

Mexico, the United States and NAFTA

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The United States is a global power, the wealthiest economy in the world and the chief point of convergence and attention of practically the totality of nations worldwide. Although Mexicans see that nation as our border, the reality is that we are two radically distinct nations in might, ambition and the manner of conducting ourselves. This is neither good nor bad: it is the reality that we must recognize and accept. The fact that Mexico proposed the negotiation that ended up being the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) implied that, after nearly two centuries of independence, Mexicans had recognized these differences and were willing to live with them, at the same time converting them into an opportunity. None of that has changed.

The U.S. is the signature reference point for almost two hundred world nations. For each one of these nations, the U.S. is a power that they want to attract or with which they want to define their relationship. Contrariwise, for the U.S. all these nations are static on the horizon that are important only when there are problems or due to their particular circumstances. Thus, there are a handful of countries that bask in the permanent attention of the Americans (such as China, the old USSR, Iran, some European nations) but they are the exception. Due to the neighborhood (and unfortunately, to matters like drugs and criminality) Mexico appears on their radar once in a while, but we are not a subject of permanent attention. Some would say we're lucky.

Additionally, it's important to observe the nature of our neighbor: this is a highly decentralized society in which a multiplicity of actors has a direct bearing on the making of decisions. The latter implies that, barring moments of national crisis, that nation's decision making, in internal as well as external political affairs, responds to a particular confluence of groups and interests at a specific point in time, which makes it possible –frequently, in fact- for contradictory decisions to emerge together. In this context, certain individuals can exert an enormous impact at a given moment, while at others everything screeches to a halt. With respect to Mexico, this implies that it will unfailingly be vulnerable to internal decisions of that country that have nothing to do with Mexico but that do affect its interests.

The preeminent point is that the problems that characterize the border and the relationship between Mexico and the U.S are never going to disappear. The problems change in nature and form over the course of time, but there will always be issues to be addressed, as occurs between Canada and the U.S. In the presence of this reality, Mexico has always confronted a dilemma with its northern neighbor: see it as a problem or as an opportunity. The dilemma does not change nor will it change in a foreseeable future.

From the end of the Revolution until the mid-eighties, successive Mexican governments opted for seeing the Americans as a problem and employed the neighborhood as an internal instrument of political consolidation. Somewhat like Fidel Castro has done. In the eighties, Mexico turned on its heel and chose to conceive of the relationship and the vicinity as a source of opportunities. That's how the NAFTA negotiation began.

Two years ago, the U.S. rejected Mexico's (and Canada's) request to be a formal party in the trans-Atlantic trade negotiations. The U.S. negative to Mexican participation in the European negotiation gave rise to all kinds of readings and speculations. One reading was that this decision changed Mexico's

geopolitical situation and demanded another type of consideration, presumably a modification of the economic perspective as well as its foreign policy stance. Another reading, more in keeping with history and the bilateral relationship, was that the U.S. decision had more to do with preferences and the ways of acting of persons or groups as individuals, and did not constitute a radical decision of a geopolitical nature. That is, going back to the beginning, the U.S. is acting according to its nature.

For Mexico, there are two ways of understanding the challenge that U.S. decisions entail. One is seeing them as a cue-switch, a geopolitical twist of great dimensions that reflects the lack of importance that Mexico entertains at the heart of the politics of that country, hence calling for an integral redefinition. The other way of looking at it is that our national interest in maintaining a close relationship with the U.S. continues and that the way of procuring the development of opportunities changes but not the need to do so. What appears obvious to me within the American acting vis-à-vis this matter is that Mexico must find the way to maintain and advance its economic interest by exploiting all the forms of political action that the American system permits, that is, parading out a show of force of all of the instruments of pressure, negotiation, lobbying and convincingness at its command, in its capital as well as, because of its decentralized nature, in all of its key localities.

Mexico's relationship with the U.S. will always be complex because that is the nature of their political system and of their society and because it is such a great and powerful nation. For us, the challenge is never to lose from sight that it is an opportunity that must be constructed all the time: an opportunity that changes over time and that exacts a permanent capacity for adaptation. The dilemma of today is exactly the same as twenty years ago: how can we oblige them to see us and to take our needs into account. The reality doesn't change, only the guise.

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