European Union Designates Mexico as Strategic Partner

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The European Union (EU) has extended the status of "strategic partner" to Mexico, allowing the 27-member bloc to expand relations with the Latin American country in such areas as security, trade, the environment, and human rights. The designation, which all 27 members ratified at a session in Luxembourg in mid-October, gives Mexico the same status as countries like Brazil, the US, Russia, Japan, and China. Mexico is also among six emerging nations that have been invited to participate at the next summit of the Group of Eight (G-8) nations in 2009. The invitation could be a prelude to an eventual expansion of the G-8.

New agreement allows two sides to build on 2000 trade pact

The new strategic partnership with Mexico allows the European bloc to build on the EU-Mexico agreement, which went into effect in 2000 (see SourceMex, 2001-03-28). "The new EU-Mexico cooperation agreement proposes to bring bilateral relationships to a new level," said the Spanish news service EFE. EU officials told EFE the new relationship would include a provision facilitating scheduling EU-Mexico summits every two years.

The EU's executive body, the European Commission, and Mexican officials agreed to enter the new relationship at the EU-Americas summit in Lima, Peru, in May of this year. In October, the executives of the 27 member nations, which comprise the EU Council, voted unanimously to approve the proposal.

"The EU Council has determined that the time has come to enter into a new phase," members said at their Luxembourg meeting. "We want to deepen our special relationships with a country that shares our values and principles and exerts a growing influence at the international scene." The European Parliament must still ratify the decision, which is considered a formality.

The new association lacks the enforcement mechanisms of a formal trade agreement, but the EU-Mexico trade agreement already contains more specific provisions regarding tariff enforcement, protection of intellectual property, and other related matters. Because of the largely symbolic nature of the association, the EU and Mexico have only discussed in general terms the areas in which they would like to deepen their cooperation.

At the meeting in Lima in May, Calderon expressed interest in working more closely with the EU on issues related to the environment, and specifically global climate change. The EU has said it would like to address issues related to democracy, human rights, and regional integration. The EU views Mexico and Brazil as stepping stones to expanding its relationship with all of Latin America. "We want to develop a consensus at the regional level," said the EU's Council on General Affairs and External Relations.
More significantly, the association gives the EU a forum to press for improvement of human rights in Mexico. This issue has come up before in relationships between the European bloc and Mexico. During negotiations on the EU-Mexico trade agreement, members of the bloc were very outspoken about reports that the Mexican government was cracking down on supporters of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas (see SourceMex, 1998-01-18 and 2000-07-19).

The EU also sees Mexico as a strategic ally in the fight against terrorism and organized crime. "Brussels also views this as an opportunity to promote socioeconomic policies to combat poverty, strengthen financial stability, and reinforce trade with Mexico," said the Spanish news service EFE. "The EU has become Mexico's second-largest trade partner," Daniel Parfait, France's ambassador to Mexico City, told reporters. The ambassador said that Mexico's exports to the EU have increased by more than 200% since the EU-Mexico trade accord went into effect. Similarly, imports of products from the EU have risen by more than 150%.

Other observers also touted the importance of the expanded relationship with the EU. "Mexico has become a primary trade partner with the EU," columnist Guadalupe Loaeza wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. Loaeza said the new relationship also points to Mexico's key role in global economic affairs. "Let us not forget that our country is the only one in Latin America that is a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)," she said.

Mexico among six nations invited to G-8 summit in 2009

Mexico could also play an important role in another multilateral organization, the G-8. In late October, Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi announced that the bloc of eight industrialized nations has decided to invite six developing countries to join as full participants at the next G-8 summit in 2009. In addition to Mexico, those countries are India, China, Brazil, South Africa, and Egypt. The G-8 comprises the US, Canada, Japan, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Russia.

The decision to invite the six countries follows recent comments from World Bank president Robert Zoellick criticizing the industrialized nations for failing to react promptly and comprehensively to global economic crises. Zoellick spoke of the group of industrialized nations as the G-7, even though Russia formally joined the organization in 1997. "The G-7 is not working. We need a better group for a different time," Zoellick said as part of his proposal for a "new multilateralism," which includes doubling the size of the organization to include key developing nations such as Mexico and Brazil.

In 2006, Mexico was one of five countries proposed for membership in the G-8, but the global economic bloc decided to pass on the plan (see SourceMex, 2006-08-02). Rather than turning the organization into simply a G-14, Zoellick proposed that it become a new more flexible steering group that would coordinate more closely with public and private institutions. "The IMF, backed by the steering group, can offer more options, including pegs linked to currency baskets or commodities," said Zoellick.

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