5-8-2013

Presidents Barack Obama, Enrique Peña Nieto Hold Uneventful Meeting in Mexico City

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Presidents Barack Obama, Enrique Peña Nieto Hold Uneventful Meeting in Mexico City

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2013-05-08

Before US President Barack Obama stepped on Mexican soil, he pledged that the agenda for his meeting with Mexican counterpart Enrique Peña Nieto would extend beyond discussions of security and immigration, which have been the topics most addressed during bilateral meetings in recent years (SourceMex, May 26, 2010).

Obama landed in Mexico City on the afternoon of May 2, held a series of meetings with Peña Nieto, and the two leaders then held a joint press conference at the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City. The next morning, Obama delivered a speech at the Museo de Antropología e Historia before Air Force One took off for San José, Costa Rica, and a series of meetings with President Laura Chinchilla.

The whirlwind visit of a day or so to Mexico will most likely fade from memory, since no significant agreements came out of the meetings, at least none shared with the public. Very few people remember the outcome of Obama’s previous trip to Mexico in 2009, when he met with then President Felipe Calderón to discuss drug-related violence, a common strategy on climate change, and trade disputes.

In comments before the summit, both Obama and Peña Nieto said they wanted the meetings to focus on economic issues rather than security. "All indications are that Enrique Peña and Barack Obama—both experts in managing the media and public opinion—appear to be directing their comments to their respective constituencies," said columnist Ricardo Alemán. "In other words, they adopted an agenda that was different from the one that has traditionally been at the center of negotiations by their predecessors."

But Alemán also noted that "immigration and security remain the overarching themes [of this bilateral relationship]."

Presidents vague about security issue

And some nongovernmental organizations were well-aware that the two issues would be discussed in one form or another. Human rights advocates in the US appealed to Obama to take the opportunity to change the direction of US foreign policy. In a letter to the US president ahead of his visit, the Washington-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) urged Obama to abandon the US’s "uncritical support" for Mexico’s drug-interdiction policies, begun during the Calderón administration, which resulted in a "dramatic increase" in human rights abuses.

Peña Nieto came to office with a promise to change the government’s anti-crime strategy by removing the armed forces from drug-interdiction efforts and replacing them with a national police force and more coordination among local, state, and federal law-enforcement agencies (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012).

In Peña Nieto’s nearly half year in office, there appears to be little discernible change in the levels of drug-related violence, although there has not been much progress in implementing structural
change. This is partly because some structural changes are still pending, including creating a national police force to replace the armed forces in anti-drug operations.

Unofficial estimates from state prosecutor’s offices and several federal agencies show more than 4,100 violent deaths between Dec. 1, 2012, and March 31, 2013, which is on par with the numbers recorded when Calderón was in office, the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Economista said on May 5. Another 1,100 similar murders were recorded during April, the newspaper calculated.

And Gustavo Madero, the president of Calderón’s Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), suggested that Peña Nieto’s strategy differs little from his predecessor. "It is very clear that the current government is continuing the strategy for combating drug trafficking and insecurity that was in place during the administration of President Calderón," said the PAN president.

But Peña Nieto’s approach shows some subtle changes that have created concerns among US officials. "In speeches, and in some of its actions, there has been a reticence on the part of the current administration to continue allowing the US to stay so closely involved in the prosecution of drug cartels," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "In addition, the northern neighbor does not like that any cooperation has to go through the Secretaría de Gobernación."

Zuckermann said the problem is that each of the two countries has a different self-interest, and Peña Nieto is simply trying to give priority to Mexico’s viewpoint. "The war against drugs is theirs and not ours," noted the Excélsior columnist. "The solution to consumption and drug addiction is more related to education and public-health policies than to security."

"For Mexico, as Peña Nieto has said, the priority is stopping the internal violence more than fighting the drug cartels," noted Zuckermann.

But in comments after his meeting with Peña Nieto, Obama noted that US cooperation with Mexico on security matters would continue to be strong, despite new policies by the Mexican government that make it harder for US law-enforcement agencies to get sensitive intelligence info from their Mexican counterparts. The US president told reporters that it is "up to the Mexican people to determine their security structures."

Peña Nieto echoed those comments. "We are not discarding cooperation or any intelligence assistance that the US government is giving us," the Mexican president said in an interview with US-based television journalist María Elena Salinas from the Univisión network. "On the contrary, we are taking this support and using it for our own intelligence scheme."

Some observers saw Obama’s willingness to show flexibility regarding the security relationship between the two countries as a good sign. "Without doubt, the mere presence of the US president in our country to redraw the configuration for our bilateral relationship, in which our interests have been subordinated to those of the US, is positive," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in an editorial.

"In particular, it is necessary to revisit the Mérida Initiative," La Jornada said of the plan implemented during the administration of former US President George W. Bush to provide assistance to Mexico in anti-drug efforts (SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2007, Nov. 28, 2007, and May 21, 2008). "Based on results thus far, the scheme has not reduced the activities of criminal organizations that
operate in Mexico. Rather, it has contributed to the deterioration of public safety and the violation of the rule of law."

There were other grumblings in Mexico that the relationship with the US neighbor remains unequal and that the US is not doing its part to reduce demand for drugs among its citizens and has failed to make any significant inroads in the flow of high-caliber weapons into Mexico. ([SourceMex], Jan. 16, 2013).

"Does President Obama come here to commit himself to such debates, vital to destroying the root of drug trafficking, or is he here only to tell us that our role in the relationship is to subordinate ourselves to them?" the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal asked in an editorial.

**Immigration discussions also general**

The two leaders also broached the issue of immigration during their meeting, but comments were very general during their joint press conference and Obama’s speech the next day. "The long-term solution to the challenge of illegal immigration is a growing and prosperous Mexico that creates more jobs and opportunities for young people here," Obama said at the Museo de Antropología e Historia.

The US president made a brief mention of the effort in the US Congress to overhaul the US immigration system ([SourceMex], Feb. 13, 2013), saying that he was optimistic that the US was going to finally approve comprehensive reforms. While he noted that he is optimistic about the legislation in its current form, he cautioned that the bill is likely to be amended before it is passed.

And Peña Nieto’s reply to Obama appeared to be an attempt to show that, if Mexico does not want the US to interfere in its domestic affairs, then his government will do the same when it comes to sensitive matters north of the border. "Mexico understands this is a domestic affair for the United States," said the Mexican president.

This prompted criticisms of both leaders. "Obama could not come here to brag about the immigration reform that he is promoting because it has not yet passed," columnist Katia D'Artigues wrote in El Universal.

D’Artigues also noted that Obama came to Mexico without having taken any new steps to stem the flow of high-caliber weapons across the border. "He also could not brag about a new arms-control law in the US," said D'Artigues. "Even though he supports the measure, it did not pass [in the US Senate]."

But D’Artigues was blunter in her criticism of Peña Nieto’s comments that immigration is an internal affair of the US. "What I could not understand is Peña Nieto’s decision to distance himself from immigration reform, which is so important to Mexico," said the columnist. "This so-called internal matter affects 20 million of our fellow Mexicans, some of whom voted for him because they are still citizens of our country."

While the two leaders made only passing comments on the controversial issues, they made sure to highlight areas of agreement, such as bilateral business initiatives. They announced that the top economic policy advisors from the two countries would meet in the fall to talk about greater
cooperation, and they also said that the US and Mexico would create a bi-national group to provide support to companies that want to do business in both nations.

**Economic issues, cooperation take center stage**

Obama and Peña Nieto also announced plans to create a "bilateral forum on higher education, innovation, and research." The panel would be made up of education officials from the two countries, who would find research projects on which the US and Mexico could collaborate.

And without providing much detail, Obama said that the US and Mexico should develop "clean-energy partnerships." But the effort to cooperate on environmental projects with the Peña Nieto administration is an effort that the US initiated with the Calderón administration. "Let's keep investing in green buildings and smart grid technologies so we're making our planet cleaner and safer for future generations," Obama said.

There were criticisms about the content of Obama's speech at the Museo de Antropología e Historia. John Ackermann, a political analyst at the Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas (IIJ) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), said in a message on Twitter that the US president's speech was a "welcome change of form," because he directed his comments to civil society. But the columnist also noted that the speech was "very disappointing in content and proposals."

The Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro) questioned the overly optimistic tone of the president, which appeared to be targeted at the youth gathered at the museum. "Indeed, I see a Mexico that has lifted millions from poverty. Because of the sacrifices of generations, a majority of Mexicans now call themselves middle class, with a quality of life that your parents and grandparents could only dream of. This includes new opportunities for women, who are proving that—when given the chance—you can shape the destiny of your country, too."

"The US president, without presenting any proof, said that millions of Mexicans are coming out of poverty," apro noted.

Peña Nieto—who recovered the Mexican presidency for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) during the July 1, 2012, elections after two successive PAN administrations—hosted Obama at a time when the Mexican president is enjoying a high level of popularity overseas. The most notable recognition came from Time magazine, which designated Peña Nieto as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

There have been plenty of other accolades showered on the Mexican president recently, primarily in the US. For example, a recent editorial in The Washington Post lauded Peña Nieto's "gridlock busting" ability as an example for the US. Additionally, Peña Nieto's ability to work with the Mexican Congress to push through some reforms prompted columnist Thomas Friedman of The New York Times to call Mexico the ‘Comeback Kid’ and led commentator Shannon O'Neil to declare in Foreign Affairs magazine that Mexico has now "made it."

But Ackermann points out the stark contrast between the accolades in the US and Peña Nieto's approval rating at home. "Such exaggerations have no basis in reality. Even after months of an expensive, high-profile media blitz, Peña Nieto has begun his administration with the lowest public approval rating of any Mexican president over the last two decades," the political analyst wrote in an opinion piece in Foreign Policy magazine on May 1, a few days before the brief Peña Nieto-
Obama summit. "Only 50% of Mexicans approve of his presidency today, much less than the 70% who supported the first non-PRI president, Vicente Fox, at the beginning of his term, according to Reforma newspaper. Peña Nieto's approval rating is even lower than that for presidents Ernesto Zedillo and Felipe Calderón at the disastrous crisis-ridden beginnings of their terms, according to the same source."

-- End --