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Trump Government Moves to Stabilize Relations with Mexico by Retaining Ambassador

by Carlos Navarro

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President Donald Trump's hard-line stance on immigration, including a proposal to extend a barrier across the US southern border, and his administration's protectionist policies have contributed to very uneasy relations with Mexico. The Trump administration, however, recently took a step toward stabilizing relations by deciding to keep Roberta Jacobson as US ambassador to Mexico. Jacobson, who was appointed to the position by former US President Barack Obama, is a veteran Latin American expert who has spent more than 30 years in the State Department under two Democratic and four Republican administrations. "In that time, she's won the respect of Mexico's leaders and become a trusted interlocutor with Washington," said Bloomberg news service.

The decision to retain Jacobson comes at a crucial time. Mexico, the US, and Canada are preparing to begin talks on reforming the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Aug. 16. Jacobson has staunchly defended the agreement, pointing out that NAFTA has brought "benefits to all three nations."

The Trump government is expected to put forth proposals that would change the formula for local content as one of the steps to protect jobs in the US. Jacobson sees an opportunity to enhance the agreement to benefit all three countries, including the inclusion of energy in a renegotiated treaty. "North America has what it takes to become a global energy power, with the capacity to bring energy to other regions," she said

A voice of reason

Additionally, Jacobson has said that NAFTA should be modernized to include electronic commerce and to strengthen protection of intellectual property. "It's not just a matter of more integration, but of building a more intelligent integration," she said at a forum in May. "We have not taken care of people who have lost their jobs or who are at risk of losing them."

Trump's decision to retain Jacobson came with little fanfare, and there was no official reaction from Mexico. However, Jacobson is extremely well liked in Mexico, as evidenced by the statements from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) when the US Senate finally confirmed Jacobson a year after Obama nominated her. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Florida) had held up the nomination because of Jacobson's role in easing US policies toward Cuba.

"The government of Mexico is pleased with the confirmation of Roberta Jacobson as US ambassador to Mexico," the SRE said in a statement on April 28, 2016. "Her ratification demonstrates the importance of our bilateral relationship."

The SRE announcement went on to tout Jacobson's strong experience as a diplomat, including her work on Latin American affairs. "Ambassador Jacobson will give a new boost to our bilateral connections and also contribute to [strengthening] the institutional framework, which will give us a certain and solid foundation."

While Jacobson has not said anything directly to contradict Trump's hard-line immigration stance, she has often served as a conciliatory figure. "I have said it before and I will say it again: The United States could not be more fortunate to have Mexico as a neighbor," Jacobson noted in a speech at a US Independence Day celebration at her residence in July.

Still, Jacobson is aware of the tensions between the two countries. Earlier, she acknowledged that the US-Mexico relationship had "gone through a difficult period over the past several months."

Controversial exchanges

Jacobson's statements are a stark contrast to Trump's comments during the electoral campaign and during his six months as president. In his short time in office, Trump appears to have gone out of his way to alienate Mexico, and especially President Enrique Peña Nieto.

A minor controversy arose in late July, when Trump erroneously stated that Peña Nieto had called him to compliment him on US immigration policies.

"As you know, the border was a tremendous problem and they're close to 80% stoppage," Trump said on July 31. "Even the president of Mexico called me—they said their southern border, very few people are coming because they know they're not going to get through our border, which is the ultimate compliment."

The SRE immediately issued a statement denying that the Mexican president had made any such statement. "President Enrique Peña Nieto has not had any recent telephone communications with President Donald Trump," it said.

White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders conceded that Trump's statement was misleading, but said that the issue had come up in a conversation between the US and Mexican presidents at the Group of 20 (G20) summit of world leaders in Germany ([SourceMex, July 12, 2017](#)). According to a source who requested anonymity, Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Videgaray acknowledged that the US and Mexican delegations had spoken about migration at the G20 meeting, and that at the time, Peña Nieto had cited statistics showing a significant decline in migration from Central America to Mexico.

A Mexican government spokesperson said the two presidents had not discussed the border wall during their recent meeting. "That subject was not part of the conversation," said presidential press liaison Eduardo Sánchez. During the presidential campaign, Trump insisted repeatedly that Mexico would shoulder the costs of the wall's construction ([SourceMex, Jan. 18, 2017](#)).

Even though the topic was not addressed in the encounter, Trump hinted at the G20 meeting that he has not moved from his position. In response to a shouted question from a reporter about whether he still wanted Mexico to pay for the border wall, Trump said, "Absolutely."

Trump's lack of respect for Peña Nieto was evident in a leaked transcript of a telephone conversation between the two leaders a week after the US presidential inauguration. In the transcript of the Jan. 27 call, which was published by The Washington Post in early August, Trump repeatedly asked Peña Nieto to stop publicly refusing to pay for the border wall.

Trump acknowledged that the source of funding for the wall was "the least important thing we are talking about," but added that "politically [it] might be the most important." Trump told Peña Nieto

that his refusal to pay for the wall had left the White House boxed in politically and suggested that they both deflect reporters' questions on the issue.

"So, what I would like to recommend is—if we are going to have continued dialogue—we will work out the wall," Trump said. "They are going to say, 'Who is going to pay for the wall, Mr. President?' to both of us, and we should both say, 'We will work it out.' It will work out in the formula somehow. As opposed to you saying, 'We will not pay,' and me saying, 'We will not pay.'"

Peña Nieto agreed that talking about the wall was unproductive. "This is what I suggest, Mr. President," Peña Nieto said. "Let us stop talking about the wall. I have recognized the right of any government to protect its borders as it deems necessary and convenient. But my position has been and will continue to be very firm saying that Mexico cannot pay for that wall."

Trump shot back, "But you cannot say that to the press. The press is going to go with that, and I cannot live with that. You cannot say that to the press, because I cannot negotiate under those circumstances."

The leak of the transcript elicited strong reaction from opposition leaders in the Mexican Congress. Sen. Dolores Padierna of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) raised concerns about the "position of weakness" from which Peña Nieto is conducting foreign policy with the US. "The scolding that Trump gave to Peña Nieto was not only an embarrassment to him but to our whole country," she said, adding that the Mexican president had not changed his submissive position in relation to Trump.

"He continues to avoid and elude the abusive [US counterpart] instead of putting a halt to the insults," Padierna said.

Similar comments came from Sen. Miguel Barbosa of the Partido del Trabajo (PT). "The president has to respond to this impertinent individual, even if he is the president of the United States," he said.

Legislators from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had a different take on Peña Nieto's responses to Trump.

"Peña Nieto has been truthful and straightforward in his relationship with Trump, who appears to twist the truth about the facts or to make misleading interpretations," said Deputy César Camacho, the PRI's floor leader in the lower house.

US House budget contains funds for border wall

Despite his continuing insistence that the US would force Mexico to shoulder the costs of expanding the barrier, the Trump government is moving forward with the project using US funds. The president's initial budget proposal for 2017-2018 contained US\$2.6 billion in funding for planning, design, and initial construction of the wall ([SourceMex, March 22, 2017](#)).

Trump has found support for his proposal in the US House of Representatives, which in July approved a US\$788 billion spending measure that includes US\$1.6 billion for the border wall. The measure, H.R. 3219, is just the first step in the budget allocation process. The initiative is sure to find resistance in the US Senate where, according to observers, Democrats intend to block the measure in the hope of striking a deal later this year that would boost domestic spending.

Time for bipartisan budget talks has not been scheduled, and it is unclear whether Congress can avoid a government shutdown when the fiscal year begins Oct. 1. By including funding for the wall, which alienates Democrats, Republicans have increased the risk that Congress will be unable to complete the spending bills on time.

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