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Cuban Relations With Mexico

by LADB Staff

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After nearly a decade of deterioration, Cuban-Mexican relations have shown marked improvement following the January resignation of Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Jorge Castaneda. Contributing to the warming trend was the failure of the US to respond to Castaneda's efforts to get a migratory accord, US pressure on President Vicente Fox to support the Iraq war, and concerns that Mexican investors could lose position in the Cuban economy.

The decline in bilateral relations dates to the early 1990s when Mexican technocrats fashioned new relations with the US grounded in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Tensions with Cuba reached the crisis level as Castaneda sided openly with US policy.

Castaneda seemed to declare diplomatic war on Cuba in April 2002 by ordering Mexico's UN ambassador to vote for a resolution in the UN Commission on Human Rights "inviting" Cuba to make progress in its human rights behavior (see NotiCen, 2002-05-02). In apparent retaliation for the vote, President Fidel Castro released the transcript of a telephone conversation in which Fox asked Castro to absent himself from a meeting in Monterrey, Mexico, in March 2002, so President George W. Bush would not have to be in the same room with him. In September, Castaneda recalled Ambassador Ricardo Pascoe from Havana for failing to adhere fully to orders from Mexico City. Castaneda also lodged criminal charges against him that later proved to be specious (see NotiCen, 2002-09- 26).

Led by the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), opposition parties in the Mexican Congress demanded Castaneda's head, accusing him of reversing Mexico's longstanding policy of nonintervention and resistance to sanctions against the Castro regime. Documents expose reality of Mexico's Cuba policy. Despite widespread denunciations that Castaneda had betrayed Mexico's tradition of strong relations with Cuba, there is evidence that Mexico's Cuba policy was a sham. Fox and Castaneda, it appears, were not entirely out of line with a secret history of Mexican collusion with the US that stretched back to the 1960s.

According to declassified White House and State Department documents made public by the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, a succession of Mexican presidents worked with the US government to secretly undermine the Castro regime. Kate Doyle, Mexico project director at the Archive said that, in effect, Mexico agreed to help the US but needed to keep up its image at home of having a revolutionary orientation sympathetic to Cuba. The documents, compiled by the Archive in a briefing book entitled *Double Dealing, Mexico's Foreign Policy Toward Cuba*, were the subject of articles in the Mexican weekly *Proceso*, which collaborated with the Archive on the project.

A 1964 White House tape records Secretary of State Dean Rusk advising President Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969) that foreign ministers from Brazil and other Latin American countries had agreed on "the practical desirability of having one Latin American embassy...[in Cuba] if possible....I would

emphasize to...[President-elect Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (1964- 1970)] the importance of his taking all the steps necessary not to permit the Cubans to use Mexico as a channel for money or agents or for travel of students to Cuba for training and things of that sort." Johnson responded, "All right, that's good." The documents show that Johnson then forged an understanding with Diaz Ordaz by which Mexico held outwardly to its nonintervention policy while, in reality, Mexican diplomats in Cuba provided intelligence information to the US.

A 1967 memorandum describes how an officer in the US Embassy in Mexico City debriefed Mexican Ambassador in Havana Fernando Pamanes Escobedo on economic conditions in Cuba, Cuban-Soviet relations, and Cuban military matters including troop deployment. New foreign policy team reverses course Castaneda resigned in January citing as the reason his failure to get the migratory accord he wanted from the US. He made no mention of the firestorm of domestic controversy his confrontations with Cuba had caused.

Accepting the resignation, Fox praised Castaneda for making Mexico "a presence" in the world, but events were showing that the resignation underscored the pitfalls Fox encountered in his efforts to project Mexico as an influential voice in world affairs. The Fox administration announced that Economy Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez would take over the foreign relations post and career diplomat Roberta Lajous would replace Pascoe in Havana. With Bush showing no interest and Castaneda gone, the migratory accord the centerpiece of Fox's diplomatic program- -collapsed. Derbez said the US and Mexico would not be ready to sign such an agreement for years. "My vision is in 25 or 30 years," he said. Almost overnight, the Castaneda policy seemed to have been erased as if it had been no more than a typographical error.

The Dallas Morning News quoted an unnamed Cuban official as saying, "This was mostly a problem caused by Castaneda. Fox gave him too much authority, and that is why we ended up in a fight." Lajous quickly acknowledged that Mexico's relations with Cuba were "carefully watched by the United States," while she and Fox issued protestations that Mexico's solid relations with Cuba would be unaffected by the recent misunderstandings. Derbez promised, however, to carry on with Fox's larger policy of making Mexico a player in global affairs "a leader in the new international architecture," he said.

In a letter to the Mexican Senate, Lajous promised to improve political and economic relations with Cuba, and referred to the Castaneda episode as "a series of unfortunate incidents." Lajous' appointment coincided with the Fifth Interparliamentary Meeting in Havana between delegations from the Mexican Congress and the Cuban National Assembly of People's Power. The generally amicable discussions among the lawmakers suggested that Castaneda's anti-Castro views did not penetrate very deeply in either government. Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban National Assembly, told the gathering that Cuban-Mexican ties had not been harmed. And Sen. Cecilia Romero of Fox's Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) took the occasion to condemn the US embargo against Cuba.

The Mexico City daily Novedades reported that Alarcon asked Mexican delegates not to go along with the US policy. PAN Senator Javier Corral answered that his party had never cooperated with the US, emphatically rejecting any such suggestion. "Are we puppets of the gringos?" he asked.

The delegates debated the issue of human rights in Cuba, which Castaneda had made a target in his diplomatic offensive. The consensus among the Mexicans was that Mexico had its own human rights problems. Corral acknowledged that the Fox administration was not a model of democracy and defense of human rights.

Both parliaments, said Corral, should recognize that they had to develop better means to deal with human rights and should not get trapped in the US position, which had "poisoned" bilateral relations. Business takes precedence over politics. In her letter to the Mexican Senate, Lajous described her task as more than cleaning up after Castaneda. She reminded the senators that there were pressing economic matters awaiting decisions by officials of both countries. After Castro's humiliation in Monterrey, Cuba had retaliated by nullifying a bilateral agreement to restructure Cuba's US\$380 million debt with Mexico.

Furthermore, bilateral trade had dropped by 30% in 2002, and there were agreements on energy, fishing, and telecommunications that needed attention. Lajous also referred to investment. There are some 400 Mexican investments contracts with the Cuban government, but improving Mexico's position in the Cuban economy could be difficult because of the inhibiting effect of the 1996 Helms-Burton law. Though sixth among nations investing in Cuba, Mexican investors are worried that without better relations with the island, they will lose out to US investors once the embargo is lifted.

"We want to be well positioned before that moment," said Yeidckol Polevnsky, president of the Mexican Camara Nacional de la Industria de Transformacion (CANICINTRA). As the diplomatic crisis began to recede, the Cuban and Mexican trade chambers signed an agreement to strengthen trade relations through workshops and other means of exchanging information and improving economic ties.

Iraq issue widens Mexico-US gulf

Critics at home charged that Fox and Castaneda had married themselves to US policy on Cuba to smooth the way for the migratory accord. In a September meeting with members of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), Castaneda had said Mexico would vote with the US in the Security Council on the Iraq war because "we can't vote against the United States if we want to reach a migratory accord." With the accord now dead, Fox found himself with nothing to show for his efforts. Worse, he was now under heavy US pressure to support the war against Iraq. If Fox thought Mexico's elevation to the Security Council made it a player in global politics, critics in the Mexican press and Congress said he would now have to cast risky UN votes that could enrage the US government.

US Ambassador in Mexico City

Tony Garza a Texas supporter of Bush made a thinly disguised threat that if Mexico did not follow the US line in the Security Council, the US Congress might take some retaliatory legislative action. In references to the Mexican and Chilean votes, Bush used the word "discipline" while answering reporters' questions about whether the US would retaliate against wayward allies (see SourceMex, 2003-04-02). Fox repeatedly said he opposed the Iraq war but never promised a "no" vote. He was

saved from making the decision when the US withdrew its resolution in March and went to war without a UN mandate.

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