

Frankness and Cooperation In Mexico-U.S. Relations

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U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Anthony Garza dances with George Bush's wife, Laura, after his civil wedding ceremony.

United States Ambassador to Mexico Anthony Garza has made a series of statements about Mexican issues that have created a stir in public opinion, as is only natural due to the prominence of his position. For many sectors of Mexican society it is not quite clear if his statements are personal observations or a reflection of State Department or White House thinking. In either case, it should be recognized that Mr. Garza's points are not groundless —as we shall see later— but are tremendously inopportune and, in any case, show that he is distancing himself from events in Mexico in which the United States could play a more empathetic and, of course, cooperative role.

Exercises in frankness are very useful in personal relations, although they may be heart-rending. But in international relations, frankness can turn into frank impertinence. Ambassador Garza has opted for invoking frankness as an exculpatory preamble to launching high impact verbal fusillades. Two recent examples are illustrative.

In May, during the Hermispheria 2005 Summit held in Nuevo León, Mr. Garza's statements were impeccable from the point of view of their logic: "The sort of reforms that Mexico will need

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to stay competitive are not easy.” Up to here, everything is normal. But a second later comes the painful exercise in sincerity: “And let’s be honest with each other, relying on remittances from Mexicans working in the United States and wind-fall revenues from high oil prices is simply not an economic policy. The underlying message of these reports is clear —reform or fall further behind.”¹

The matter would not be important if it involved two countries that were far apart and without close links. If that were the case, the statement could be taken as an academic reflection that sought to objectively describe the reality of a country. But things are different when you are talking about one of your main trade partners. The United States, and therefore its ambassador, cannot speak of Mexico with

The U.S. government is aware of the fact that since the beginning of his administration in 2000, President Fox has not enjoyed the majority needed in Congress to pass these reforms. Modernization of the Mexican economy today depends on the relationship of forces in Congress, where market-oriented policies are not exactly the most popular among most representatives. The discourse of economic nationalism and state intervention in the economy continues to be politically profitable. Opposing the structural reforms (particularly the fiscal and energy reforms) has become one of the opposition’s banners and a point for unity between two old enemies: the previous governing party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

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the same distance that he would if he were speaking of the Ukraine or Bulgaria. Mexico is the U.S. economy’s third biggest supplier after Canada and China, with a trade volume of over U.S.\$250 billion, an appreciable amount by any standards.

Pointing to the need for structural reforms to improve the country’s competitiveness is obvious. The Fox administration and a large number of specialists who study the matter (like Mario Rodarte, the director of the Private Sector Center for Economic Studies) waste no fora for underlining the need to make these reforms to facilitate foreign investment flows and the increase of the Mexican economy’s global competitiveness. For any observer of Mexico, the issue is not recognizing this need, but the political viability of these reforms in a very delicate political context.

The problem stemming from this situation is delicate because the lack of reforms weakens the president, his party and reform proponents and therefore reinforces the so-called revolutionary nationalists who feed off the deterioration of the Fox administration. Of course, I am not suggesting that the U.S. embassy should defend the Mexican government, but the least that can be expected is that it not throw fuel on the fire, so to speak.

The United States must recognize that its role in Mexico’s political transition has been limited and not very constructive in reinforcing the first democratic government of the country’s modern history. While the government of George W. Bush repeatedly promises that it is going to support those who fight for freedom throughout the world, it has made few explic-

it gestures to strengthen the advance of the regimen of liberty in Mexico. What is more, we could say that there is no qualitative difference in the treatment given an administration like that of Salinas de Gortari, with its doubtful electoral origin, widespread corruption and lack of internal transparency, and that of Vicente Fox, which has fostered transparency and an open door to freedom in modern Mexico. The vehemence with which the Bush administration defends freedom and market reforms in Asia or Russia contrasts sharply with its disinterest in consistently supporting a neighbor stumbling toward making those reforms.

Not to go on about the issue, but it is worth remembering that all the Fox administration's attempts to establish a new basis for relations with the U.S. (NAFTA Plus or the strategic part-

Things are not very different with regard to security. Once again, Ambassador Garza's frankness looks like a poisoned dart instead of being a shot in the arm to reinforce the image of cooperation between the two countries. A recent U.S. embassy communique lamenting the assassination of the Nuevo Laredo police chief who only a few hours before had taken office, reads, "And while I have no interest in criticizing the Mexican government... As friends and neighbors, we should be honest with each other about the rapidly degenerating situation along the border and the near-lawlessness in some parts." Further on, it must be admitted, Garza said, "I absolutely recognize that the security of the border region around Nuevo Laredo is a shared responsibility."²

Once again, this would not be more than an anecdote mentioned in passing if we were talk-

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nership of North America to compete in the world) have not been met with a response that was politically useful for reform supporters. U.S. disinterest in Mexico has paradoxically been the opposition's driving force for discrediting Fox and politically shoring up the groups to the left of the political spectrum who are traditionally hostile to Mexico's trade integration with the United States. The Fox administration is frequently and severely accused of selling out the country. It is also ridiculed, alleging that its policy of creating closer ties to the United States has obtained nothing in exchange. National public opinion deems that the United States considers us its backyard (and, is it true?). Was it the idea that the nationalists reaffirm their traditional anti-Americanism? If it was, it was successful; if not, the effect was perverted.

ing about some tourist destination in the South Seas, but when it is a neighbor with which you share an Alliance for Security and Prosperity, the statements are a matter of concern because they bring into doubt two fundamental questions.

The first is that cooperation to fight drug trafficking seems to begin to be fractured. A brief look at bilateral relations around this issue shows that during the 1990s and in the first years of this century, the institutionalization of the binational fight against drugs advanced a great deal through the creation of the High-Level Contact Group, and the frequent exchange of tactical and operational intelligence seemed to be yielding good results. The tacit recognition that a large part of the drug problem was due to high consumption in the U.S. market helped reinforce the idea of co-responsibility.

We should also remember the flexibility of Mexican laws for extraditing dangerous drug kingpins as another example of convergence. Only a few months ago, former-Attorney General Macedo de la Concha was recognized on several occasions by the U.S. administration for his work in striking at the leadership of the cartels.

However, in recent months something seems to be changing. Given the brutal wave of violence unleashed along the border and in Sinaloa, with its death toll of more than 600 in six months, joint work does not seem to be yielding the desired results. Something is failing in operational intelligence gathering along the border that leads U.S. authorities to censure what is going on in Mexico. In this case, more useful intelligence for arresting those responsible for the killings would be more effective than reproaches. Or perhaps it should be recognized that U.S. anti-drug services are just as lost in this bloody war as their Mexican counterparts, something not at all reassuring.

The second point is that something is wrong with the design of U.S. security strategy. If the United States' intention is to armor itself against a terrorist attack, the weaknesses of its southern border are clear. Not only because of the number of weapons circulating in the region and the amount of "black" money flowing between the two countries, but because illegal emigrants enter the United States with relative ease. How can six million undocumented Mexicans live in the great fortress without the complaisance (if not something else) of that country's authorities?

The violence caused by drug trafficking is also a symptom of the decomposition of a security system that does not seem to have its priorities straight. The situation is alarming, and reproaches or greater distrust are not going to solve it. It is in the interest of both countries to improve border security.

It is clear that the United States is not going to solve Mexico's political, economic and security problems. That is not its role. What seems

obvious to me is that it can play a more constructive and cooperative role with Mexican authorities and be more sensitive about what is going on here. It is not a matter for comparison, but Mexico has taken on board the objectives of the global struggle against terrorism and has adopted the necessary measures for maintaining the North American security perimeter because it is a U.S. priority, and it is in our own interest to do so. The Mexican government cannot —nor should it— be pleased that things have not progressed until now as the Bush government would have liked; it must continue to cooperate wholeheartedly and decidedly.

It makes me shiver to just imagine our ambassador in Washington saying publicly, with the frankness appropriate between friends, that an economy with a deficit the size of the United States' does not seem to be seriously led. But if, just to complete the scene, in another public event, our exuberant diplomat continued along the same lines of forthrightness and expressed his regret that the anti-terrorist crusade had not yet achieved the arrest of Osama Bin Laden, or, worse, deplored the fact that all the laws restricting civil liberties passed in the United States to fight terrorism had only resulted in what the Washington Post cites as 39 individuals charged with terrorism, his statements could well and fairly be taken as impertinent.

Without a doubt, just like among individuals, among nations, cooperation in solving problems is appreciated more than frankness in describing them publicly. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Speech read May 13, 2005 at the Hemispheria Summit by Ambassador Garza. www.usembassy-mexico.gov/ambassador

² Embassy of the United States in Mexico, Communique (June 9, 2005), <http://mexico.usembassy.gov/mexico/epress05.html>