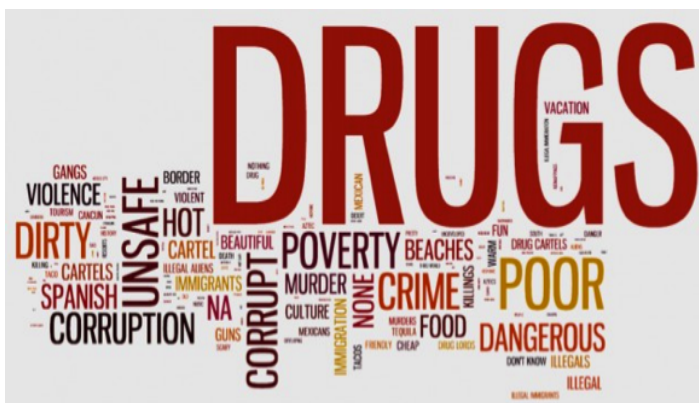


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## Mexico Wants to go Beyond the Drug War <sup>[1]</sup>

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In November 2006, President George W. Bush received Mexican president-elect Felipe Calderon in the Oval Office as part of a traditional protocol meeting that brings together the Mexican president elect and the United States president. At the time, immigration was the hot topic for discussion. Days before their meeting, President Bush passed a bill that authorized the construction of a border wall. President Calderon’s response was to compare it to the Berlin Wall. Nonetheless, the incoming Mexican president wanted the United States to see a different side of Mexico. Immigration, [Calderon said](#), “is not the only issue in our bilateral relationship”, and, “we want to foster our trade relationship, our economic relationship even more.” However, the atrocious images from drug cartel violence captivated the U.S. and the world’s attention and were more attractive to the news media than any other Mexican narrative. Today, in a similar fashion as 2006, Mexico’s recently elected government wants to emphasize the country’s vigorous trade and economic relations with the U.S. In the traditional protocol meeting, which occurred in November 2012, President Peña Nieto met with Mr. Obama and made almost the same point as Mr. Nieto’s predecessor, except that this time, immigration was replaced by drugs and security. In spite of the change in political power, it is clear that Mexico wants to be regarded as a trustful and respected partner instead of a source of problems for U.S. national security. However, Mexico’s drug-damaged image needs to be addressed and a new narrative crafted if it wants to gain trust and respect from its neighbor. In this sense, Mexico makes an interesting case for public diplomacy.



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**What are the messages the new administration is sending to transform a relationship which is seemingly dominated immigration and security?**

First, it appears that the new administration will seek to highlight Mexico’s well-evaluated

economic performance. Months before the new administration came to power on December 1st, 2012, *The Economist* issued a special report on Mexico that asks the U.S. to look at Mexico differently. In fact, many U.S. media outlets have published stories with a similar approach, featuring articles about Mexico's growing middle class, its high number of graduate engineers and its vigorous trade and economic interdependence with the U.S., et al. Indeed, Andrew Selee, Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute, told CNN that "for the first time in more than a decade, economic issues are likely to dominate the agenda shared by Mexico and the United States". Although good economic development impacts a country's reputation positively, it does not necessarily provoke a change in people's perception. Commonly observed in polls, unfavorable images of Mexico still tend to surpass positive ones. It is seen as a place related to drugs and violence. It has been argued that the root of Mexico's image problem in the U.S is the negative news coverage. Nonetheless, such stories arguably had a powerful impact on Americans because of their gruesomeness, but also because Mexico's violence concerned them somehow either as tourists, investors, consumers, or by the fact of sharing a border with a neighbor who is allegedly becoming a "failed state". To successfully transmit its positive economic stories, Mexico must directly address the concerns of the American public.

Second, Mexico's good economic forecast will be broadcast by the means of targeted economic diplomacy. In a very surprising move, the current administration named the past administration's Minister of Finance, Jose Antonio Meade, as the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mexico's participation in international economic fora and trade agreements might be the basis to boost the country's reputation. In his remarks at his investiture, Mr. Meade stressed that job creation and the formulation of strategies for economic development will be areas in which Mexico will need to put most of its efforts in order to transcend the security agenda with the U.S. However, the new administration's decision to assign security expert and former Secretary of Public Security and Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora as the new ambassador to the U.S. raised questions about how much the security agenda will remain in the press spotlight. If Mexico wants to keep the drug war out of the media spotlight, it can no longer expect to make kingpin detentions and other drug war victories a source of international recognition.

In addition, the rhetoric of the new administration seems to engage the United States through common goals, including, shared responsibility for regional security; and common prosperity through increased economic integration. In his op-ed published in the *Washington Post*, President Peña Nieto positioned NAFTA as "the solid foundation to integrate both countries' economies", claiming that the most important issue was bolstering the economic and trade relationship for common prosperity. Similarly, President Peña Nieto talked about "guaranteeing North America energy independence" when referring to his plan to open Mexico's energy sector to foreign private investment, a topic expected to become emotional in Mexico given the traditional resistance by nationalists to expand foreign investment in PEMEX, the state run oil company. Given that "North American prosperity" seems to be relying on greater investments in finance, infrastructure, manufacturing and energy, it was important for Peña Nieto to stress the "pragmatism" with which his new administration will lead the economic integration, as opposed to the nationalist, patriotic rhetoric traditionally observed in his party.

Last but not least, even though the economic agenda and the narratives that will emerge from it play a big role in the bilateral agenda, it seems that the new administration is considering strengthening cultural diplomacy. Mr. Rafael Tovar y de Teresa, the new head of Mexico's Ministry of Culture, CONACULTA, is a well recognized face within the cultural *milieu* who has

already pointed out the need of his Ministry to work closer with Mexican diplomatic representations in order to improve Mexico's image abroad. He is an experienced figure who was involved in what might be one of Mexico's most recognized public diplomacy strategies: the engagement with the U.S. and the signing of NAFTA in 1994. At that time, a well-supported cultural diplomacy strategy complemented Mexico's public diplomacy efforts to convince the U.S. Such an experience is significant because the new administration might be expecting to outline similar strategies given the emphasis on economic diplomacy.

Mexico's focus on its economic relations with the United States might be beneficial for bringing new narratives to a security-saturated public sphere. Focusing on trade relations and regional economic integration when Mexico's economic development is being praised by analysts has the potential to make the U.S. see Mexico as a rising middle power, while at the same time it strengthens its cultural diplomacy in a way that complements the economic diplomacy. Conversely, the security cooperation framework between the two countries creates narratives in which Mexico is more likely to be seen as a country that needs to be fixed at almost every level. As Mexico seeks to influence Americans' perception by transmitting its economic successes, it is arguably better to frame the message as one of shared prosperity and opportunity rather than by the merely touting how well Mexico is doing.

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