

Calderón to set new path, redefine relations with U.S.

Mexican President-elect Felipe Calderón's is setting his foreign policy priorities to his south as he downplays the importance of an immigration agreement with the Bush administration.

The Miami Herald
Nov. 15, 2006

WASHINGTON - Mexico's President-elect Felipe Calderón hardly seems like one to chart a new foreign policy course.

He hails from the same conservative National Action Party, or PAN, as President Vicente Fox, a free-trade defender and the man Calderón will replace on Dec. 1.

Calderón is U.S.-educated like former Presidents Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo, who also nurtured closer ties with the United States -- a nation that absorbs most of Mexico's exports as well as millions of its migrants.

Yet Calderón is set to steer Mexico on a new foreign policy path that aggressively courts South American nations and reframes the relationship with the Bush administration to downplay the immigration issue -- a departure from Fox's priorities, analysts say.

Observers and Mexican officials say Calderón will also seek to mend ties with Bolivia, Venezuela and Cuba and even seek to position Mexico as a mediator between Washington and some left-wing governments opposed to U.S. policies.

Last week, after meeting with President Bush in Washington, Calderón told reporters that immigration, though important, was one issue among others that needed attention. He suggested that other issues like security and trade were of equal importance.

"I don't say it was a mistake to have made immigration . . . almost the only issue of our bilateral relationship," he said. "It is something that happened given the importance of the issue and the expectations that the matter generated. I am going to insist on the subject, but without making it the only issue in the bilateral relationship."

LOOKING SOUTH

After Calderón defeated populist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador in a bitterly contested vote, Calderón first headed south, not north, visiting eight Latin American nations, including left-leaning governments in Chile, Argentina and Brazil.

One Mexican official, who requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak for Calderón, described the gesture as "deliberate" and noted that the president-elect has said publicly he will seek better ties with Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela -- all nations that clashed with Fox.

Both Calderón and Bush have realized that emphasizing immigration was a mistake, says Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, a Mexico expert with the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, because it is an issue that fuels political passions on both sides of the border.

"It ended up becoming the barometer of the U.S.-Mexican relationship," he said.

SEEN AS PRAGMATIST

Peschard-Sverdrup and several other analysts who met with Calderón during his visit here say Calderón cast himself as a "Latin Americanist" and a pragmatist looking to resolve Mexico's pressing problems like poverty and rising violence.

In an indication of his style, he told McClatchy Newspapers after his election that he admired former Chilean President Patricio Aylwin, a centrist who made difficult compromises as he steered Chile through the transition that followed the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

The unassuming Calderón cuts a contrast with Fox, a tall former Coca-Cola executive with a booming voice. The son of a well-known conservative leader, Calderón is a consummate politician who quickly rose to become PAN's president in his early 30s and led the party as it transitioned from opposition to ruling party.

This, says Andrew Selee, the director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute in Washington, taught Calderón to have "a clear set of values and objectives, but also knowing that in the end you have to negotiate."

Although most of Mexico's trade and investment goes to or comes from the United States, Calderón has an incentive to boost his nation's ties to Brazil and Asia, a region that has been luring manufacturers and jobs away from Mexico.

He wants to bring Asian manufacturers and investment to his country.

LESSONS FROM BRAZIL

During his trip to Brazil, Calderón devoted attention to energy issues in talks with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, telling McClatchy Newspapers that he hoped to learn from Brazil's experience with ethanol production and offshore drilling.

Brazil's Petroleo Brasileiro oil giant has opened to foreign investment in a way that could serve as a model for Mexico's own state oil firm, Pemex, and Calderón wants the two firms to explore joint investments in Mexican energy projects.

The problem, says Peschard-Sverdrup, is that Brazil and Mexico have a long rivalry over who exerts influence in South America, so Calderón will have to move cautiously.

Then there's Cuba and Venezuela. Fox and Hugo Chávez have traded barbs and Chávez has suggested Venezuela may not recognize Calderón's razor-thin electoral victory.

Peschard-Sverdrup says Calderón may revert to Mexico's traditionally pragmatic approach to Cuba, preferring to have good relations with Havana because of Castro's perceived influence over Mexico's more radical movements.

"Calderón may have to be more strategic in rethinking its policy with Cuba," he said, "bearing in mind the national security dimension."