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Fox Feuds with Argentine, Venezuelan Leaders After Americas Summit

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President Vicente Fox has become entangled in what could be his administration's worst diplomatic crisis following a series of public spats with Presidents Nestor Kirchner of Argentina and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. The tensions between the Mexican president and his Argentine and Venezuelan counterparts followed Fox's staunch defense of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) at the IV Summit of the Americas gathering of regional leaders at Mar del Plata, Argentina, Nov. 4-5.

Fox, along with US President George W. Bush, has been one the staunchest supporters of the regional-integration plan first proposed by former US President Bill Clinton in 1994 (see NotiSur, 1994-03-05 and 1994-12-16). The FTAA has encountered many stumbling blocks (see NotiSur, 2001-04-07, 2003-12-05).

The members of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), including economic giants Argentina and Brazil, have proposed an alternate vision for regional integration (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24). The MERCOSUR countries, along with Venezuela, were especially vocal in opposing the FTAA at the 2005 summit, undermining efforts by the US, Mexico, Canada, and other countries to resume discussions on the plan at Mar del Plata.

Fox criticizes counterparts for opposing trade plan
In an interview with Mexican media, Fox criticized the leaders who strongly opposed the FTAA effort, singling out Kirchner and Chavez. He told reporters that Kirchner, as summit host, had the responsibility to seek a consensus among attending nations to back the FTAA. "Instead, the impression that several of us got there was that [Kirchner's] thinking was directed more at satisfying public opinion in Argentina and involved more with Argentines' image of the president than in achieving a successful summit, with American integration," Fox said.

Kirchner wasted no time in responding to Fox's criticism, saying the Mexican president had no right making any comments about Argentina's domestic policies. "President Fox should concern himself with Mexico, and I will worry about meeting the needs of the Argentine people," said Kirchner. Some observers said Fox's disagreements with Kirchner were not limited to public criticisms but were also evident in his actions at Mar del Plata. "There was a certain pettiness to some of Fox's actions," said Kelly Arthur Garrett, a columnist for the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald. "According to newspaper reports, he didn't clap after Kirchner's public address. He even refused to attend the gala supper."

Mexico mends fences with Argentina, but not Venezuela
The exchange of harsh words created concerns that diplomatic relations between the two countries would be endangered. This led to an emergency meeting between Mexican Foreign Relations
Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez and Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa to try to reduce tensions. After a series of meetings, Derbez and Bielsa concurred that a break in relations was not in the interest of either country.

At a press conference following a meeting in Buenos Aires, the two officials said they were confident that bilateral relations remained "excellent" and would continue to "strengthen at all levels." The situation was much different with the Mexico-Venezuela relations, where a downgrade of diplomatic ties occurred.

At the summit, Fox condemned Chavez's motives for opposing the FTAA, suggesting that the Venezuelan leader was merely trying to divert attention from some controversies at home. "There we have some presidents, fortunately a minority, who blame other countries for all their problems," Fox said in reference to Chavez. Fox's comments angered Chavez, who issued strongly worded statements about the Mexican president, whom he called the "lapdog of imperialism," in reference to his close relations with the US government. "We are saddened that such a historic country as Mexico has a president who kowtows to imperialism and then turns and criticizes those of us who are defending the dignity of our peoples," said Chavez.

Fox immediately called for an apology, but Chavez did not back down. The Venezuelan president even borrowed words from a folk song from Venezuela's cattle country about thorn bushes to issue a warning to Fox. "Don't mess with me, sir, because you'll come out pricked." The Mexican government then threatened to withdraw its ambassador from Caracas, but Venezuela beat Mexico to the punch by immediately recalling its ambassador from Mexico City. Mexico then followed with the withdrawal of its ambassador.

In the midst of the conflict, Derbez attempted to negotiate a truce with his Venezuelan counterpart, Ali Rodriguez, but the two officials were unable to come to any agreement to reduce the tensions. Some observers suggested that Fox's strong defense of the FTAA might have been as much a function of his own convictions as pressure from the US. "The assumption that the president was serving only as Bush's lapdog also seems a little too facile," said Garrett. "Fox is a free-market absolutist who sees free trade as the solution to the hemisphere's problems."

The break in relations with Venezuela may be one of the most serious diplomatic crises for the Fox administration, equaling or surpassing a row with Cuba in 2004, when the two countries withdrew their respective ambassadors in a disagreement regarding perceived Cuban interference in Mexico's domestic affairs (see SourceMex, 2004-05-12 and 2004-07-21).

**Congress criticizes Fox, chides Hugo Chavez's harsh tone**

Fox's performance at the Mar del Plata meetings and the subsequent disagreements with Kirchner and Chavez raised strong concerns at home, although some Mexican politicians and commentators also criticized what they viewed as an overly harsh tone in Chavez's comments. "Chavez showed a complete lack of courtesy...but getting into a shouting match with him is not a good idea," said analyst Gabriel Guerra Castellanos of Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales. "The danger here is that our relationship with the rest of Latin America continues to weaken and that Mexico loses its position as a regional leader."
Others agreed that Fox would have been better off keeping his comments to himself. "It's a big gaffe," said Rafael Fernandez de Castro, a Mexican expert in international relations at the Washington-based Brookings Institution. "Chavez is capitalizing on all the anti-Bush feelings in Latin America. There's no way to win something like this; you don't pick a fight with a professional fighter."

Some members of the Mexican Congress criticized Fox for "exposing Mexico to ridicule" by adopting such a confrontational attitude toward other leaders. The Congress, which under law must approve all the president's foreign trips, threatened to deny Fox permission to travel to South Korea for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum on Nov. 16-19. Legislators from Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) criticized the threat to deny Fox travel rights as an attempt by Congress to micromanage the decisions of the executive branch, which could violate the Constitution. "The position of the legislators from the PRD and PRI is absurd," said PAN Deputy Juan Molinar Horcasitas.

In the end, the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) in the lower house decided to grant the president permission to travel to South Korea, but also demanded that he not issue any pronouncements or declarations that would embarrass Mexico. A factor that may have led the Congress to approve Fox's visit was the ambivalence toward Chavez's statements.

Many legislators of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) who had initially leaned toward denying Fox permission to travel changed their stance as soon as Chavez made the scathing remarks against Fox. "In my opinion, the comments from President Chavez are profoundly disrespectful," said PRI Deputy Heliodoro Diaz Escarraga, who also serves as the speaker of the lower house.

Other major PRI figures, including legislative leader Emilio Chuayffet Chemor and presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo Pintado, said Chavez's comments, while directed at Fox, were also a slight against the institution of the Mexican presidency. "In this dispute we stand with the president," Madrazo said in his first meeting with the foreign media since winning the PRI nomination in early November.

**Center-left PRD faults Fox**

The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) was less critical of Chavez, with some legislators blaming Fox for the tensions with Venezuela. "You have to remember that the one who started this whole incident was President Fox and not President Hugo Chavez," said PRD spokesperson Gerardo Fernandez Norona. "The recall of our ambassador from Venezuela has pushed us further away from Latin America and makes us more dependent on the United States now," PRD Sen. Raymundo Cardenas told reporters.

PRD presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took a more cautious approach, criticizing the tone of Chavez's comments while rebuking Fox. "I will defend President Fox against the attack of any foreign government," Lopez Obrador told reporters during a campaign stop. Still, he urged Fox to act more responsibly and to moderate his rhetoric when dealing with other countries.
PRD president Leonel Cota Montano also blamed both leaders for the escalation in tensions. "We are not supporting the comments of President Vicente Fox nor those of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez," said Cota.

The Mexican Congress and Venezuelan National Assembly both issued statements urging their leaders to re-establish diplomatic relations as soon as possible. "It would be a shame that a personal disagreement would cause us to break relations with a country as dear to us as Venezuela," said PAN Sen. Cesar Jauregui Robles. Other senators agreed. "It's disappointing that a relationship of cooperation and friendship between governments will be hurt by a verbal exchange in which two presidents have insulted each other," said PRI Sen. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho.

Venezuela rift concerns business community
The deterioration in relations with Venezuela has caused some concerns among the Mexican business community. "What is going to happen to Mexican companies like CEMEX, Maseca, and PEMEX, which have investments in the hundreds of millions of dollars in Venezuela?" wrote the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Economista.

The escalation of tensions could also affect Venezuelan companies, which have invested about US $40 million in Mexico. Trade relations could also have repercussions from the diplomatic break. Venezuela is a partner with Mexico and Colombia in the Group of Three (G-3) trade agreement, completed in 1994 (see SourceMex, 2004-05-18). Even with the agreement, Venezuela has not been a lucrative destination for Mexican exports.

The Mexico City daily newspaper El Financiero said Mexican exports to Venezuela totaled US$575 million in January-August of this year. Imports from Venezuela during the same period amounted to US$494 million. Mexico's trade surplus with Venezuela so far this year contrasts a trade deficit in 2004, when Mexican exports to the South American country totaled US$610 million, compared with US$909 million in Venezuelan imports.

Mexico's principal exports to Venezuela include plastics, medications, automobiles, shampoo, and computers. Still, the Consejo Empresarial Mexicano de Comercio Exterior, Inversion y Tecnologia (COMCE) said total trade levels between the two countries have been on the upswing. "We are hoping that this agreement will continue to operate without any major problem," said Fernando Ruiz, COMCE's technical director for international trade. (Sources: Reforma, 11/08/05, 11/12/05, 11/14/05; Associated Press, 11/08/05, 11/11/05, 11/14/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 11/09/05, 11/10/05, 11/14/05; Reuters, 11/14/05; Los Angeles Times, 11/06/05, 11/15/05; El Financiero, 11/08-11/05, 11/15/05; La Crisis, La Cronica de Hoy, 11/08-11/05, 11/14/05, 11/15/05; El Economista, The Herald-Mexico City, 11/09-11/05, 11/14/05, 11/15/05; The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, 11/15/05; El Universal, La Jornada, 11/09-11/05, 11/14-16/05)

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