

## **The United States and Mexico: Prospects for Convergence on Critical Issues during the Obama Administration**

Brandon Valeriano

### *A Moment of Opportunity*

Since the 9/11 attacks, the foreign policy focus of the United States has been directed away from regional concerns towards problems outside the Western Hemisphere. Latin America has been virtually ignored by recent presidential administrations, and the problem is becoming chronic. While Columbia gets some attention, relations with our neighbor and number two trading partner to the south wither. What of U.S. – Mexican relations? What hope is there for progress on critical issues of concern, and what can be achieved by President Obama?

This article, based on recent research by Valeriano and Powers (2010) on American and Mexican public perceptions, explains why now is the time to deal with the significant and pressing problems that occupy U.S. foreign relations with Mexico. Because public views in both countries are converging in the realms of terrorism, drug trafficking, and immigration, the moment is ripe to deal with these issues. The shift towards democracy, openness, and public consultation on pressing issues within Mexico suggests a moment of opportunity for the Obama administration to engage it. Since this convergence may only be temporary, failure to engage Mexico immediately will prevent the resolution of these pressing issues while engendering anger and continued frustration because the United States continues to ignore the maintenance of an important international relationship. This article concludes by suggesting some of the policy options open to the Obama administration.

### *The State of Public Perceptions*

Despite disagreements over a few major issues like NAFTA and Iraq that have soured bilateral relations, there is significant agreement between the publics of Mexico and the United States over several other important areas. Public views in both countries converge around the issues of immigration, terrorism, and drug trafficking. In fact the public and elites in Mexico are more concerned with terrorism and drug trafficking than are the public and elites in the United States. People in both the United States and Mexico are optimistic that the issues of immigration, terrorism, and drug trafficking can be solved if proper

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attention is focused on solutions and international coordination. Recognizing the linkages among these issues and mobilizing this mutual support will be critical to resolving these outstanding foreign policy problems.

Perhaps the most important issue is terrorism. Obviously, for the United States terrorism has been a critical problem since 9/11. The major focus of U.S. foreign policy has been to tackle this problem in the Middle East, yet it should equally look in its own backyard for solutions to security problems. If the United States is going to achieve domestic security, it must first achieve secure borders. Achieving secure borders does not mean simply building walls to keep out Hispanic immigrants. It means strengthening screening processes at both borders, fixing port security, and remaining vigilant to the threat that comes through air traffic. While no terrorists have yet crossed through the southern border, it is still critical to ensure security at all points of entry.

The Mexican and American publics hold similar and stable views regarding terrorism. Both groups view terrorism as a critical threat at levels of 70 to 80 percent. The high level of concern among the Mexican public might be surprising, but one must consider they are neighbors to the biggest terrorist target in the world and have experienced their own incidents of domestic terrorism. Since both publics view the issue as critical, it seems prudent that both states work together towards intelligence sharing and stable borders.

This takes us to our next issue: immigration. U.S. perceptions focus on immigration as a critical internal problem, but it is also a major concern for Mexico. A slight majority of Mexicans believe that the problem of immigration into the United States is a predicament that the Mexican state must deal with, not the United States. Mexicans only account for approximately 30 percent of incoming immigrants; a substantial number of those who come through the U.S. southern border crossed through Mexico from other nations. Consequently, Mexico has many of the same immigration problems as the United States.

Instead of playing the blame game, public convergence on this issue indicates the two countries should work together to ameliorate this mutually pressing concern.

The final issue on which both Americans and Mexicans agree is that drug trafficking, which is related to immigration by the mutual practice of border smuggling, is a major problem for their respective countries. As much as 89 percent of the Mexican public views drug trafficking as a critical threat, while 63 percent of the American public views the issue as an ‘important’ threat. The ills associated with the practice are just as evident in Mexico as in the United States, since Mexico is a major point of transit for illegal drug smuggling operations. Negative societal effects include rising violence, corruption, and criminality.

#### *Future Paths and Recommendations*

There is an unprecedented opportunity for the reconsideration of strategy in bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico. Change in both countries allows for the pursuit of new avenues of cooperation. The shift in foreign policy goals by Obama is evidenced by increasing consultation, engagement of international institutions, and international negotiation. The reinvigorated desire by the Felipe Calderon administration to solve pressing domestic issues such as drug trafficking and corruption also creates the opportunity for change in bilateral relations. Yet, it seems that pathways to progress are being ignored in favor of focusing on other foreign policy problems. Is there willingness on the American side to engage and deal with pressing mutual concerns? Our neighbor to the south is a critical ally in the ‘war’ on drugs, immigration, and terrorism, yet little has been done to press the advantage of public support revealed by recent opinion polls.

The time is ripe for action. Improvement in bilateral relations is not a hope but a critical need in line with both states’ national interests. The issues of terrorism, immigration, and drug trafficking remain critical problems on both sides of the border. A large proportion of Mexicans are even willing to give the United States some role in border security in exchange for protection against outside threats.

What specific options can be pursued? Probably the most pressing and effective option would be to establish a coordinated regional regime to stop or limit drug trafficking in North America. While the United States has extended much effort to tackle the problem in Columbia and other states such as Panama, it has done little to deal with the issue in Mexico. The United States cannot even seem to coordinate policy with Canada and Mexico on legal drugs, let alone illegal ones. The time has come to seek to deal effectively with the problem on both sides of the border, and a regional security regime would be an effective measure to deal with coordination and consultation dilemmas.

In combination with a regional regime to tackle the issue of drugs trafficking, the United States, along with Mexico, should seek to deal more effectively with port, air, and land border security. The focus should not be on economic migrants, who do not pose a security threat, but on criminal enterprises that seek to infiltrate various holes in the border. The main threat that comes from the south is organized terrorist and drug collectives, not families seeking economic opportunity. Drugs or terrorists are not going to walk across the border; they are going to come through organized transportation networks.

A final suggestion is to increase the number of legal immigrants allowed into the United States from all southern countries, to expedite the process of acceptance, and to decrease costs for these migrants. Eliminating the legal immigration backlog will remove much of the burden migration places on Mexican society. Allowing more Mexicans and other Latin Americans into the United States through legal means would decrease the profitability of illegal underground operations by removing the need for their existence. Increasing the flow of migrants through legal methods will mean fewer people will be stuck in limbo in Mexico and push them to remain in their home countries during the application process. Increasing the number of legal immigrants will also allow for these new actors to participate legally in American society and decrease the perception that they are criminals.

A majority of the Mexican public has a positive view of the United States. The same cannot be said of the American public's and elite's view of Mexico. Pundits rant night after night on TV of the ills funneled into the United States from Mexico. The reality is that the problems are the responsibility of both sides and can only be solved through mutual cooperation and burden sharing. The politics of blame are stifling the course of bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico. If the convergence of views on important policy issues is to be taken advantage of, we must take action now.

*Reference*

Valeriano, Brandon and Matthew Powers. Forthcoming 2010. "United States and Mexico: Convergence of Public Policy Views in the Post 9/11 World." *Policy Studies Journal*.