

The crisis in Mexico–US bilateral relations

ANTI-US SENTIMENT

Since September 2001, the US-Mexico agenda has been on hold. The desire to find an answer to the migration crisis, and the attempt to bring prosperity to Mexico through integration hasn't worked. It has been almost eight years now, and it is not at all clear whether this delay will ever be reversed, or if the trust built with such difficulty between the two countries will be recovered. Not an easy task for either nation, but it is especially difficult for Mexico, which traditionally has had to deal with nationalist and anti-US sentiments that have directly influenced government decisions in recent years.

For the majority of Mexicans, George Bush is no longer a trustworthy partner for dialogue either domestically or abroad, and even his most faithful allies have their misgivings about him. His political position has weakened and his initiatives have been systematically rejected by broad sectors of society and the national and international political classes. Bush supported policies so extreme that he got burned by them, eliminating any possibility of governing effectively and with dignity. His skirmishes with Congress exemplify these difficulties and have trampled underfoot the already weak Mexico–US agenda. In other words, President Bush is drowning in a political shipwreck the likes of which neither Harry Truman nor Richard Nixon probably ever saw even in the worst of times.

THE LAME DUCK PRESIDENT

Bush is the most powerful head of state in the history of the global village, who opted—and is paying for it now—to exercise hard power. As a result, his foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East and Iraq, has lost all semblance of rationality; he has lost sight of the rational centre that guaranteed the United States government equilibrium in local and international decision making. Domestically, the facts attest very eloquently to this

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crisis. His closest collaborators—Colin Powell, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, George Tenet, John Bolton, Karl Rove, Alberto Gonzales, and so on—abandoned him because they were either burned out or incompetent. The more principled resigned in light of the administration's enormous fiascos: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the *Patriot Act*, immigration reform, and a \$160 billion deficit. His domestic and international approval ratings are at a historic low: fewer than 30 percent of Americans approve of how he runs the country. Internationally, the figures are similar: the lowest in the modern history of the imperial presidency.

This is a crisis of legitimacy reminiscent of the political crisis of the 1960s. Bush is practically a political liability, what is known in political parlance as a "lame duck," even for some Republicans, who avoid being associated with him. Bush's administration has atrophied, and he is left managing the remains of what could be a latent crisis of the state, with palpable consequences given the breakdown of the political consensus. Certainly, this crisis began when he took office in 2001, continued tragically with the September 2001 terrorist attacks, and

has increased dramatically since March 2003 when Washington decided illegally, illegitimately, and unilaterally to invade Iraq. Since then, something unprecedented in the history of the US presidency has occurred: Bush prematurely began the end of his own mandate. He no longer has the socio-political support that would allow him to govern credibly. To top it all off, his decisions lack a strategic vision that would, if not make it possible to avoid losing, at least allow him to extricate himself from the infernal maze that is the theatre of war in Iraq.

THE TRI-NATIONAL ASPIRATION

As if that were not enough, tri-national relations among NAFTA signatories have become narrowly bilateral. As it had always done in the past, Canada prioritized its special relations with the United States above and beyond its expressly pro-Mexican will; and Mexico, hemmed in by its dependence on the United States, had no option but to maintain a forced, but conflicted, proximity to Washington. And throughout this whole process, Ottawa and Washington demonstrated an almost complete lack of political will for achieving anything more than the media joke that was the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). The SPP has been an ineffective scapegoat for guaranteeing both the trade partnership and Mexico any real equivalent to the prosperity that Washington has managed to guarantee itself by imposing a radical securitization agenda on NAFTA, its partners, and the world.

This scenario exacerbated the ongoing complications between the United States and Mexico. Above all, it fanned the flames of the Mexican perception that Washington was acting only in its own interests, and that once its aims were achieved, it would abandon Mexico to its fate. In addition, this radical securitization neglects the fact that grave shared problems stemming from the onslaught of organized crime are to a great extent the consequence of US

indolence. After all, the United States plays a role in both drug trafficking and black market high-power weapons, which supply organized crime in Mexico with enormous firepower. Mexico has been trapped domestically by the centrifugal forces of nationalism represented by certain radical sectors, both inside the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and inside the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). It is understandable that, taking caution to the extreme, Tlatelolco (the Mexican Foreign Office) is not yet able to articulate any substantial strategic proposal for its international policy, whether it be to the north or to the south. Somewhere in this morass, Mexico has ended up alone, far from the United States, from Latin America, and even from God.

Although the historical antecedents of this virtual paralysis of the binational agenda are due mainly to 9/11, there exists the unprecedented situation of no clear strategic agenda for Mexico or the United States, either individually or jointly. It is surprising that two nations that share a long, complex border with such diverse problems have not realized that, given the post-2001 conditions of insecurity, they need to find a way to interact with each other that reinforces their ties, shores up the weakened diplomatic bridges, defines the central issues of their relationship, and strengthens the basis for cooperation. Only in this way will Mexico and the United States be able to achieve common goals and professionalize their relationship.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF BILATERAL DISTANCING

The year 2001 brought enormous surprises for both countries. The US Supreme Court confirmed Bush's election, which had been plagued by the phantom of illegitimacy, and his presidency was born alongside the first serious constitutional and institutional conflict since the time of Richard Nixon's impeachment. As if that were not enough, Al-Qaeda struck brutally against the country and government with its September 2001 terrorist acts.

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This event fractured the internal consensus, polarized US society, and translated into the beginning of the rapid decline of Bush's foreign policy, not to mention the bilateral agenda with Mexico. Bush and his retinue never forgave Mexico's belated expression of solidarity with its neighbour to the north. The cost has been very high, and it has not been clear how Mexico could repair the relationship. That framework defined both the international and North American policy of the Republican government, which is dying today as it leaves by the emergency exit.

For its part, in 2001 Mexico had its first democratic experience in 70 years. The first non-PRI government took office through a democratic process that offered Vicente Fox and his administration great opportunities to make the popular mandate weigh in with substantive reforms. The so-called democratic bonus, which was precisely that, a commitment, a debt to the majority of Mexicans, was frittered away on all fronts of domestic and foreign policy. It was not clear what Mexico wanted to do, or, in any case, it was not able to express itself clearly, as seems to be the case with the current government.

After the crises and confusion caused by September 11, the result was that foreign policy became no policy vis-à-vis the United States, Latin America, and the rest of the world. Mexico was orphaned, far away from almost everyone, and it remained alone and adrift for a long time. To make matters worse, Mexico was exposed to the inclemency of economic dependence on the United States,

to which it was subjected above all by its erratic integrationist policy with zero diversification. The foreign policy that Mexico could not articulate is demonstrated by the state's incapacity to respond with strategic intelligence to the challenges posed by an international crisis in enormous need of aid from its actors.

Very soon, it will be a little clearer—once the new chief executive is elected in November's historic election—whether the relationship will recover its lost equilibrium, whether the rational actor will be present, and whether the United States will return to the “rational centre” and recover its good judgment in defining its international and regional priorities. 🍀

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