

The Peña Nieto-Obama Dialogue And Its Impact on Bilateral Relations

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Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

Though not old acquaintances, much less friends, Presidents Enrique Peña Nieto and Barack Obama have already met several times. They have coincided at different trilateral and multilateral forums, among them the North American Leaders Summit in Toluca, Mexico, in 2014, and G20 meetings. Shortly before taking office, in November 2012, President-elect Peña Nieto visited Obama. At that brief cordial meeting, he presented his reform program and received the confirmation that Vice-president Biden would attend his inauguration on December 1 of that year.

During that visit, the idea was firmed up that it was very important that Peña Nieto dilute security in a multi-thematic agenda in order to throw into greater relief other issues like trade integration. The idea of a TransPacific Partnership (TPP) was even rumored. This did not imply, however, that he would elude the issue, which was finally an important part of the official communiqué. Perhaps the most important thing to underline was the announcement of a new strategy for dealing with violence and the emphasis on “cooperation with respect for sovereignty.” From that time on, the idea began to take shape of “one-stop” communications centered in the Ministry of the Interior to centralize and then deal

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with all contacts that had previously been decentralized and made autonomously between government bodies under the Felipe Calderón administration and their U.S. counterparts.

Months after that meet, Obama continued not understanding—or he didn't want to understand—the overall guidelines of the new security strategy, to the point of stating on the eve of his visit to Mexico City in May 2013, that he wanted to hear about their scope directly from Enrique Peña Nieto.

Obama did, in effect, make a much-talked-about visit to Mexico. He used it to listen first-hand to how the Mexican government had tweaked its security strategy and concretely to put his administration's seal of approval on the cooperation framework established by the Merida Initiative as the right one, and just to avoid confusion or wrong interpretations, that it was best to even retain its name. And that's what happened.

The security issue continued to be on the agenda, however, even though the Mexican government made efforts—and rightly so, in my opinion—to open up other avenues for bilateral relations. A basic understanding already existed about how to manage the common border that was not to be reformulated,¹ and the issues highlighted were prosperity and competitiveness, whose profiles faded during the Calderón administration, innovation, and education. A new coordinating body, the High Level Economic Dialogue, was created, co-chaired by the U.S. vice-president and Mexico's minister of finance. Promising paths were opened in the field of education to foster mutual understanding with ambitious goals for increasing the presence of Mexican students at U.S. universities. A specific fund was also created for the Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation, and Research.

In short, at first glance, the visit was promising. Certain doubts about security persisted, but the new projects and the promise of a discourse less marked by security opened up favorable prospects. Obama's visit also was also extensively covered in the media and included a memorable, hopeful speech at the Museum of Anthropology and History.² In that speech, Obama thanked the decisive support from the Mexican-American community for his reelection and his commitment to move ahead with a profound, comprehensive im-

migration reform. He spoke masterfully about the Dreamers and the future Mexico was carving out for itself.

What seemed a different, warmer stage of relations between the two countries after that successful visit generated favorable expectations for 2014, the year in which NAFTA celebrated its twentieth anniversary, as the appropriate space for deepening integration and taking some bold steps to improve the region's competitiveness. Without there being exactly any misstep, the year transpired without official commemorations. This can probably be explained by the political calculations on the part of each of the administrations, but the fact is that neither D.C. nor Mexico City's D. F. was in a celebratory mood. The anniversary's stellar moment came and went with the protocol-fulfilling celebration of the North American Leaders Summit in February 2014 in Toluca. Barack Obama, Enrique Peña, and Stephen Harper only skimmed the surface of NAFTA's twentieth anniversary.

Many observers of public life noted this lack of interest in taking advantage of the anniversary. In fact, the business community and even academia spent more energy on remembering and analyzing the implications the trade agreement had had in the three countries and the region as a whole than the governments did. From May 2013 to the closing months of 2014, the general trend seemed to be, rather, that of two partners cooperating formally and correctly, moving through their joint plan of action without any further ambitions. In other words, each party did its part. Period.

One irritating and rather unexpected item was the crisis over the unaccompanied migrant children, which made for a large part of the news headlines last summer. Many critics, such as the governor of Texas, for example, pointed to Mexico as responsible for unleashing this problem on their southern border, which created momentary tensions but that did not go very far. In fact, Obama thanked the Peña administration at the January 2015 summit for its willingness to cooperate and alleviate this problem.

In September 2014, Peña made a comprehensive trip to New York, visiting the UN General Assembly, which seemed to re-channel things onto a smoother path, accepting awards, speaking to investors, and making as much as politically possible of his legislative successes based on an impressive reform agenda. The events of Iguala, Guerrero, were just about to occur.

A particularly weighty concern floated in the air, however, about the possibility that Obama was going to lose strength, as he did, due to the unfavorable mid-term election results and the possibility of his facing a two-year period in

which he would grow weaker and weaker, and that Mexico's president would not have made an official visit to Washington. Finally, in early 2015, Obama received Peña at the White House. It was not a state visit, and therefore, the agenda was limited, consisting of a private talk between the two presidents, a press conference, and a couple of parallel activities.

In contrast with presidential visits to other nations, which have been very successful in terms of media coverage, Enrique Peña Nieto was treated rather unfortunately by the press, and the balance of the opinions published was unfavorable. The headlines of the capital's main newspapers had no news that really attracted attention. Some underlined Obama's congratulations on the reforms; others mentioned security; and finally, the most important was Obama's mention of the case of the Ayotzinapa Normal School. However, the content of the bilateral meeting included traditional items and some new ones that are worthwhile reviewing.

With regard to the prosperity agenda, the presidents centered on the key points of more effective border crossings, trade, and investment, while Mexico's discourse highlighted the will to make the region the world's most competitive. A good part of the text published in *The Politico Magazine* centered on the two economies' interdependence and the impressive bilateral trade figures.³ The figures are there and they are irrefutable, but they increasingly seem less effective for spurring a different regional project.

The U.S. public is not too impressed by Mexico's auto production, and it cannot be said that exporting light trucks or flat screens positions our country's image in the United States, since a large part of these products are not associated with the universe of perceptions about Mexico. That is, neither the design, nor the brands, nor the colors add anything to Mexico's "brand." In this sense, NAFTA seems to be an effort parallel to each of the countries rather than a will to create incentives for convergence and a sense of regional belonging.

Obama, for his part, took a more traditional tack, congratulating Peña on his reforms and their potential for promoting investment. The most sensitive issue in their private conversation was probably the conflict of interests that Mexico's president and the minister of finance have been accused of and, particularly, the U.S. concern about sectors in which Chinese companies can invest in Mexico, specifically energy. Parallel to all this, the High Level Economic Dialogue met without reporting anything new.

The second important chapter was about security. The thorny Ayotzinapa issue was the first mention in the White

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House communiqué, very clearly stating that it would maintain its support to eliminate the causes of criminal violence and the power of the criminal organizations, but that, in the last analysis, it is Mexico's responsibility to make the pertinent decisions to remedy the situation.⁴ For the Mexican government, the mention of Iguala put security back at the heart of the bilateral conversation, exactly what Enrique Peña Nieto was trying to change by his visit to Washington as president-elect.

Naturally, the border was one of the issues on the presidents' agenda. As already stated, Obama thanked the Mexican government for its work to contain the crisis of unaccompanied Central American immigrants that had caused so much tension in the summer of 2014. The possibility of cooperating to improve the situation in their home countries was left open. Cuba was also briefly discussed and Mexico, not an important actor in the process of reopening diplomatic relations, reiterated its willingness to facilitate the process to the extent of its abilities.

The most novel point of the meeting was precisely immigration. Obama's executive order clearly reinforces border security to dissuade new flows of migrants and there is no doubt that Washington is not going to change its deportation policy for recent arrivals, but it has opened a door of hope to several million of our fellow citizens. The Mexican government applauded what it termed the "bold" initiative and announced that the consular network would support all the work of dissemination and documentation necessary for facilitating the process for migrants.

In sum, we can say that in these two years of the Peña administration, there has been an important effort to open up new channels. Its main success has been in education. The combination of Mexican aspirations to increase the number of students, with the goal of 100 000, and the Obama administration's 100 000 Strong in the Americas Program has already borne some fruit.⁵ Twenty-three cooperation agreements have been signed between universities from both countries, and a website, *Mobilitas*, has been created, which in principle, helps students find educational opportunities

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in the two countries.⁶ In 2014, the number of Mexican students attending different U.S. universities rose to 27 000, not an optimum number, but a considerable improvement.

How migration evolves, in particular the opportunities opened up for undocumented immigrants in the United States, will depend on the way in which the political conflict between President Obama and the Republicans is resolved. For Mexican interests, it is key that the president's executive action be successful and that, eventually, the benefits of regularization of immigration status be extended to more and more citizens. The crisis of the U.S. immigration system is still a pending issue that clearly affects relations between the two countries.

Finally, the rule of law and security remain on the agenda. The Mexican government must ramp up its efforts to reduce the widely-held perception that corruption is a practice not only tolerated but backed from the highest levels of government. Despite the attempt to reduce the importance of security and its impact on bilateral relations, it is more or less clear that this issue will continue to be one of the priorities on the agenda in coming years. ■■■

NOTES

¹ "Plan de acción bilateral México-Estados Unidos," <http://embamex.sre.gob.mx/eua/index.php/en/comunicados2010/454-plan-de-accion>.

² "Discurso del presidente Barack Obama en el Museo Nacional de Antropología," May 3, 2013, <http://spanish.mexico.usembassy.gov/es/news/discurso-y-publicaciones/otros-oficiales/discurso-del-presidente-barack-obama-en-el-museo-nacional-de-anthropologia.html>.

³ Enrique Peña Nieto, "Why the U.S.-Mexico Relationship Matters," January 6, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/us-mexico-relationship-enrique-pea-nieto-113980.html#.VLgWeyuG-So>.

⁴ The White House, "Remarks by President Obama and President Peña Nieto after Bilateral Meeting," January 6, 2015, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/06/remarks-president-obama-and-president-pe-nieto-after-bilateral-meeting>; and Presidencia de México, "Coinciden los presidentes de México y Estados Unidos de América en el interés mutuo de seguir profundizando los vínculos entre ambos países," <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/articulos-prensa/coinciden-los-presidentes-de-mexico-y-los-estados-unidos-de-america-en-el-interes-mutuo-de-seguir-profundizando-los-vinculos-entre-ambos-paises/>.

⁵ See <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/100k/>.

⁶ <http://mobilitedu.net>.