

Shifting Borders

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Mexico's relationship with the U.S. is inextricably intertwined with Mexicans' perception of themselves and with the evolution of its history. According to Javier Ocampo López in *Ideas of One Day: The Mexican People Before the Commission of Their Independence* the very concept of Mexicanness arose from the relation of Mexicans standing up against the 1847 U.S. Invasion of Mexico. Geography imposes its own law and, although Mexicans defied it throughout the entire era of the hard PRI -1930–1980-, in the eighties Mexico fully opted for proximity. Does Trump alter the logic of that decision?

Mexico's relationship with the U.S. has comprehended three distinct stages. For nearly a century indifference dominated: two new nations, clearly different in instinct, sense of destiny and internal organization that, however, lived in proximity without much ado. Mexico supplied services that did not exist there (and was a relevant factor in the Civil War of that nation) while importing goods and ideas that were not available there. The 1847 Invasion changed Mexico but not the nature of the relationship. In one of his films, Mario Moreno Cantinflas summed up, better than anyone, the nature of the relationship of that era (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxa_IVICASI): a fluid border, without hindrances, which worked but which, at the same time, evidenced deep philosophical contrasts.

Distance followed indifference: the indiscriminate use of the U.S. as the enemy as the source of Mexico's problems was the PRI trademark of the relationship. Better distance and enmity than influence and intromission. This not only guaranteed distance, but was also exploited to the maximum, and to the absurd. For the sake of internal unity, at the service of the authoritarian system (which Fidel Castro learned and exploited to the maximum), the maquila industry was limited along the border (perish the thought that these would contaminate the internal monopolist industrial plant) and an unviable and unsustainable economic model was preserved that, nonetheless, contributed to the political status quo.

The exchange-rate crises of the seventies and eighties called for a redefinition. Thus, from the clear and unmovable vision of Enemy Number One, it suddenly became an unusual closeness. The internal unity factor of former times resulted unsustainable in the face of the adoption of a growth model based on the search for foreign investors and exports from the Mexican productive plant. It was urgent to find a novel form of

conceptualizing the direction of the country: the U.S. was no longer the enemy to conquer, but rather, the nation's salvation.

From economic liberalization the two nations passed on to a functional relationship, but one founded on friendship in which the two nations understood themselves to be interwoven and to share a common destiny which they were required to confront together and always give each other the benefit of the doubt. The two governments committed themselves to solving problems, not to judge each other but to cooperate in matters of mutual interest. The attacks of September 11, 2001 firmly established a much deeper and integral relationship in the new issue of highest priority for the U.S.: security. The change was radical, but was essentially toward the outside: a new vision of development that would include the relation with the U.S. was never propagated, nor was the complexity and consequences of greater proximity assumed, especially on the migratory plane. Migration and trade, two apparently unconnected vectors, in the end created the most dramatic crisis of our history and, certainly, of the bilateral relationship.

We now find ourselves at the threshold of yet a third stage of the relationship of neighboring nations, now with Trump, who de facto proposes a transactional relationship in which everything is zero sum: what one wins the other loses. The vision of the whole that characterized the past several decades and in which every part was seen as a component may be about to be left behind. It is still too early to know what will happen in this new era, but it is clear that the relationship will change. At the least, the commitment to no mutual judgment and to solving problems without ulterior motives by either party has disappeared.

Each of the two prior stages had their *raison d'être*, their history and their legacy; the constant, however, was one, and a very obvious one that, in addition, had nothing to do with the U.S. or with Mexico: although Mexico is not the main character in the book by Richard Morse, *Prospero's Mirror*, that had been the nature of the bilateral relationship. Mexico's history has been a direct or indirect reference to its immediate geography. Pretending the contrary has cost Mexicans a pretty penny, from the XIX century to today. Instead of building its own capacities and instituting a domestic development platform – in the broadest sense, that is, including education, infrastructure, the microeconomy, the system of government, checks and balances and, in general, civilization-, Mexico's history is a permanent attempt, typically a failed one, to limit itself, associate itself or distance itself from the power to the North. No one like Octavio Paz for stating the obvious: “The border between Mexico and the United States is political and historical, not geographical. There are no natural barriers between the two nations. The Río Grande

does not separate us, it brings us together. But the monotony of the landscape accentuates the social and historical differences. These (barriers) are visible in ethnic, but above all in economic, terms...” Despite this, in the eighties Mexico opted for proximity as a strategy for accelerating its economy’s growth rate and, above all, for modernizing the country, to take it to the forefront of the world foreseen at the time for the XXI century.

In contrast with the U.S., a nation that Octavio Paz presents as committed and dedicated to the future, Mexico clings to its attachment to the past. Edmundo O’Gorman explains, in his invaluable *Mexico, the Trauma of Its History*, how Mexicans were incapable of deciding how to govern themselves: Federalists or Centralists, Liberals or Conservatives, Republicans or Monarchists. All this as the mirror, the reflection of the power to the North. These dilemmas have been and are, in the last analysis, revelatory of a historical constant: our incapacity to construct a “normal country”.

The desire to transform the country has never been lacking: in fact, the constant throughout time has always been the search for development. In the XIX century, this search was concentrated on the great disputes that O’Gorman relates with his customary sharpness; in the XX century we underwent the Revolution, the PRIist monopoly and subsequently an interminable series of economic experiments, none of which has achieved integral development adequately. During the last decades of the XX century we embarked on a development strategy that attained stability, as well as extraordinary growth in the rate of productivity, but not in the whole economy. The average continued to be meager.

Whatever the reason, we have been incapable of aligning the assemblage of elements necessary for achieving development. While the society, above all the companies and the workers, have had no alternative other than to adapt to the changing rules, and the system of government fell behind and remains frozen in the XX century. The major question is how was this possible?

The Institutional Backlog

The response is obvious and more transcendental than might be apparent: the great achievement of the end of the XX century was the incorporation of a factor of certainty that had never before been present in Mexico’s prior history. NAFTA was much more than a set of trade and investment rules: in its essence, NAFTA is a factor of certainty. The great wager inherent in NAFTA was the supposition that all of what Mexicans had been incapable of constructing internally to lend certainty and continuity to the factors of

production, could be achieved by means of an institutional agreement with the U.S. From the Mexican perspective, NAFTA has been a resounding success, which explains its enormous levels of popularity: the population, in contrast to its politicians, has no problem in identifying a winner.

The problem now, in the Trump era, is that no one imagined the uncertainty –the challenge- could come from the U.S. Therefore, in retrospect, at which we are all brilliant, the seeds of this moment were sown at the time of the NAFTA negotiation. NAFTA but, above all, the massive growth of illegal migration (product of the strategic perfidy of Luis Echeverría rooted in the inane notion that “governing is populating”) for some time that has affected the legitimacy vectors of the Mexican within the U.S. While Mexicans viewed migration as a solution to the growing internal demographic pressure, anti-Mexican sentiment took shape in the U.S. Although the true cause of the dislocation of U.S. traditional manufacturing jobs has much more to do with the technological change than with NAFTA or migration, the political fact is that, from the battle for legislative approval of NAFTA, anti-Mexican sentiment in the U.S. experienced an uncontrollable rise. Trump is not the cause of the discontent, but is instead its most intelligent beneficiary. The phenomenon has been obvious for more than two decades and we did nothing to mitigate it.

Today, after the extraordinary election of 2016, I have no doubt that we will procure a fit with the Trump government in terms of trade and, with that, for the principal engine of the Mexican economy. However, it appears quite discernable that the function and transcendence of NAFTA will diminish rapidly and this will demand new responses, with which the establishment is not equipped. I also have no doubt that the bilateral relationship will change inexorably: in fact, it has already changed. Mexico’s challenge, once again, will be internal: to construct sources of domestic certainty that permit the country to develop. The concept is simple and clear-cut, but one that has eluded Mexicans for more than two hundred years of independent life. We have never accomplished building the foundations of a “normal country.” Will it be possible to do so now?

Basically, a normal country implies, in the most minimal sense, sources of internal certainty that generate trust among the population about the country’s future. The concept is crystal-clear but implementing it has been exceedingly complex, so much so that the solution found to deal with it in the midst of the fight for the reforms comprised an external source of certainty in the form of NAFTA. In addition, given our geography, the very notion of distance with respect to the world superpower is somewhat nonsensical,

but the real asymmetry in the relationship has nothing to do with the economy but, rather, with the fact that Mexico bet on the U.S. as its source of certainty. The consequence is that any pretension of reducing that vulnerability implies, *de rigueur*, the construction of sources of certainty and trust at the interior of the country and that entails political consequences of huge dimensions.

The future relationship with the U.S. is going to be different from that of the recent past for two reasons: first, because the damage wreaked has been tremendous and has altered the attitudes of those Mexicans who are most naturally willing to be close allies. The deportations will play their part, but the discriminatory and degrading racist stances that Trump and his team have employed, in addition to modifying Mexicans' perceptions of them, have also been extraordinarily costly for the image of the "new" U.S. in the world. It is impossible to ignore the social impact of Mexican migrants in the geographic center of the U.S, and the political impact this has had. The rejection of those migrants in Middle-America is absolutely explicable, above all, because of the cultural and ethnic shock entailed in the presence of large groupings of "different" individuals in an overwhelmingly White, rural or semi-urban and provincial region. The contrast of struggling, but very visible, Mexicans in the face of a native population that is unsure of its future, created the perfect medium for the type of campaign that Trump launched. The phenomenon has been obvious since 1993, but the 1994 crisis, and everything that accompanied it, blinded us to the anti-Mexican phenomenon that was brewing. Thus, we never developed a strategy directed toward re-legitimizing Mexico with a forward-looking perspective.

Perhaps more importantly, even without Trump, it is no longer clear that the certainty that NAFTA furnished for twenty years will be permanent. The challenge does not lie especially in Peña, Trump or in every Tom, Dick, or Harry, but rather in the fact that technological change is unstoppable. Beyond the current disagreements, the world changes expeditiously and the manufacturing sector is no exception in this regard. Before Trump can count the fingers on one hand, the number of jobs that have disappeared thanks to automation and 3-D printers –here and there- will be staggering. Therefore, even the importance of NAFTA as a source of demand for Mexican producers will increasingly diminish.

North or South

Having said all this, geography will not change for Mexico or for the U.S. Historically, Mexico's foreign policy has to a certain degree oscillated in a Manichean way between two poles, as if they were self-exclusive: the U.S. and Latin America. Various Mexican administrations acted as if proximity with one gives rise to distancing from the other, as if the origin, language and culture were to vary due to the fact of adopting a determined position. Worse yet, Mexico's foreign policy excluded potentially important options for the development of the country (as the construction of an interoceanic passage through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec would have been) supposing that the latter would affect other nations, without having ever consulted the interested parties or, even, without having analyzed its implications for our own development.

Maybe the most interesting, and pathetic, part of the articulation process of a foreign policy, and also the reason for there not having been ample consensus about how it should be, is our atavistic capacity to define, accurately and in black and white, what the national interest is. Part of the explanation perhaps lies in that there are opposing conceptions concerning what the national interest is and that has led, in a very Mexican way, to the preference for a vague situation instead of opening a new source of contention. That strategy was very convenient for many decades because the country engaged in little foreign trade and the greater part of its international affairs was reduced inherently to cultural exchanges, participation in multilateral forums and other themes involving relatively little conflict (or, as in the case of Cuba and the Organization of American States [OAS], whose level of conflict was low but entailed risibly small costs, but high domestic dividends). Much of the prestige gleaned by Mexico in the international arena derived punctiliously from a policy that assumed its principles with great integrity, in the knowledge that no higher costs would present themselves.

But the world has evolved and Mexico today finds itself confronted with a changing reality, for which the old principles, while in many respects still valid, do not always coincide with our aspirations or our daily realities. That is, inasmuch as the country has developed a multiplicity of linkages with the rest of the world, we have also created interest-based networks that do not mesh, on the one hand, with the philosophical principles remitting to the Estrada doctrine and, on the other, to the protagonist aspirations not infrequently encountered in foreign matters. The best example of this is that of Mexico's presence on the United Nations Security Council twice during the last decade, one of the most conflictive periods of recent times, which required definitions on issues that are inordinately controversial with the prodigious risks –domestic and foreign– that one would suppose. The point is not that it would be desirable or undesirable, in

itself, to participate in the Security Council, but that rather, in order to participate, this assumes exact definitions that deal with our national interest. On not having an exact definition regarding this point, as those chaotic exercises proved, the propensity toward the suicidal is immense: unalloyed costs, no benefit.

At some time in the past decades Mexico considered the development of zones of influence as part of its foreign policy. Some proponents of these zones, the most realistic, spoke about Central America and the Caribbean; others, more ambitious, suggested the hemisphere in its entirety. Brazil, a country with power ambitions and an accurate definition of its national interests, although involving a lesser intrinsic capacity than it assumes, soon allowed its weight to be felt, obliging Mexico to offer to a not-very-discrete retraction. Despite that the tension with Brazil is constant, our dilemma seems to be unaltered: down or up. In terms of the geopolitical reality, however much the country entertains friendly relations with numerous key countries of the Southern Hemisphere, none of these nations hazard the risk of engaging in relations of more than the most minimal with us: those relations reach only to the extent that Brazil will allow them to; in addition, the disagreement with respect to a possible expansion of the Security Council of the UN comprises another expression of the same reality. Eventually, the matter is not North or South, Brazil or the U.S., but rather our perennial incapacity to decide what we want to be when we grow up.

The lack of domestic certainty

The geography will not change and the opportunities and complexities will continue to be there, wherever we go. The U.S. is not the solution to our problems, just as the South will not be, either: the solution lies within and all of the strategies that we could possibly imagine will not change that fundamental reality. Germany and France did not reach an understanding because they loved each other, but because they ended up realizing that their security, interests and development could be better served in conjunction rather than separately. This is something that we should re-think: the European Union came into being by the association of enemies after the destruction of a terrible war that produced millions of deaths; understanding under those conditions required inner strength, clarity of views and confidence in the capacity of each nation to advance together.

As France and Germany came to understand the inevitability of proximity –and its opportunities- Mexico will have to decide what kind of future it wants. Germany and France came to an agreement as equals in that each embodied its own certainties but both

shared a common destiny. The U.S. and Mexico came to a similar accord in 1988 that to date has been called into question. Trump represents an apparent discontinuity, but time will tell whether this is the mere passing twist of fate or a new tendency.

The real challenge for Mexico is not the U.S. or NAFTA; the true challenge lies in its becoming a normal country, with its own sources of certainty and viability. That is, the product of an internal transformation that revolutionizes its capacity to confront the future. NAFTA was a great substitute for a reform of Mexico's political system and government; what Trump has brought to light is the fallacy of being able to trust in others permanently without solving one's domestic affairs. The problem then is not Trump, but rather our paralysis and its privileges. That problem will be resolved when we have transformed the system of government; when that happens, the relationship with the U.S. will be natural -normal-, the fruit of two mature nations, friends and equals. Like France and Germany.

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