

Mexico and the U.S.

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No perfect model exists for the relationship between Mexico and the U.S. because there is no other relationship like it. There are many nations that share lengthy borders, but none in which such great differences of development and incomes intersect. There are many nations that exchange inordinate volumes of goods and border crossings, but none is as active as that shared by these two North American nations. Certainly, there are numerous duos of European countries, Canada-US and some in Asia that experience similar processes of industrial integration, but none resembles ours in terms of the combination and dimensions of border entries and exits, commercial interchanges and populations living at close range on the other side of the mutual frontier.

The U.S. electoral contest has evidenced that Mexico is an important and inevitable actor, a circumstance that can lead to two conclusions: one, that we should shut our eyes and trust that the Americans will know how to act in the most responsible manner; the other, that we should respond in determined fashion. The first alternative is absurd because that is not the way to conduct the affairs of a sovereign and proud nation like Mexico. The second would be apt only in that it implies not confronting but, simply, developing a strategy that curtails our vulnerability and renders the internal political process irrelevant regarding the functionality of the things important to us.

As Octavio Paz illustrated myriad times in his marvelous prose, our border is exceptional because of the clash of cultures, histories, and civilizations that it represents. Nor is the relationship similar to that frequently mentioned as a model one, that of the U.S. and Israel, because the factors that vitalize the U.S. Jewish community have nothing to do with Mexican communities in the U.S., starting with the fact that U.S. Jews do not originate from that country. The supposed similarities are not such.

A Mexican ambassador in Washington in the eighties summed up the traditional view of a style that is revealing of a whole era: “neighbors now, partners now, friends never”. That form of conceiving of the relationship has led us to where we are now: lacking a strategy, abandoning our interests and ceding the initiative and all of the spaces to our detractors: unions, ecologists and anti-immigrant groups. Instead of acting within the natural and permissible fabric of the U.S. environment and Washington politics, we have remained marginalized -dauntless- before the spectacle of the destruction of the name of our country and our compatriots.

After years of ignoring Mexicans who had migrated north, present-day Mexican politics is nearly exclusively concentrated on these very individuals. This is natural and logical, but it is insufficient. Clearly, the Mexican Government retains the obligation of attending to the compatriots, to solve their affairs and to protect them. But it is crucial to understand that Mexican-Americans are not there to help Mexico or to become tools of the Mexican Government. Rather, it is the Mexican Government that must assist them, trusting in a long-term reconciliation that, far from being utilitarian, would be the product of mutual recognition and respect.

On the other hand, the abandoned component of the relationship is that relating to the Americans themselves. In contrast to the dearth of historical memory in many of their matters of foreign affairs, memory with respect to who their friends are and who are not is legendary. Although we generated an exceptional presence when NAFTA was negotiated at the initiation of the nineties, we never faced the consequences when adverse moments presented (such as the assassinations of 1994, the devaluation of that year and, above all, the pathetic response to the events of September 11), in addition to the devastated expectations of the failed Fox regime as well as the inefficacy of the present government. We proceeded from hyperactivity to total absence, creating an unfavorable if not hostile ambience on the part of our main commercial ally. The key is not to be leading characters but to face the music.

The relationship with the U.S. requires attention to two realities that are very distinct, but not mutually exclusive, and that should never be contradictory. We cannot pretend to influence their internal affairs and simultaneously take on the stance of neutral partners. This is about the principal bilateral relationship that we possess and that will always be central due to geographic, economic and geopolitical reasons. None of that impedes us from engaging in active relations with the rest of the world, but this one has to be, in the political argot, “of State, wholly non-partisan. It appertains to a relationship that can be limiting if we do not develop it, but one that can also be a source of infinite opportunities if we cultivate it properly. Our objective should be that of safeguarding and advancing our interests, while concomitantly making possible a workable and mutually satisfactory coexistence.

In 1992 the government erred on wagering on a candidate, who lost. Our logic should never embrace choosing candidates or attempting to manipulate results. Strictly speaking, it is critical to never again return to a situation like the current one in which we are a major part of the U.S. internal debate without the instruments or the possibility to act. We should project an active presence, but a discrete one that, paradoxically, makes us invisible: allow no one have any incentive to attack Mexico and Mexicans. Precisely the reverse of where we find ourselves today.

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