

FOREWORD

“Distant friends?” To what extent will a closer friendship make the difference in Mexico-U.S. relations at the expense of a serious and respectful partnership? It is commonplace to expect and desire that the bilateral relationship grow on the core foundation of wholehearted friendship, even complicity. This approach to foreign policy and handling proximity leads to a series of confusions and misinterpretations of what Mexico’s national stance should be and the room for maneuver a country has internationally in accordance with its interests and needs.

If anything is to be salvaged from the Bush administration, it is the lesson of what went wrong back then and what could work better in the future. A bilateral relationship based on the personal identification of the first executives certainly did not work for repositioning Mexico—in a very particular moment of transition to democracy—as the regional leader and bridge between the two Americas that it can potentially become. On the other hand, keeping all our eggs in the immigration basket tied Mexico’s hands and prevented us from advancing the rest of our interests of a bilateral and urgent nature, especially in a context of crisis and shared economic and security risks.

Parallel to the aforementioned lessons, Mexico has to deal with a personality problem. Historically, two attitudes have polluted the formulation and execution of its foreign policy. On the one hand, Mexico has struggled to create a relatively clear distance from Washington in the eyes of the world. On the other hand, Tlatelolco has worked persistently to guarantee the U.S. a convenient, peaceful, close relationship, to the point that our northern partner has taken for granted the support and the “alliance.” And Mexico on its own has underestimated both the need to improve the quality of the agenda and to ensure the real character of the relationship that it wants to establish with the U.S. Even though NAFTA, the SPP, and the Merida Initiative are built on the understanding that there is a partnership with shared responsibilities and duties, the three actors involved have remained far behind in the construction of a solid, respectable partnership in all fields of the integration process.

No recipes for asymmetrical partnerships can be produced, and no model can be replicated for a context such as that of the North American region. The widespread Mexican expectation is to have a partnership (especially with the U.S.) that could lead to understanding and dealing with the natural obstacles that come with proximity, embracing the opportunities to bridge the distance and take advantage of the natural, institutional paths of communication that have emerged in the regional

arena. Nevertheless, paths need to be blazoned that will become the channels of communication and exchange that both sides of the road deserve and require. For such a purpose, a prior understanding and internalization of the region as the starting point for the U.S.-Mexico bilateral discussion is critical, however overlooked. Canada may not have the most active frontier with the U.S., or be only peripheral for the Mexican trade balance. Notwithstanding the lack of connectedness with its Canadian fellows, Mexico needs to acknowledge —despite Canada's relative reluctance to accept it— the importance of strengthening the areas of opportunity it shares with the more distant of its northern partners, in order to succeed regionally and hemispherically.

The coming Obama administration poses interesting challenges for the bilateral relationship since Mexico is not one of the top priorities on the president-elect's foreign policy agenda. Nevertheless, George W. Bush's departure unfolds the red carpet to welcome a different attitude among the regional actors. Even though the economic crisis, domestically and internationally, the Middle East chaos, and the repositioning of the U.S. as the global leader top the forty-fourth president's agenda, Obama came to international politics with such a conciliatory, multilateral-led, and open perspective on international relations that almost every country —and particularly Mexico— can be aware of an American turn in its foreign endeavors. This shift represents the strongest foundation for a renewed bilateral relationship that can be boosted by Mexico and proposed on a less asymmetrical scheme for a partnership of the dimension and importance of NAFTA. There is no guarantee of resonance —let alone success. Nonetheless, the reconstruction and reinforcement of the bridges between the U.S. and Mexico, sustained by a deep and comprehensive understanding of each other, are the strongest step toward reducing the cultural and sensibility gap.

The stumbling blocks and constructive paths of U.S.-Mexico relations are not exclusive to the intricate phenomenon of migration, and the present book highlights the diversity of issues that bring both countries together in an apparently conflictive relationship that is more cooperative than it seems. Migration is not the only clue to solving the North American puzzle; it may be the most evident materialization of undeniable integration, but it is certainly not the only field. The economy and security are drawing attention away from immigration to other issues that have remained silent or worse, underestimated. The need to disassociate foreign policy from the victimized perspective recurrent in the Mexican government's immigration discourse may settle the path toward fully embracing the standing that the country has in the region, as a partner, as an influence, and a middle power but from the very different and perhaps unusual edges of the bilateral relation.

The contributions in this book share that holistic and multidimensional perspective of U.S.-Mexico linkages, in the sense that it embodies a unique composition of dimensions ranging from the latent, never-ending discussion of migration, trade integration, and the security alliance to the emerging topics focusing on the regulation of scientific developments, bilateral diplomacy, and the dynamics of rising transnational elites.

Compartmentalization of the U.S.-Mexico conundrum may be adequate for profound learning and study of the multiple areas of unstoppable integration; however,

in the long run, there is a need not only to build connections among the states but also among the issues in order to actually reduce the distance, uncertainty, and, most importantly, the reluctance to rapprochement with our neighbors. The pieces in this publication are a pristine example of that commitment.

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde, PhD.
Director of the CISAN