

In Mexico, Bush Seeks to Bolster Uneasy Alliance

The New York Times
March 13, 2007

MÉRIDA, [Mexico](#), March 12 — Just a few days before President Bush was scheduled to land here on Monday for bilateral talks, the Mexican Foreign Ministry sent an angry diplomatic note to the United States.



The final stop on President Bush's weeklong trip is Mérida, Mexico.

The note complained that United States Border Patrol agents had crossed the border and ventured a couple of dozen feet into Mexico to put out a rapidly spreading brush fire. “Even in emergency situations, the Mexican authorities must be notified immediately, without exception,” the note said.

The incident illustrates just how touchy relations have become between the United States and Mexico during Mr. Bush's presidency and hints at the difficulty the American president faces as he tries on this state visit to revive what many Mexicans see as a moribund partnership.

In large measure, the relationship has stagnated in recent years as Mr. Bush has failed to deliver on a promise of changing [immigration](#) laws to allow more guest workers, while conservatives in his party

have pushed through tougher measures to control the border, among them a giant wall.

Anti-American sentiment runs high here, with more than half of 1,000 people surveyed in a recent BBC poll saying they viewed the United States' influence in the world as mainly negative. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 3 percent.

“A lot of what my president will be looking for in Mérida is a renewed sense of purpose,” said one high-ranking Mexican diplomat.

That frustration was evident as dozens of protesters marched down one of the main avenues of this tropical city Monday evening, before Mr. Bush arrived, waving banners depicting him as an imperialist. Mr. Bush's plane landed at 9:10 p.m. and he went to the Hyatt Regency hotel, where he is expected to spend two nights.

For the United States, there is more at stake in the talks with President [Felipe Calderón](#), a conservative free-trade advocate, than possible progress on an age-old list of frictions between the neighbors: drug trafficking, trade barriers, border security and illegal migration.

Also in play is whether Mr. Calderón is willing or able to become a pro-American counterweight to [Hugo Chávez](#), the left-wing populist leader of Venezuela who is using his country's oil wealth to undermine American influence in Latin America.

For political reasons, however, Mr. Calderón has been reluctant to become the anti-Chávez standard-bearer in public. He said in a recent interview with The Associated Press, “I am not interested in playing a role with Bush in that respect.”

His aides say he wants to mend fences with the United States' antagonists, Cuba and Venezuela, as well as with the rest of Latin America. “The United States has a lot to do to regain respect in Latin America,” he said.

Still, Mr. Calderón remains the best candidate the United States has for a strong ally in Latin America. Gordon D. Johndroe, the spokesman for the [National Security Council](#), said the main purpose of Mr. Bush's visit to Mexico was "to show support and confidence in the agenda that President Calderón has laid out."

"He's certainly an important regional leader who is making the right policy choices," Mr. Johndroe said.

One trouble for Mr. Bush is that he is a lame-duck president facing an opposition-controlled Congress. He seems to have little to offer Mr. Calderón beyond a handshake and a photo in front of Mayan ruins, political analysts say.

The Mexican president would dearly love to see a comprehensive immigration bill passed that would allow more migrants to work temporarily in the United States and would offer citizenship to many of the 6.4 million illegal workers already there. It is unlikely that Mr. Bush can deliver on that now, given the divisions within his own party on the issue and the approaching presidential election, political analysts say.

"Bush could have done something to buttress Calderón, but he's going to arrive with empty hands," said Miguel Tinker-Salas, a professor of international affairs at Pomona College in California.

President Bush has said he still believes he can push an immigration bill through Congress, working with both parties.

Mexicans had high hopes of a better relationship when Mr. Bush, a former Texas governor, was elected in 2000, as he promised to push through an immigration-reform bill.

But those initial hopes have soured over the past six years. Mr. Bush and the United States Congress not only did nothing to legalize millions of illegal Mexican immigrants, but took strong actions after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to strengthen security along the 2,000-mile border. A result has been more walls and barriers.

Particularly irksome for Mexicans is Congress's decision last year to approve a 700-mile wall. It has left many Mexican politicians and intellectuals wondering what it is the United States president wants.

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“I don't know what his aim is,” said Senator Ricardo García Cervantes in an interview with the newspaper Reforma this weekend. “What I believe is that there isn't a lot of interest in Latin America.”

Like other Latin Americans, many Mexicans have also grown tired of the free-trade policies that were trumpeted in the 1990s as the solution to their economic ills. That sentiment was so strong among the country's poor that voters came within a hairsbreadth last year of electing a left-wing populist, [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#).

Now Mr. Calderón has to convince the two-thirds of Mexicans who voted for other parties that staying the course on free trade and remaining a close United States ally will work to alleviate poverty, political analysts say.

Since taking office in December, Mr. Calderón has taken several steps aimed in part at showing Washington he is a willing partner on security and immigration issues.

He has cracked down on drug cartels, breaking tradition to ship 11 top-level drug dealers to the United States for prosecution. He has also sent thousands of police officers and soldiers to restore order in several states where warring drug cartels had killed hundreds of people, among them dozens of police officers.

In late February, he also announced plans to create a guest-worker program for Central American migrants on Mexico's southern border, decriminalize illegal entry and improve the treatment of

illegal migrants. It escaped no one's notice that the proposals are precisely what Mr. Calderón is seeking from the United States.

Mr. Bush, meanwhile, ruffled a lot of feathers when he suggested in an interview with Reforma that the state-owned oil monopoly should be opened to private investment so it could explore deeper waters for crude.

Selling off all or part of the state monopoly, or even allowing private investment in it, is a political land mine here that even the most ardent free-trade conservatives like Mr. Calderón are not willing to step near. The interior minister immediately squelched speculation that the new president would consider the idea, but the leftist leader, Mr. López Obrador, leapt on it, saying "one doesn't sell the fatherland."

Beyond help with changing United States immigration laws, Mr. Calderón is likely to bring up the possibility of tinkering with the North American Free Trade Agreement to protect farmers who produce corn and beans.

He is also likely to suggest expanding the role of a development bank created under the 13-year-old accord so it can finance projects in southern Mexico. For a year, as a candidate and now president, Mr. Calderón's mantra has been that the solution to illegal migration is to attract more investment to Mexico; expanding the bank's role is one small way to do that, his aides say.

Other issues likely to come up are the steady flow of arms from the United States into Mexico as well as the skyrocketing cost of American corn because of new ethanol plants.

Mr. Bush is likely to seek a continuation of the strong diplomatic support the United States enjoyed from the previous administration, that of President Vicente Fox. Mr. Fox backed the United States to the hilt in its feuds with Mr. Chávez and its attempt to create a free trade zone throughout the Americas.

But some Mexican political leaders and opinion makers are now expressing the belief that Mr. Bush does not understand the depth of

anti-American sentiment, nor the prospects for a left-wing populist taking over here in the near future, as nearly happened last year.

Some are talking about a need for greater United States assistance to help Mr. Calderón make the free-trade model work to alleviate poverty.

Rossana Fuentes-Berain, the opinion page editor for the newspaper El Universal, points out that more than half the country survives on \$4 a day. With help, she says, Mexico could go the route of Portugal and become prosperous in a short time. Without it, Mexico might begin to resemble Pakistan, she said.

“We must be honest, there are a lot of predators that are rooting for President Felipe Calderón’s presidency to go sour,” she said. “They will come back with an ‘I told you so’ story, with a ‘free markets don’t work for us’ tale, with ‘throw the baby out with the water’ advice. ‘Let us build the anti-American wall ourselves,’ they will say. And people will listen.”