

Mexico in Latin America: The elusive relations with Cuba, Brazil, and Venezuela

MEXICO AND LATIN AMERICA

There are a series of misunderstandings regarding Mexico's relations with Latin America. The first is the notion that the region can be treated as a homogeneous entity. The truth is Latin America is a mixed group of nations, which vary greatly in terms of geography, culture, size, demographic density, and levels of development. This diversity has been thrown into sharp relief over recent years by an emergent group of radically left-wing nations whose notions of economic development, of democratic practice, and of international behaviour differ from other countries in the region. In these circumstances, it makes little sense to refer to Mexico's relation with Latin America as a whole; this relationship can only be understood in view of specific ties created with particular countries.

The second misunderstanding is the notion that Mexico could easily aspire to leadership in the region. Nothing could be further from the truth. Latin America is divided into various subregions that share very little with Mexico in political terms. This is particularly evident in South America, where processes of integration and political orchestration have left Mexico lagging. The achievements of the South American Union of Nations (*Unión Sudamericana de Naciones*), a mechanism for political coordination that Mexico was not invited to join, is a good example of this situation.

Mexico's situation in Latin America can only be evaluated through the particular understandings—profound or superficial, long-lasting or transitory, affectionate or fuelled by resentment—achieved with specific nations. The construction of such understandings is undoubtedly a central task for Mexico's foreign policy. And yet, there is no clear

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explanation for the manner and the means with which relations have been woven with certain nations. Three examples clearly come to mind: Cuba, Brazil, and Venezuela.

CUBA

The rebuilding of relations with Cuba has been a priority goal for Felipe Calderon's foreign policy. Many obstacles had to be overcome so that the famous "you eat and you then leave" ("*comes y te vas*"), and the many misunderstandings that followed in its wake, could be laid to rest. Although a total breakdown of relations between the two countries did not actually take place, it came very close. To heal this relationship clearly called for concessions and diplomatic handling, which have been very successfully accomplished. Felipe Perez Roque's highly publicized visit to Mexico and Felipe Calderon's announced trip to Cuba are good examples of the salubrious state of the relationship.

We might, however, have reason to wonder about the benefits or costs of this carefully structured reconciliation. It is to Mexico's advantage to normalize relations with this key player among the

group of radically left-wing nations in Latin America and a country that resonates with many Caribbean and African nations whose votes can be crucial within multilateral organizations. However, this does not provide Mexico with an enhanced margin for political action among other players in the international arena. During the 1960s and early 1970s, being the only nation in Latin America to retain relations with the Island was simultaneously a source of prestige and of *silent* understandings with the United States. Today, Mexico's good relations with Cuba add little to the former's international standing.

BRAZIL

Mexico's relationship with Brazil is of a very different nature. While both are considered emerging nations because of the size of their economies, territory, and population, they differ greatly in terms of their approach to foreign policy. Brazil seeks to strengthen its regional influence, diversify its economic relations, enhance its presence in international forums, and participate in international security mechanisms, such as peace keeping operations (PKOs). Mexico is reluctant to take centre stage in multilateral forums, has concentrated its economic relations almost wholly with the United States, and is one of the few nations in Latin America that does not participate in PKOs.

Despite these differences, recent circumstances, most particularly the growing international economic crisis, should foster a greater level of understanding between the two nations. Their joint action will be required to ensure that the emerging powers can improve their position within the mechanisms that will oversee the reconstruction of the global

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financial system. Furthermore, their cooperation could serve as a buttress for the Latin American nations in the shifting tides of international economic relations. Only Mexico and Brazil, together, can provide the region with the political weight required.

However, and despite certain recent efforts, such as the creation of a Bi-National Mexico-Brazil Commission, relations between the two nations are just cordial, though certainly not as intense and close as they should be. They have failed to capture the imaginations of the media and the Mexican Congress, unlike Mexico's renewed friendship with Cuba.

VENEZUELA

The case of Venezuela occupies a different context. Mexico's poor relations with that country during the government of Vicente Fox—which reflected the ideology that prevailed among the leadership of the Partido Acción Nacional, as well as the perception, justified or otherwise, that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had contributed economically to the campaign of Mexico's left-wing leader Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador—led to verbal confrontations between the presidents of both countries, which escalated to unprecedented levels. For a certain period, diplomatic relations barely covered trade issues; the atmosphere of the relationship as a whole could hardly have been worse.

Thus, it was surprising to find that the National Action Party (PAN) presidency of Felipe Calderon would decide that improving relations with Venezuela should be a central item in its foreign policy agenda. A good diplomatic handling, gestures of cordiality, and the reassignment of new ambassadors by both parties have put an end to the era of open confrontation. However, the relationship is not characterized by the level of cordiality that we observe in the case of Cuba. The nationalization of the Mexican Company CEMEX by the Venezuelan government and the difficulty of

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locating reliable interlocutors within Chavez's government, in view of the peculiar manner that said government conducts its diplomatic affairs, have prevented a significant bond.

A LOOK TO FUTURE RELATIONS

There are no elements within the three preceding examples that might lead us to affirm that there is a clear project in Mexico's foreign policy to build influence through strategic alliances with particular Latin American nations. The interest in finding a new level of reconciliation with Cuba and Venezuela served to distin-

guish the clumsy and sometimes strident foreign policies of Vicente Fox from the somewhat more professional diplomatic handling implemented by Calderon; it is comprehensible, yet insufficient.

Not only in the case of Brazil, but also with other South American nations that should be of interest for Mexico, such as Chile, relations rarely go beyond presidential encounters full of grand promises but short on concrete results that might lead to long-standing strategic alliances.

One result has been uncertainty regarding Mexico's weight in the region. Over the coming few months, certain nations will put their influence to the test—from the Summit of the Americas, in April of this year, to which Mexico could contribute by proposing a joint Latin American standpoint through the Grupo del Rio, through the events convoked by nations that, along with Mexico, celebrate the bicentennial of their independence in 2010.

It would be an illusion to believe that Mexico will automatically be a leader, or a privileged interlocutor, at such events. Its position is the sum of specific relationships with scattered countries in the region, which rarely, if ever, have achieved a true and viable partnership. ❁

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