The relationship with the United States today: the gap between expectations and reality

The North American Free Trade Agreement went into force on January 1, 1994 and it marked a watershed in U.S.-Mexican relations. For Mexico, NAFTA meant a break from its traditional distrust of the United States, a country that was perceived as an obstacle to Mexico’s independent economic development and a threat to its sovereignty. For the bilateral relationship, NAFTA meant an unprecedented intensification of trade and investment and increasing social and economic interaction between the new partners.

Mexico’s geographic proximity to the United States and the interdependence that has developed since NAFTA make its relationship with its neighbor to the north the most intense and complex relationship it has with any country. Currently, 56% of Mexico’s imports come from the United States and Canada, while 89% of Mexican exports are shipped to the U.S. and Canada. The United States is the leading foreign investor in Mexico, accounting for nearly 63% of all foreign direct investment (FDI). Canada is now Mexico’s fourth-largest trading partner and its fifth most important investor.

Mexico’s second largest source of funds from abroad, after oil exports, is roughly $20 billion per year in remittances, mainly from Mexicans in the United States. The economic and social forces behind this burgeoning trade and financial relationship as well as the increased immigration between Mexico and the United States are unlikely to change in the near future.

Until recently, many pro-NAFTA observers on both sides of the border hoped that the future would bring more intense economic integration and the construction of a North American Community, similar to the early stage of the European Union. Indeed, as the preceding chapter shows, Mexicans share this vision for the future of North America: 67% think that the economic integration of Mexico, the United States, and Canada will continue, and 61% expect political integration to follow a similar path (Tables 6.1 and 6.2). However, after twelve years, this hope has not been fully realized. Nor has that of a stable bilateral relationship based on cooperation and mutual trust, policy coordination, and the acceptance of institutional mechanisms and rules for dialogue.
In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and a lack of progress in overhauling U.S. immigration policy, Mexico’s relationship with its northern neighbor has fallen into a cycle of mutual recrimination and diplomatic disagreement. Despite initiatives such as the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPPNA), launched in March 2005 by the Mexican, U.S., and Canadian governments, the economic integration process is at a standstill; meanwhile, the initial benefits of preferential access created by NAFTA are waning and the institutional structures the agreement put in place have eroded.

U.S.-Mexico relations are as uneven as they are intense. The two countries have not yet succeeded in striking a stable and mutually beneficial balance between the logic of the market — which draws countries toward an intensification of economic, social, and cultural interaction — and the logic of security, which pulls them in the opposite direction. The tension between market and security has heightened to such a degree that the U.S.-Mexico border is being strained by increased unilateral controls, recurrent states of alert and emergency related to terrorism and organized crime, and the deaths of hundreds of Mexicans each year who die trying to cross the border illegally. The integration model foreseen by NAFTA is inadequate to today’s most pressing issues: the development gap between Mexico and its North American partners, the magnitude of the immigration phenomenon, and increased transnational security threats, such as terrorism and organized crime, which undermine economic growth in the region. It is precisely the topics that were excluded from the trade negotiations twelve years ago — security, immigration, energy, and development — that now demand immediate action from the three governments.

Below we describe Mexicans’ general attitudes and sentiments toward the United States. We also examine their opinions on the non-economic topics of the bilateral agenda, issues where Mexico’s positions are still unresolved. Because Chapter 4 addressed Mexicans’ perceptions on the issues of the North American economic agenda, in particular NAFTA and its implications, this chapter will refer to those issues only in passing.

Political relations and social perception

The United States is facing an extraordinary international situation, and its unchecked supremacy coexists with a sense of extreme vulnerability. This has led it to lean toward unilateralism, distance itself from the multilateral framework, lose interest in the issues that most interest Mexico — immigration and development — and adopt more stringent border controls. Although in many parts of the world the perceived excesses of the War on Terror and mistakes in the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have heightened negative sentiments toward the United States, one of the survey’s most surprising findings is that the opposite prevails in Mexico: positive and favorable attitudes toward the United States have increased since the 2004 survey.

For Mexico, the current scenario raises multiple questions and demands a clear formulation of the objectives, priorities, and strategies of its relationship with the United States. How do Mexicans see the United States in light of the new circumstances? What type of relationship do they want with the first global hyperpower? Do they trust, fear, or resent their northern neighbor? Under the current conditions, do they believe that the common border represents more advantages or disadvantages? Do they share the concern over the terrorist threat and to what extent are they willing to cooperate in response? Do they think that it is in Mexico’s interest to continue to seek a unique, close relationship with the United States so as to deepen economic integration, or do they want Mexico to return to a stance of relative distance? What are they willing to give in exchange for arrangements to normalize the status of Mexican immigrants and improve the treatment they receive?

The 2006 survey indicates that anti-Americanism has lessened and Mexicans are more open to strengthening their relationship with their northern neighbor. As noted in Chapter 3, on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 as the most favorable sentiment, the United States once again ranked near the top, this time placing second, with an average score of 74. (In 2004, it tied Japan for first place with a average score of 68.) It ranked immediately below Canada, which received an average score of 75. The decline in Anti-Americanism is especially noticeable in the center of the country, where the United States’ average score rose from 66 to 74 and in the north, where it increased from 75 to 77.
In the south and southeast, however, the average remained at the same level as in 2004, 70.

Nevertheless, an examination of Mexicans’ attitudes toward the United States in isolation, outside of comparisons with other countries, shows a different, more ambivalent and more complex outlook. Although this view does not necessarily contradict the trend toward a more favorable opinion of the United States generally, it does point to a continued strong distrust of that country. Just as in 2004, in 2006 the percentage of respondents who distrust the United States, 53%, is much higher than that of those who trust it, 25%, or who are indifferent, 16%. However, whereas distrust increased by 10 percentage points, from 43% to 53%, trust also grew, although only 5 points, from 20% to 25%. But far fewer Mexicans were indifferent, only 16%, down from 33% in 2004 (Table 6.3).

The regional breakdown shows a sharp difference between the south and the rest of the country. The north and center confirm this trend, with the percentage expressing distrust increasing from 25% to 16% in the north and from a very high 48% in 2004 to a majority in the center of the country. In the south, distrust rose by 16 percentage points to 60%. Another sentiment measured by the survey is admiration, disdain, or indifference. The percentage of respondents in the north who said they feel disdain, 18%, was much lower than that of those in the south and southeast, 42%, and the center, 33%. At the national level, we found greater polarization than in 2004: the proportion of respondents expressing indifference declined by 21 percentage points, from 46% to 25%. Those expressing admiration rose by five points, from 29% to 34%, and those who say they feel disdain rose by 12 points, from 20% to 32%. Mexicans are clearly more divided than they were over whether the United States is a model to be emulated (Table 6.4).

The sharpest change came in the south and southeast, where the percentage of people who say they are indifferent fell from 40% to 8%. The percentage in this region who say they feel disdain for the United States rose dramatically from 23% to 42%, marking a surge in anti-Americanism in this region. Meanwhile, the number of those who admire the United States also rose, modestly in this case, from 26% to 33%. These figures mark a clear contrast with the north, where only 18% express contempt for the United States.
Our findings regarding sentiments of fraternity or resentment are similar. As the percentage of those expressing indifference fell from 46% to 25%, the proportion of respondents who say they have fraternal feelings increased by seven percentage points to 27%. But the number of those with feelings of resentment rose more, up 12 percentage points to 38% (Table 6.5). We found this increase in all three regions, although more so in the south and southeast, rising from 25% to 42%, and the center, from 27% to 42%. One possible explanation for this greater resentment is that these regions include some of the states with the highest emigration rates (Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, Puebla, and Zacatecas). These states have been adversely affected in recent years by more stringent state and local anti-immigration laws in the United States. The north is the only region where more respondents feel fraternity towards the United States, 32%, than resentment, 22%, but a large number, 28%, remain indifferent, down 17 percentage points from 2004, or volunteered that they are not sure how they feel, 18% in 2006 compared to 7% in 2004. Surprisingly, the high levels of resentment in the south are accompanied by a significant minority, 35%, who say they have fraternal feelings towards the United States.

In addition to these changes in Mexicans’ sentiments toward the United States, we identified a stronger degree of pragmatism. That may tip the scales in favor of making self-interested choices in situations where attitudes are ambivalent rather than decisions based on traditional principles. For example, in Chapter 1, respondents were asked to choose between national identity and individual economic interest when asked if they agreed with the hypothetical possibility of the United States and Mexico becoming a single country if it meant that their standard of living would increase. Their responses indicate that material considerations, their standard of living, are more important for them than they were two years ago. 54% of Mexicans agreed with this hypothetical proposal, up from 38% in 2004.

Mexicans’ pragmatism vis-à-vis the United States becomes clear when they are asked to define the category that best describes Mexico’s relationship with a series of countries — partner, friend, rival, or threat. 50% define the United States as a partner, whereas 36% consider it friend, 5% a rival, and 5% a threat. More respondents say that the United States is Mexico’s partner than do so for any of the other countries on the list of eight countries in the Americas, while fewer respondents, 36%, say that Mexico’s relationship with the United States is that of friends compared to the levels for the other countries on the same list.

Likewise, geographic proximity to and having a common border with the United States are perceived by more respondents throughout the country as an advantage, 52%, than as a problem, 39% (Table 6.6). Again, there are large regional differences. A wide majority of the respondents in the north, 72%, view being close to the United States as an advantage, a smaller number in the center, 50%, hold this view, and in the south and southeast, the number is only 48%. One explanation may be that for those in the south and southeast, the benefits of geographic proximity to the United States are distant: they receive lower remittances per capita, less foreign investment, have weaker trade ties with the United States, and aren’t close enough to enjoy an occasional weekend shopping trip in the United States, as are northern border residents.

Mexicans have preferred to construct a unique relationship with the United States by engaging with their powerful neighbor directly, rather than seeking allies or intermediaries. They have chosen this approach rather than seek common cause with Canada, the other North American trading partner and a logical ally in providing a counterweight to
Electoral cycles are particularly useful for detecting linkages between foreign and domestic policy. And, for the purposes of this study, the recent presidential campaign showed different perceptions of political parties’ positions regarding Mexico’s relationship with the United States. In 2006, Mexicans consider that the PAN, PRI, and PRD are all willing to cooperate with the United States, albeit to varying degrees. On a scale of 0 to 10, respondents view them as more cooperative than they did in 2004. The average score respondents throughout the country gave the PAN for cooperation with the United States rose from 7 to 8. For the PRI, the average score rose from 6 to 7. For its part, the PRD, which had an average score of only 5 points in 2004, rose to 6.

When we asked respondents to use the same scale to rank their personal positions on cooperation between the two countries, the average level of cooperation that respondents indicate they prefer Mexico to have with the United States is 7. The north and center prefer a higher level of cooperation (8) than does the south and southeast (7).

Lastly, we will examine Mexicans’ opinion on the role the United States should play in the world. A majority, 59%, say that the United States should assume an active role in solving world problems although in coordination with other countries. 22% of the respondents — six percentage points lower than in 2004 — believe that the United States should stay on the sidelines and not participate in efforts to solve international problems, while only 12% believe that it should continue to act as the preeminent world leader (Table 6.8). Mexicans oppose U.S. unilateralism more than its inaction and isolationism, but above all they would prefer a cooperative and multilateralist dominant power to work with other countries in finding solutions to world problems.

Security, drug-trafficking, and immigration

A constant of the relationship between Mexico and the United States has been the two countries’ difficulty in cooperating on security and immigration issues. Given the prominence of security concerns since the September 11, 2001, attacks and the rising public pressure to address illegal immigration in the United States, one of the timeliest issues is how far Mexicans are willing to cooperate and coordinate actions with the United States on these matters. To what extent do Mexicans share their
neighbors’ security concerns? Do conditions exist for cooperation on immigration and security?

The 2006 survey once again finds that all six of the goals Mexicans classify as “very important” for the country’s foreign policy are closely linked to the U.S.-Mexico bilateral relationship. Although the two top objectives, promoting exports and protecting Mexican interests abroad, are not linked to security and immigration, four of the next five are: combating drug-trafficking, which is seen as the third most important goal; protecting the nation’s land and sea borders; combating international terrorism; and preventing nuclear-weapons proliferation.

This points to a convergence between Mexico’s foreign policy priorities and the United States’ security concerns. This convergence, in turn, opens the door for cooperation on sensitive topics such as border management and combating drug-trafficking and terrorism.

Security became a global priority after September 11, 2001. Although Mexicans continue to be willing to cooperate in combating terrorism, their concern with this issue, as noted above, has diminished: in 2004, 81% of the respondents considered it a serious threat, but in 2006, the number slipped to 70%. The reason for this decreased concern may be the lack of evidence that Mexico is either an important potential terrorist target or a likely springboard for a terrorist attack against the United States. Another element that may affect Mexicans’ opinion is their critical view of U.S. unilateralism. As we have noted, 59% of Mexicans believe the United States should work together with other countries.

Other questions in the survey confirm that the concern over the terrorist threat has decreased. In 2004, Mexicans were more willing than they are now to take strong measures against terrorism, including allowing the presence of U.S. agents in Mexico to collaborate with their Mexican counterparts in maintaining surveillance over borders, seaports, and airports. Two years ago, 87% of the respondents believed that Mexico should tighten its controls on goods moving across its territory, whereas in 2006, the number slipped to 79% (Table 6.9). Another indication is the lower percentage of respondents who support enacting more stringent requirements for foreigners to enter and leave Mexico: from 84% in 2004 to 74% in 2006 (Table 6.10).
In the fight against terrorism, Mexicans continue to be willing to allow U.S. agents to collaborate with Mexican authorities in monitoring airports, sea terminals, and borders; still, as with the preceding cases, support for such cooperation has fallen, from a large majority of 63% of all Mexicans to a slim one of 51% (Table 6.11) As the perception of an immediate and direct threat to Mexico's security diminishes, so does the willingness to share responsibilities and coordinate actions with the United States. Mexicans are willing to cooperate with the United States on sensitive security issues when they consider it necessary; this support is not based on solidarity with or a liking of the United States but rather on self-interest.

Table 6.11
Actions against terrorism
PUBLIC 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permits American agents to participate with Mexican agents in guarding (watching) Mexico's airports, ports, and borders</th>
<th>Should</th>
<th>Should Not</th>
<th>Depends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North and South and Southeast</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mexicans are more willing to cooperate with the United States on security issues such as combating drug-trafficking and organized crime, issues that they view as priorities. An overwhelming majority, 81%, of respondents in all regions agree — 59% strongly and 22% somewhat — with the extradition of criminal defendants of any nationality who try to use either country as a haven from prosecution. Only 15% oppose Mexico cooperating with the United States on extradition. Approval of collaboration between the two countries is stronger in the case of extradition than in any other area.

Would Mexicans be willing to permit the presence of U.S. agents on Mexican territory for purposes other than contributing to security, such as facilitating tourism and trade? 56% of the respondents say they would either strongly agree, 27%, or somewhat agree, 29%, to an accord with the United States that would permit the presence of U.S. immigration agents at Mexican airports to streamline the entry of U.S.-bound travelers once they arrive in that country. 39% say they either somewhat disagree, 15%, or strongly disagree, 24%, with such an accord. The highest percentage of those who would accept US immigration agents is in the center of the country, with 59% either strongly or somewhat in favor. That may be because an overwhelming percentage of all international air traffic — excluding tourists flying directly to some beach resorts — passes through the center.

From a broader perspective, rather than just security issues, there is a trend among Mexicans toward more favorable views of the United States. They are more willing now than they were in 2004 to make decisions jointly with the United States to face common problems, even if this may at times mean having to implement policies that weren’t Mexico’s first choice. 42% of Mexicans agree with making joint decisions with the United States, up sharply from 30% in 2004. Those opposed fell from 54% to 31% now (Table 6.12).

As stated above, Mexicans identify security, drug-trafficking, and immigration among their primary foreign-policy concerns. In 2006, their responses to questions on what Mexicans would be willing to give up achieving their objectives once again confirm those priorities. By a ratio of almost
three in four, 71%, Mexicans said they would approve of an agreement in which the United States offered greater employment and residence opportunities to Mexicans in exchange for Mexico making a commitment to reduce drug-trafficking, a topic that concerns many Mexicans because of the violence it creates within Mexico, and illegal immigration into the United States. Mexicans favor such an agreement even though any crackdown on undocumented border crossers by Mexican authorities could hamper many Mexicans’ efforts to emigrate. The lower opposition to such an agreement, from 20% of respondents in 2004 to 14% in 2006, underscores Mexicans’ favorable opinion of a tradeoff of this nature, even when there are costs.

There are limits to the kind of bargain that Mexicans are willing to strike though. A majority, 52%, say they would not support a bilateral agreement by which the United States provided resources to promote Mexico’s economic development in exchange for being allowed to invest in Mexico’s energy sector (Table 6.13) Still, that is a notable fall from 2004, when 70% disapproved. And the proportion of respondents who say they would favor such an agreement rose from 20% to 29%. So while opposition to foreign investment in the energy sector continues, it is less widespread than two years ago when considered as part of a trade-off. Oil, Mexico’s leading foreign exchange generator, continues to be a strategic resource for the country, particularly in an era of high prices.

Lastly, how should Mexico and the United States manage their common border? More than two thousand miles long, it is the world’s busiest border. With millions of legal crossings into the United States every year for tourism, business and migration, it is also the place of entry into the United States for most of the close to 500,000 Mexicans who emigrate to the U.S. Some US$350 billion in goods move across the border each year. Roughly, 400 people die each year trying to cross the border illegally and the Mexican government is under increasing pressure to address the problem. Only 3% of the respondents believe that the Mexican government should not be doing anything, although passivity has long been the traditional policy toward emigration. By contrast, 37% are in favor of strong measures, such as setting up checkpoints at high-risk locations to prevent would-be emigrants from crossing. This underscores Mexicans’ interest in finding mechanisms to control its borders and ports and reduce safety risks for Mexican nationals. 34% believe the government’s task should be only to warn border crossers of the dangers and provide them with supplies to reduce their risks, a more recent policy that has provoked outrage among anti-immigration forces in the United States. 22% would favor the Mexican government taking such drastic measures as patrolling and monitoring the entire border to ensure that only authorized crossings are used.

Mexicans’ willingness to accept border controls that would reduce risks for emigrants implies that there is a possibility for negotiation on immigration and the border with the United States. Action by the Mexican government to control border crossers to reduce the deaths on the border could help strengthen moderate voices in the United States, those who argue in support of temporary-employment programs, but also stress that Mexico must play its part by stronger policing at the border.
Methodological Note

Mexican General Public Survey

For this second survey of Mexican public opinion on foreign policy issues, CIDE and COMEXI worked with BGC-Ulises Beltran & Associates who conducted the general public survey from July 22 to 27, 2006, using the same survey method and field organization as the 2004 survey. The survey was conducted by in-person (face-to-face) interviews based on a sample of the adult Mexican population aged 18 and older. In-person interviews were necessary because of the low rate of telephone and Internet penetration in Mexico.

The general public survey consists of 1499 interviews based on a probabilistic sample design. Given the nature and objectives of the study to compare Mexicans’ opinions across regions of the country and in the same regions over time, it was necessary to oversample the populations of the states in the north that border the United States and the relatively sparsely populated regions of the southeast. The resulting sample included 600 respondents in the six states of the north, 299 respondents in the seven states of the south and southeast, and 600 respondents in the remaining nineteen states constituting the country’s center region.

The sample design was based on a list of 63,594 electoral sections defined by the Federal Electoral Institute for the 2003 Mexican federal elections. This design provides an exhaustive and exclusive division of the population under study. The selection process used was multistage sampling in which the first stage is the grouping or “conglomeration” of sections in the same state and municipality. This was done to reduce costs by reducing the geographic dispersion of the survey. The number of conglomerates per municipality increases with the population size of the electoral district. This combining of sections produced 6,080 section conglomerates. The selection of 75 conglomerates was then done through random sampling with probabilities proportional to the size of the electoral list. The second stage consisted of choosing two electoral sections inside a conglomerate, selected through random sampling with probabilities proportional to the size of the electoral section. In the next stages, blocks and then residences were selected randomly with equal probabilities. Inside the residences respondents were chosen using quotas for age and sex based on the known demographic characteristics, according to the 2000 Mexican Census. The overall response rate was 48%. The survey took approximately 25 minutes.

Because of the general public survey design, regional oversampling, and sample deviations from the distributions of age and sex, the data were weighted for the national and regional analyses based on the known demographic characteristics. There were, however, generally small differences between the weighted and unweighted results.

For the results based on the total national sample of 1,499 respondents, the sampling error for a 95% confidence interval is +/- 4%. Each regional sample has a larger sampling error. For the north it is +/- 6%, for the south/southeast it is +/- 8%, and for the rest of the country (center) it is +/- 6%. This margin of error does not include any additional error that can occur in surveys due to question wordings and other characteristics of the survey and interview process.
Translation
Martha Alicia Bravo
Intertraducciones
Alan Hynds
Intertraducciones
www.intertraducciones.com

Editing
Elisabeth Malkin

Fieldwork
Ulises Beltrán (Public Survey)
BGC Ulises Beltrán & Asociados
Jorge Buendia (Leader Survey)
ipsos-Bimsa

Graphic Design
Fernando Shimizu
El Ojo de Cain, Boutique Creativa
www.elojodecain.com

Printing
Gráfica Creatividad y Diseño
www.grafcrea.com.mx