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The Two-track Relationship Between Mexico And the United States

Four difficult issues affect relations between Mexico and the United States: migration, the border, the pandemic, and militarization and weapons. It is hard to come to agreements about them, and therefore, both governments have two-track movements that can be read as contradictory. The radical change from the Trump to the Biden administration on January 20, 2021, together with the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the border closure, have been difficult to handle for the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

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Migration, the Pandemic, and the Border

Mexico's president had to make a great effort both diplomatically and domestically to handle bilateral relations in 2019 given the U.S. threat to break off trade relations and levy a 25-percent tariff on Mexican products. It was not until the renegotiation of NAFTA and the signing of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that a new, pragmatic relationship could be established between the two leaders, who occupied opposite sides of the ideological map.

As a result, Mexico had to change its migratory policy. At the outset of his presidency, President López Obrador

had stated that migrants had the human right to freely transit through the country. However, to counter the U.S. threat, he had to deploy the recently launched National Guard,¹ the armed forces, and police from Mexico's southern states to build a police-military wall to stop the migrants desperately trying to reach the United States. In June 2019, Donald Trump and our president signed a migratory agreement, and the two leaders became fast friends.

When Democrat Joseph Biden won the November 2020 elections, López Obrador thanked Trump with his silence. He did not rush to recognize the winner, since the Republican maintained that there had been huge electoral fraud. Mexico applied its diplomatic principle of non-intervention, something that has never been quite understood in the United States.

At the same time, politics north of our border became polarized to unheard-of extremes on January 6, 2021, with the take-over of the Capitol by Republican followers. A second track also appeared in the United States: a key governor for relations with Mexico, Greg Abbot of Texas, a Trump disciple, continues to incite anti-Mexican hate; in June 2021, he insisted on building a new wall on the border with Mexico and began a campaign to arrest immigrants, a stance that has led to a harsh clash with President Joe Biden. In other words, migration and bilateral policy in both countries are also domestic political issues.

In the United States, the issue divides Democrats and Republicans, but this is also the case for the Mexican government. The most important cities in northern Mexico are going through two difficult situations: the accumulation of migrants living in parks and tents and the closure of border crossings for the Mexicans who live on the Mexican side of border but work on the other side of it. The COVID-19 pandemic sparked that closure, something that had never happened before, even during two world wars, the Mexican Revolution, or the Cold War.

Biden demonstrates no particular sympathies toward Mexico, but his immigration and national security team is very actively looking for convergences, and the more than eight million vaccine doses gifted to Mexico help in the reconciliation. In the northern border cities, the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine was given to young Mexicans last June—the older population having already been vaccinated. The aim was to immunize the border population to open up as quickly as possible, something Mexico has

been asking for since May. However, the United States has postponed it. Biden has been invited to make an official visit, but that can hardly happen without the border opening being announced beforehand.

In the United States a silent enemy is acting against economic recovery and good relations with Mexico: the people who refuse to be vaccinated. They are also preventing the border from opening up. Biden's dream of all U.S. Americans being vaccinated by last July 4 not only did not come true, but became a nightmare. Most of the deniers are the very followers of Trump and they are profoundly anti-Mexican. Thus, the pandemic also changes bilateral relations.

Two-track Diplomacy

From the Mexican side, relations range from noteworthy offerings of friendship with our neighbor to proposals to transform or eliminate the most important multilateral body where the United States has maintained leadership, the Organization of American States (OAS). Mexico's Latin American policy makes the United States uncomfortable because, from its perspective, it is excluded. The Mexican government thinks—this is an illusion—that the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) can replace the OAS and that it could be transformed into something similar to the European Union.

On the arms issue, both countries have clearly opposite policies. Mexico has sued eleven U.S. arms manufacturers, charging that they are responsible for providing weapons to the criminals who perpetrate the violence in our country. It is highly unlikely that this suit will succeed since these companies, supported by the National Rifle Association, are at the same time very powerful industrial consortia that shelter under the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. This action is based on the idea that the violence in Mexico is due to the free sale of arms in our neighboring country. The defendants in the suit say that they cannot be held responsible and that if weapons cross the border it is due to the incapacity of the justice systems, the corruption of many officials on different levels of government in Mexico who facilitate life for the criminals, the poverty that causes young people to seek false ways out, the lack of customs controls, and weak policing in preventing crime, among other reasons.

Security, a Binational Failure

Binational responsibility is the big anti-crime strategy. In 2007, the U.S. and Mexico designed the Mérida Initiative together. The United States spent more than US\$3 billion between 2008 and 2020 on the professionalization of the police and Mexico's military; the initiative backed the reform of Mexico's slow, corrupt justice system; and attempts were made to reconstruct the cohesion of society. But almost all its aims came to naught.

Mexico's current government does not even want to mention the initiative, since it evokes a past that it wants to leave behind. Since it has not taken a hard line with criminals like "El Chapo" Guzmán, they have been able to broaden their sphere of action. The criminal groups have divided and the number of homicides has tripled: the rate has risen from 8 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants in 2008 to 23 in 2020. This is one of the most serious bilateral problems, but none of the governments wants to accept its responsibility for this failure, and different interpretations have been offered to explain the increase in violence since 2007.

In the first place, the United States argues that Mexico suffers from huge institutional fragility. And they're not wrong. In some states—and particularly in a large number of municipalities—, criminal organizations have replaced the government, using corruption, cooptation, or threats. The two countries agree that corruption facilitates criminals' job. The Mérida Initiative sought for more than ten years to change the trend through decisive federal intervention, mainly by the intensive deployment of the armed forces. This theory leads to the idea that "militarization" is necessary, and it is currently happening under the López Obrador administration. But, as I pointed out above, they don't even want to mention the failed initiative.

In this context, the October 2020 capture of General Salvador Cienfuegos, former minister of defense under ex-President Enrique Peña Nieto, almost made security-related relations collapse. His release a month later helped bring the crisis under control.

One popular theory developed by U.S. think tanks is that between 2008 and 2013, Mexico was a failed state (though for some, it was merely a weak state, a failure in security measures). They said that the Mexican state did not have the capability to protect itself from the criminal onslaught, and that the Mérida Initiative was created to

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strengthen those capabilities. People also talked about a "coopted state," alluding to the holes and vacuums in the Mexican administration and the lack of accountability, with officials who did not act in the national interest and had favored illegal activities and criminal groups. Examples of this would be the collaboration of the last three governors of the state of Tamaulipas with the Golfo and Zetas cartels; that of the ruling officials in Michoacán during the rise of the Michoacán Family-Templar-Knights groups; and that of the governors of Veracruz and Nayarit.

In the second place, both governments agree that poverty explains the violence. This hypothesis does not hold water if we take into account that it is in the northern states, the most developed part of the country, where criminal violence soared starting in 2007. Waiting for poverty to be overcome in the country, especially with how it has increased due to the measures taken to deal with COVID-19, would condemn Mexicans to endemic violence for many years. This could lead to the growth of the informal economy and, on a municipal and state level, and in some federal bodies, the *de facto* powers would fill in the empty spaces opened up by the weakness of Mexico's government.

In the third place, huge differences exist between the two governments regarding the demand for drugs and the supply of arms as explanatory factors for the violence in Mexico. For the Mexican government, money and drugs come from the United States, and for the U.S. government, Mexico sends the drugs. The U.S. hypothesis presupposes that Mexico is subject to geographical determinism because it is situated between the Andean countries and the United States.

Militarization

As a fourth variable, militarization is the strategy implemented since the Mérida Initiative. The critics of military deployment say that, while this is the quick way to de-

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stroy the leaderships of the drug trafficking organizations (the high-value target strategy), the war against the cartels only atomizes them, spreading criminal violence to other states. This meant that, from having to deal with two big organizations (the Pacific and Golfo cartels) that carved up the country without serious conflicts in the 1990s, we moved to fighting six criminal monopolies in the times of the Mérida Initiative under what was called the “war against drug trafficking”: the Sinaloa, Golfo, Arellano Félix, Carrillo Fuentes, Amezcuca Contreras, and Michoacán Family cartels.²

That is, with the super-militarization of those years, the criminal groups have grown. In thirteen years, more than half the country has been swept up in increasing violence. In addition, criminal activities have broadened out considerably: almost 200 criminal organizations are currently dedicated to extortion and more than 150 to kidnapping. And these groups have developed much more complex strategies and broadened their scope of action into more than fifty countries. To fight these organizations, President López Obrador trusts only the armed forces: in 2019, he dismantled the Federal Police and created the new National Guard.³

Equally, in the last three years, the violence has intensified along the Pacific Coast and in Central Mexico, in Guerrero, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Morelos, and the State of Mexico, among other places, notably affecting agriculture and industry. As if that were not enough, now the Jalisco New Generation cartel is trying to take over Mexico City.

President López Obrador’s pacifist strategy, which bets on “hugs, not bullets” is not understood in the United States. It is also not echoed by many Mexicans.⁴ In my opinion, they are sending hugs to the Sinaloa cartel and bullets to the Jalisco cartel. The Jalisco cartel is the most important for U.S. security because it is the source of the fentanyl-consumption “epidemic,” which has killed so many of its youth.

While the fight against drug trafficking is the cross-cutting issue for the efforts of three Mexican administrations

(Felipe Calderón Hinojosa [2006-2012], of the PAN; Enrique Peña Nieto [2012-2018], of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI; and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, of Morena) and four U.S. administrations (George W. Bush [2001-2009]; Barack Obama [2009-2017]; Donald Trump [2017-2021]; and Joseph Biden), in recent years, the situation has become more serious and complex.

Final Thoughts

The highest officials in the Biden administration in the spheres of security and migration have visited Mexico several times in the last six months., headed by Vice President Kamala Harris. Their aim is that the differences do not bury the difficult-to-reach agreements. However, increased migration has rekindled nationalist and nativist anti-Latino sentiments in the United States, strengthened by Trump’s discourse for four years. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the border hard, and the governments have not found a real alternative to this crisis. For all these reasons, despite there being two-track policies, cooperation continues. Clearly, both countries are responsible for the failure of the security strategy. ■■■

Notes

1 Mexico’s National Guard is very different from that of the United States, which is made up of civilians who train one weekend a month and two weeks in summer. Mexico’s is composed of full-time soldiers and sailors and a group of former federal police officers. It is operationally coordinated by the Mexican army and its members belong to it. Its main activity is public safety, patrolling, and helping the civilian population. Since the beginning of the pandemic it has helped guard hospitals, protect doctors, and, in 2021, collaborate with vaccination.

2 The “war on drug trafficking” was undertaken by the Felipe Calderón administration (2006-2012), headed by the right-wing National Action Party (PAN). [Editor’s Note.]

3 This is analyzed in detail in Raúl Benítez Manaut and Elisa Gómez, eds., *Fuerzas Armadas, Guardia Nacional y violencia en México* (Mexico City: Fundación Friedrich Ebert, Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia 2021), www.casede.org.

4 This government strategy is based on the idea that peace is the result of justice, and therefore it has sought to attack violence and insecurity by resolving its causes and putting an end to structural injustice. See “Defiende López Obrador su política de ‘abrazos, no balazos,’” *La Jornada* videos, July 30, 2019, <https://videos.jornada.com.mx/video/14017588/defiende-lopez-obrador-su-politica-de-abrazos-no-b/>. [Editor’s Note.]