

# Re-Building a Complex Partnership:

The Outlook for U.S.-Mexico  
Relations under the Biden  
Administration



**By Arturo Sarukhan**

## A Reset in U.S.-Mexico Relations Also Requires Re-Engagement on Global and Regional Issues



**For the past two-and-a-half decades, every new governmental term in either nation provides an opportunity to explore how both nations can deepen their coordination on a range of global and regional issues.**

### Key Policy Recommendations

- Address the root causes of displacement, migration, and insecurity in the Central American Northern Triangle countries.
- Reengage multilaterally in advancing the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees.
- Hold regular, twice-a-year bilateral policy consultations between the countries' respective UN Permanent Missions and the State Department and Foreign Ministry's policy planning teams.
- Rethink strategic relationships and economic competitiveness vis-à-vis China.
- Reengage, along with Canada, in strengthening North American cooperation and synergies.
- Resuscitate the annual North American Leaders' Summit.
- Leverage participation in fora like the G20 to accelerate economic recovery and roll out vaccination programs that ensure equitable immunization.

The entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil profoundly changed the economic, security, and diplomatic reality between the United States and Mexico. Since then, for the past two-and-a-half decades, every new governmental term in either nation<sup>1</sup> provides an opportunity to explore how both nations can deepen their coordination on a range of global and regional issues. It is only natural that two neighbors and partners with an almost 2-thousand-mile contiguous land border and that are so strategically salient to each other's security and wellbeing should always be on the lookout for ways to engage and cooperate in the international arena, when and where—given the significant and relevant power asymmetry between both countries—our national interests coincide.

This is even more relevant given that our bilateral relationship (as I started describing and underscoring throughout my tenure as Ambassador in Washington) has become over the decades truly “intermestic”<sup>2</sup>: that is, all foreign policy issues in our agenda are domestic policy issues, and moving our diplomatic agenda forward, whether bilaterally, regionally, and even globally, requires that we address the domestic policy triggers, constraints, and Gordian knots on either side

of the border. Moreover, all the issues of the U.S.-Mexico bilateral agenda are globally relevant. Whether it is because of one of the most important trade blocs in the world and the future of competitiveness with China; the security, and increasingly the cybersecurity, of the North American region; energy efficiency, security, and independence; climate change and environmental degradation; biodiversity and shared transborder water resources; the challenges and opportunities that migration and refugee flows pose for open, plural, and tolerant societies; economic and societal dynamics and interdependence of transborder metroplexes; or transnational drugs and arms trafficking—all these core issues of our day-to-day two-way agenda entail profound and widespread implications and policymaking lessons for other regions, nations, and multilateral organizations.

Towards the end of 2017, former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Earl Anthony Wayne and I penned a piece for the Mexico Institute where we discussed the opportunities for greater synergies between the foreign policies of the three North American partners.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to forge a common foreign policy footprint, the list of potential areas we identified at the time for greater or new collaboration beyond the bilateral agenda included, among other issues, energy security, climate change and the environment, national security and common domain awareness (including external terrorist threats, illicit flows, bad actors, and cybersecurity) in North America, collaboration with the three Northern Triangle nations in Central America, and collaboration and synergies at the UN, the OAS, G20, OECD, APEC, and other relevant multilateral fora.

And this was not Panglossian wishful thinking. There has already been a track record of successful foreign policy ad hoc partnership and synergy between both countries in the recent past, particularly during the Obama and Calderón administrations. Whether it has been intelligence-sharing and collaboration regarding potential transnational terrorist threats to our North American region, leading on the critically important issues of climate change, the green economy, and an environmental sustainability agenda via the UN's COP mechanisms, peacekeeping engagement, Hemispheric issues such as disaster relief and emergency response in the Caribbean and Central America, the erosion of democracy, or refugee flows and regional and extra-hemispheric transmigration patterns in the Americas, many of our bilateral

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mechanisms and protocols became the springboard for a widening and deepening of our foreign policy coordination and agency globally.

The current context, with the transition to a new administration in the United States, is pregnant with opportunities and ripe for collaboration. The Biden Administration will quickly seek to revert the pernicious effects and the vacuum of Donald Trump's diplomatic vandalism these past four years and will also likely attempt to reset key bilateral relations with allies and partners

damaged and undermined in the process. Mexico's two-year stint as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council would also, in normal circumstances, offer myriad opportunities to build density for U.S.-Mexico regional and global collaboration and synergies to advance a 21st Century rules-based international system. And with Brazil largely having decided to paint itself into a corner, both in terms of its foreign policy ambitions and President Bolsonaro's policies and support for Trump, this could open a window of opportunity for Mexico to position itself as the key strategic partner and go-to nation for the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, and we should not hold our collective breath until this opportunity is seized. A forward leaning, and deeper and wider U.S.-Mexico regional (with the potential exception of Central America) and global dialogue will be unlikely in the coming months and years. For starters, a Biden-López Obrador reboot will not be easy, notwithstanding the best intentions in Washington and the deliberate efforts of some actors in the Mexican government. As in most things in life, you need two to tango, or in the case of our two nations, salsa.

On the one hand, López Obrador seems intent on erecting roadblocks -even undermining- a reset in relations with the United States. And what at the outset of his relationship with Trump could have been justified by some as pragmatism, in the end looks like something much worse. Just look at the cumulative effect of López Obrador's long list of unfriendly and short-sighted actions over the past year: his ill-advised determination to travel to Washington to meet with Trump, whatever the cost, on the eve of the U.S. general election; his decision to not meet with Democratic congressional leadership and his baffling remarks in the Rose Garden; his obstinacy in not congratulating (along with Putin and Bolsonaro) President-elect Biden until December 14; his sparing letter of congratulation to Biden, immediately drawing lines in the sand over non-intervention and national sovereignty; his offer of asylum to Julian Assange; his resounding silence over the seditious events in Washington on January 6; and his defense of Donald Trump after being banned from social media platforms.

On the other hand, for a nation that has typically punched below its weight in the international arena, with López Obrador—the most uninterested and uncurious president in Mexico's recent history when it comes to the world and foreign affairs—the danger is that the country might decide in many instances to not even step into the ring, as was evidenced during the dismal failure by most Latin American nations to coalesce around a common candidate to lead the Inter-American Development Bank, even despite U.S. prodding and suggestions to the López Obrador government to present a Mexican candidate. Add to the mix a Mexican leader obsessed with a diplomatic past and a bygone international system of Westphalian paradigms of national sovereignty and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other nations—and their intermittent, on and off (depending on his own particular take of what constitutes non-intervention) usage—and the end result is very little appetite or bandwidth to engage the United States in mostly anything beyond the bilateral agenda itself.

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What's more, the Biden administration is going to have much bigger problems with Mexico than potentially holding grudges or bemoaning the lack of engagement from Mexico on global and regional issues of interest to Washington. The next four years could morph into a series of roiling tensions and challenges south of the border—regarding human rights and the rule of law, criminality and law-enforcement, the erosion of checks and balances and autonomous institutions, a lack of a level playing field for U.S. businesses and potential violations to the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), energy policies and paradigms based on the past and on fossil fuels—that in the end could generate whiplash and make Mexico even more prickly and chauvinistic in a relationship with a U.S. Administration that López Obrador sees, and will likely engage, with suspicion.<sup>4</sup> With democracy being challenged and checks and balances being eroded today in Mexico, and without the fear—but also empathy—that Donald Trump inspired in López Obrador, resetting the relationship and seeking an early harvest of success stories and cooperation with Mexico might not be as easy as some assume on either side of the border.

And as if this were not enough, the architecture and the institutionalization of the bilateral relationship—the web of mechanisms and institutions that have been built over the past two decades or so—and that ensure that one of the most complex, fluid and dynamic bilateral relationships in the world maintains traction, muscle tone and problem-solving capabilities, has been fraying over the past five or six years. It certainly started with the Peña Nieto government, but it has deepened with the López Obrador government. Mexico—and the way the Mexican government diplomatically engages with its partner north of the border—is not the Mexico that then-Vice President Biden engaged with during the Obama Administration.

Still, despite this complex landscape, limited regional—and to a lesser extent, global—cooperation is possible and feasible. There is a shortlist of agenda items where this could happen relatively quickly and painlessly. For starters, President Joe Biden and his administration are the best allies López Obrador could have in seriously

addressing the root causes of displacement, migration, and insecurity in the Central American Northern Triangle countries. With President Biden wanting to spend USD\$1 billion a year to improve conditions in Central America, President López Obrador's idea of "Marshall Plan"-like engagement and investment there could gain the traction it never got with Trump. Helping these countries is a natural area for closer pragmatic, on-the-ground, and holistic cooperation, particularly as both nations seek to prevent mass transmigration from the region, through Mexico and towards the border in the coming weeks and months, from politically blowing-up on their respective domestic fronts and contaminating the bilateral agenda.

Secondly, with a United States recommitted to enlightened refugee and asylum policy, both countries could reengage multilaterally in advancing the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees, agreed to in Marrakesh at the end of 2018. And to ensure smoother sailing in what could potentially be a rocky two years with Mexico on the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member (particularly given President López Obrador's take on international relations and his obsession with non-intervention), holding regular, twice-a-year bilateral policy consultations between the countries' respective UN Permanent Missions and the State Department and Foreign Ministry's policy planning teams to talk about the UNSC agenda and global issues—as was done in the early 2000's and then again in 2006-2012—would be crucial.

Thirdly, potential U.S. re-engagement with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the renegotiated USMCA framework for North American trade (with healthy bipartisan support both in the U.S. House and Senate), could provide the template for a much

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more realistic discussion of how Mexico, with the United States and Canada, needs to think of strategic relationships and economic competitiveness vis-à-vis China. This process could start with resuscitating the annual North American Leaders' Summit. The three partners and neighbors now have the opportunity to reengage in strengthening North American cooperation and synergies. On everything from trade and essential supply chains to a green economy, infrastructure, and security, the three nations can and need to build back better together. And finally, with the economic dislocation effects of the pandemic and the strains on the politics and social contracts of nations around the globe, Mexico and the United States should leverage their participation—along with Canada's—in fora like the G20 to accelerate economic recovery and roll out vaccination programs that ensure equitable immunization as a key priority in 2021.

U.S.-Mexico relations are likely to be severely tested in 2021 by ongoing challenges across multiple fronts and recent and growing tension in security cooperation, as well as by serious economic and health challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. And for a Mexican president who has stuck to his default mantra that “the best foreign policy is domestic policy,” it is certainly paradoxical that the country's domestic vulnerabilities constitute patent pressure points in the relationship with the United States and condition the road ahead, both in terms of the bilateral agenda and for the ability and desire to engage beyond the meat-and-potato issues of Mexico-U.S. ties and engage globally and regionally. Nonetheless, it would behoove President López Obrador to understand that in the 21st Century, the United States and Mexico can contribute together in strengthening a rules-based international system and in jointly working on behalf of the global commons. With the opportunity of an incoming—and enlightened—U.S. administration, the two governments should indeed cooperate globally—and regionally—to solve locally and bilaterally.

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## About the Author

**Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan** is a Global Fellow and an Advisory Board Member with the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute. Ambassador Sarukhan is an international strategic consultant, and the former Mexican Ambassador to the U.S. (2007-13). A Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Public Diplomacy School and Adjunct Professor at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, he is a digital diplomacy pioneer. He writes for Mexico's *El Universal*, as well as Op.-Ed pieces in U.S. media. He received the rank of Career Ambassador in 2006. He served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, Chief of Policy Planning and Consul-General to New York, among other positions. He was Foreign Policy Advisor and International Spokesperson for Felipe Calderón's 2006 campaign, and led the foreign policy transition team. Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan earned a B.A. in International Relations from El Colegio de México; M.A. in U.S. Foreign Policy from SAIS-Johns Hopkins, where he was a Fulbright Scholar and Ford Foundation Fellow. He has received numerous decorations, awards, and honorary degrees in recognition of his diplomatic achievements. He sits on several boards.

## Endnotes

[1] These cycles and their respective electoral processes coincide every twelve years; the next one will occur in 2024.

[2] This is a term I piggybacked on back in 2007 and borrowed from Bayless Manning's seminal 1977 Foreign Affairs piece in the aftermath of Vietnam War and Watergate in which he sought to explain that U.S. international and domestic (ergo the term intermestic that he coined in the piece) policies had become fully intertwined.

[3] Wayne, E. A., & Sarukhan A. (2017). Toward a North American Foreign Policy Footprint. *The Wilson Quarterly*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/after-the-storm-in-u-s-mexico-relations/toward-a-north-american-foreign-policy-footprint/>

[4] López Obrador likely has a chip on his shoulder. He believes Democrats should have supported him and his claims of electoral fraud in 2012 and particularly in 2006, and continues to hold a grudge over what he sees as a party that “abandoned” him during his twelve years trek in the political wilderness.



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