

Bilateral Relations Between Mexico and the US May Not Improve, Despite Biden's Promises

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Mexico's relationship with the US opens a new stage with the beginning of the Joe Biden government. According to the Democrat's plans, the focus of the binational dialogue will be directed to strategic and humanitarian issues, such as migration, combating drug trafficking, international trade, and investment commitments. Mexicans are very hopeful that several improvements can be achieved, especially in terms of migration, but certainly many challenges still need to be overcome.

In fact, of all Biden's promises, the one that most arouses interest and good expectations among Mexicans is the plan to naturalize around 11 million currently irregular and undocumented immigrants, of which more than half are of Mexican origin, completing the migratory reform project. President Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador said, when commenting on Biden's inauguration ceremony, that he expects the new president to fulfill his promise to consolidate a migratory reform.

What Mexicans fear is that Biden will act like former Democrat President Barack Obama, who has promised to reform immigration policy but has never did so. Biden, as vice president, worked on drafting the proposed migration reform, but Democrats failed to get the minimum number of votes needed due to frontal opposition by Republicans – whose more protectionist and nationalist view of the migration issue became official during the Trump era.

Now, despite Biden's promise, there is no guarantee that Democrats will not face the same challenges, especially considering the current American scenario, which is much more polarized and violent than in Obama's days. If Biden makes any decision that directly confronts Republican interests, the response may be severe not only within Congress or institutional sphere, but also among the people with Trump supporters, who form a mass of activists with broad mobilizing power. This, of course, worries the Mexican government, which fears that Biden will withdraw from his promises to avoid suffering reprisals.

Last week, Biden and Obrador talked by telephone to discuss plans, strategies, and joint partnerships for the years to come. Among the issues, in addition to a migratory reform, both presidents addressed topics such as international cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, economic revitalization plans, among others. Subsequently, during a speech,

Obrador said that during the conversation Biden promised to offer aid valued at 4 billion dollars for the three nations that make up the so-called North Central American Triangle, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, as part of an economic support plan. The American interest is strategic, because, helping to reduce poverty, the migratory flows tend to be more balanced, and it helps to establish a softer migration policy. However, the very fact that Obrador publicly revealed the content of the conversation, before Biden did so, shows that the Mexican government handles American promises with warning – by making the pledge public, Obrador allows three countries that are meant to receive the aid to require it even before Biden notifies them of this.

This scenario of collective distrust is further aggravated by another factor: the American policy to combat drug trafficking. Recently, cooperation between Americans and Mexicans in combating drug trafficking has been profoundly affected by the arrest of General Salvador Cienfuegos. The general, a former Mexican national defense secretary, was arrested in October last year on charges of having links to drug trafficking cartels, which the Mexican government vehemently denied.

At the time, Obrador not only defended Cienfuegos, but also accused the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of having produced false evidence against the general. The Mexican accusation is not by chance: Cienfuegos was investigated in a completely confidential manner, without any information being provided to the Mexican government. His arrest surprised Mexican civil society, as he is a well-known and beloved public figure in his country. The American action completely violated the bilateral security cooperation agreements between the US and Mexico, but more than that, it hurt the national pride of the Mexican people, which deeply irritated Obrador and his team. Subsequently, both governments consented to repatriate Cienfuegos so that he could be investigated in his country, provided he was exonerated from all his positions. But the case continues to profoundly influence the direction of bilateral relations, as the Mexican government expects a more diplomatic attitude from the Democrats, such as the end of investigations, but at no time did Biden promise to do so.

The Cienfuegos case goes far beyond the mere figure of the General, as long as the investigations are not closed, it will mean that Washington will maintain a position of unilateral conduct of policies to combat drug trafficking, conducting investigations and intelligence operations against Mexican people without the consent of the Mexican government, which will certainly negatively influence relations. In fact, for Mexicans, it is not enough to prevent the construction of the wall at the border, it is necessary to create a scenario of mutual respect, recognition of sovereignty and bilateral cooperation. Obrador has taken more and more emphatic positions in favor of Mexican sovereignty and respect not only for his country, but also for the neighbors of Central America.

In fact, the domestic crisis scenario in the United States is profound and does not allow Washington to choose to continue to conduct relations between these countries unilaterally – Mexico will increasingly seek to impose its interests, regardless of the effects of this on migration policy.

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