

Why US ties with Mexico are tepid

Sunday's election in Mexico for a new president could help refocus US attention closer to home.

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WASHINGTON – Though US-Mexico ties have been in the doldrums since 9/11, the election of a new Mexican president provides an opportunity to re-energize relations.

But such reenergizing could only take place with concentrated attention from the US side, analysts say - something that has been lacking for most of the Bush administration.

"If President Bush were to welcome the new Mexican president [Monday] or Tuesday with a call" for new steps to promote North America's economic growth and integration, "it would be the jolt needed to demonstrate a willingness to start anew," says Robert Pastor, director of the Center for North American Studies at American University in Washington. "But so far, the White House has only shown an interest in keeping the relationship the way it is."

It wasn't supposed to be that way.

Hopes had been high that Mexican President Vicente Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive who broke Mexico's one-party dominance with his election in 2000, could put relations with the United States on a stronger and more productive foundation. Expectations were only boosted when George W. Bush, a governor from a big border state, won the White House.

Then 9/11 happened. And in the lead-up to the war in Iraq, Mexico disappointed the US by adopting its traditional anti-invasion stance. The US reverted to paying little more than lip service to Mexico and the rest of the Latin "backyard."

But now, immigration is back at the top of the American political agenda. Also prominent in discussions are the hemisphere's energy supplies - and the anti-American leaders who in some cases hold leverage with those supplies.

This is why experts insist that, regardless of who ends up winning Sunday's vote - a left-wing populist who seeks a better deal for Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement or a conservative pro-business former energy secretary from Mr. Fox's political party - the ball will largely be in the US court to get relations moving again.

"Both candidates say they want better relations with America, but it's really going to be up to our side to make that happen," says James McCann, a political scientist at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., who studies Mexican and expatriate Mexican public opinion.

Noting that America's other international preoccupations have left the Latin America stage to leaders like Venezuela's anti-Yankee Hugo Chávez, Mr. McCann says, "It's up to America to fill the void that has opened the way to a Chávez, and a good starting-off point would be to reenergize relations with Mexico."

In the contest that pitted leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador against the Harvard-educated Felipe Calderón, the US was quiet. (Fox is barred from running for reelection, and a third candidate, from the party that ruled Mexico for seven decades until Fox triumphed, was stuck in third place throughout the campaign.)

A quiet US is seen as an improvement over past decades when the US meddled, often surreptitiously, in Mexican affairs, and as a reflection of the Bush White House's lack of

attention to Mexico. "The US was aloof from this election, and that alone is a gain," says Miguel Tinker Salas, a professor of Latin American studies at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif.

No one anticipated US favoritism in the election, but Mr. Tinker Salas says some Mexicans worried that echoes of the charged immigration debate in Washington would ripple into the campaign. "They feared immigration would become an emotional focus in the campaign had [the US] Congress approved an onerous policy towards Mexican immigrants," he says, "but that didn't happen, at least not in time for the voting."

Mr. Pastor of American University says that calls from all the candidates for good relations with the US, and their unwillingness to exploit the immigration issue for political gain, shows a "maturity" the US should capitalize on. But he also points to surveys showing that the percentage of Mexicans and Canadians holding a positive opinion of the US has fallen by about half since 2000.

Mexico would have a more pro-US president in Mr. Calderón, Tinker Salas says, while Mr. Obrador might focus more on shoring up Mexico's relations with the rest of Latin America. Those ties have frayed as the free-market Fox has clashed with the populist tide sweeping the region.

But one thing the US should not fear is another anti-US Latin leftist next door should Obrador, who was slightly ahead in polls before Sunday's vote, win the presidency.

"He's not going to be a Chávez on the border," Tinker Salas says. Given the 2,000-mile-long border, NAFTA, the millions of Mexicans in the US, and the billions of dollars in remittances those Mexicans send home from the US each year, Mexico is not free to antagonize the US, and Obrador has said as much: "He recognizes there are locks on the system, and that just the simple proximity and reality of the US influence mean Mexico is not free to either ignore or upset relations too much."

One approach to challenges facing the US-Mexico relationship could be creation of an investment fund to encourage infrastructure development in Mexico's impoverished south and central regions, says Pastor, who notes that Sen. John Cornyn (R) of Texas recently introduced legislation to create a trilateral (US, Mexico, Canada) investment fund.

"Something like this would help reduce Mexico's development gap by integrating the poorest regions into the production network - and in the process would reduce a source of undocumented immigration," he says.