economic, commercial space. The multinational companies established in Mexico and the United States, as well as the financial system, flows of tourism and labor markets have their own dynamic, and, with supplementary regulations, controls and a great deal of coordination, they demanded their space to develop, regardless of the mood of the two countries' presidents.

In any case, the inertia of a trade balance of almost U.S.\$400 billion, a shared population of several million people with two passports, and many other things, like social, academic, religious and business networks, forced things to move forward, albeit more slowly.

Security concerns framed bilateral cooperation, which is how the Action Plan for Border Cooperation, the Alliance for the Border (intelligent borders) and programs for safe repatriation, the containment of illegal Central Americans, the joint fight against smuggling of persons and what was achieved with the OASISS Program came about.²

Although with a lower profile than security measures, some other advances were made that are worth reviewing. One has had a significant impact in protecting emigrants' property and the flow of foreign currency into Mexico. Jointly, Mexico worked to register emigrants at its consulates and the U.S. Treasury Department, with Rosario Marin's decided support, loosened the requirements for millions of persons to get bank accounts so they could send their remittances safely and more economically. This is no minor matter.

The Partnership for Prosperity also made it possible to create a treaty with the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) to protect investments.³ Among the Fox administration's achievements is also having solved the 1992-2002 difference about the distribution and debt of water.

As the years passed, and with Iraq looming in the background, the relationship went through some very tense moments, particularly with regard to two issues: 1) insecurity along the Mexican border, particularly in Nuevo Laredo, and 2) the radicalization of sectors of society, the media and parts of the legislature about the question of illegal immigration.

With regard to the first point, the Mexican state's weakness undermined authority in the border municipality of Nuevo Laredo. Daily shoot-outs between drug lords and the subjection of local police to organized crime sparked very harsh statements by the U.S. embassy in our country, which were answered by the Ministry of Foreign Relations in a kind of upward spiral of declarations that severely tensed the climate of bilateral relations for some weeks.

The second issue has several aspects. Some are localized but serious risks, like the actions of the Minutemen, while others have a less visible but more destructive effect. Anti-Mexican sentiment in many television broadcasts has been growing and is increasingly flagrant and intransigent. Some academics began to say that Mexican emigrants were incapable of being assimilated and represented a threat to national identity itself! These pernicious ideas often do more damage than the violence of ranchers angered by illegals' crossing the border. The ideological debate in Mexico has not been anything we should be proud of either. Primitive anti-U.S.

sentiments were expressed increasingly openly in statements by politicians and the media, statements that systematically minimized Mexico's responsibility of containing the smuggling of illegals (an activity sometimes linked to organized crime) and of guaranteeing the rule of law within its borders.

All this anti-emigrant ideology was loudly echoed in the U.S. House of Representatives, which approved the polemical Sensenbrenner bill, which, among other things, includes the building of a fence along some stretches of the border and makes anyone who for any reason helps an illegal a felon. The bill is so profoundly aberrant that the

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opposition of an impressive array of social and political forces (which merit a study of their own), business interests and special support from the Catholic Church achieved such an enormous political effect that it did not pass the Senate. The last page remains to be written, but we can already say that for the moment the most recalcitrant, radical tendencies have been neutralized and the possibility of finding a balance between security and migration has gained more political support, significantly that of President Bush and certain sectors of his party.

In the last period of the Fox administration, relations have been marked

by a renewed will to rebuild the agenda in a more cooperative manner. The basis has been established for making real tri-lateral relations in the framework of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, whose main virtue is putting security and the need to jointly advance the region's prosperity and competitiveness on the same level, a prospect that helps us out of the swamp that the security paradigm had sunk us in for almost three years.

Personal attitudes have gone back to being cordial. The difference between the cool, irritated Bush who visited Los Cabos for the 2002 APEC meeting and the friendly, accommodating man who visited Cancún in 2006 is enormous, even though the change will be of little use at this late date.

In short, what's done is done. And the absence of a definite policy for the Mexico of 2000 has led the United States to miss out on a good opportunity to explore another kind of relationship with its southern neighbor. The beginning of the administration could not have been more promising. On its southern border, the United States had for the first time in history a triple combination that may not be repeated for many years: a democratic government, stability and an ideological stance compatible with the opening of markets and economic integration.

Vicente Fox waited in vain for Washington strategists to understand and value that moment, and consequently make it possible to handle relations in a much more cooperative framework that would stimulate a search for bridges that could help mitigate the differences and historic mistrust and develop the basis for a platform to jointly face a large part of the challenges of the twenty-first century, which, as neighbors and

trade partners, we have no choice but to face together.

Mexico's traditionalists, who continue to uphold its classical foreign policy values, gained ground with the public. A recent poll by Zogby International and the Center for Research for Development (CIDAC) shows that 36 percent of Mexicans consider the United States a distant neighbor; 18 percent catalogue it as a threat; while 20 percent consider it a partner and only 12 percent, a friend.⁴

As these pages are being written, we do not know who the next president of Mexico will be. However, I do not think it probable that 2000's favorable conditions will be repeated, and I accept that lack of expertise and uncon-

trollable events made it impossible to get more out of those favorable conditions. Even so, the inertia of the economic, social and cultural actors will force the two governments, no matter what their state of mind or political ideology, to seek out new bridges for understanding since we can do anything but stop being neighbors with a growing number of shared interests. **MM**

NOTES

¹ About this issue, see Jeffrey Davidow, *The US and Mexico. The Bear and the Porcupine* (Princeton, NJ): Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003). [Editor's Note.]

² Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations, Ministry of the Interior and Attorney General's

Office reported that as one of the measures to protect migrants, avoid impunity and strengthen border security, they had agreed with the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Customs and Border Protection division to begin the OASISS Program, which consisted of criminally prosecuting traffickers and smugglers of persons in the border region. See the joint press release published August 17, 2005 at <http://www.embassyofmexico.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=214&Itemid=124> Consulted May 30, 2006. [Editor's Note.]

³ Established by Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox in September 2001, the Partnership for Prosperity was forged with the shared vision of "unfettering the economic potential of every citizen so each may contribute fully to narrowing the economic gaps between and within our societies." See <http://sociedadparalaprosperidad.bog.mx/p4p_php> [Editor's Note.]

⁴ *Cómo miramos al vecino*. Report of the CIDAC-Zogby Mexico-U.S. poll, March 2006. See <www.cidac.org>

