

# Introduction

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## Re-Building a Complex Partnership:

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



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It is widely agreed, and commonly stated, that Mexico and the United States share a common destiny. The progressive integration of their economies and societies, especially since the 1990s, has been matched by efforts to develop shared responsibility in anti-narcotics and organized crime policy, as well as a common approach to migration in recent years. Regular meetings on a bilateral and trilateral basis (with Canada) until 2016 saw the construction of a common agenda on both regional and global basis. Essentially friendly relations established a paradigm of friends, partners, and allies across the Rio Grande/Bravo.

This steady progress came to an end in 2017 as the Trump administration “broke the mold” of North American relations with attacks on the legitimacy of NAFTA, and a more aggressive approach to bilateral relations, threatening Mexico with tariffs and border closures if Mexico failed to meet expectations on controlling migration. At the same time, protectionist tariffs were applied to Mexican steel exports to the United States, and President Trump pushed ahead with his efforts to extend the border wall.

Over the next four years, an uneasy détente broke out with the successful negotiation and ratification of the USMCA, the unexpected personal bonhomie

between Trump and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), and bilateral collaboration on stopping Central American migrants before they reached the U.S. southwest border. This final element was central to the evolving relationship between the two presidents and between their respective administrations. For President Trump, the relationship mattered for one main reason, namely his ability to show progress on stemming illegal migration to the United States. For AMLO, a similarly unidimensional perspective was to be found: he quickly realized that if he was able to satisfy Trump in the migration arena, Trump would pay little attention to anything else that AMLO attempted to do in terms of domestic policy. This meant that AMLO won himself a free hand to make moves against U.S. manufacturers, service providers, and U.S. energy investors (in both hydrocarbons and electricity sectors) and to weaken the regulatory framework and autonomous institutions that have been central to the development of democracy and a market economy in Mexico.

AMLO's cozying up to Trump took on an extraordinary aspect during July of 2020, when he made his first (and to date only) foreign visit to see the U.S. President at the White House. During this visit, AMLO made no effort to communicate with then presumptive Democratic Presidential candidate Joseph Biden, nor any representatives of the Democratic party. Compounding this apparent favoritism was AMLO's refusal to send a message of congratulations to President-elect Biden until the Electoral College had voted (six weeks after the election, making him one of the last world leaders to do so), and then issuance of a number of statements critical of social media platforms' condemnation and banning of Trump after the January 6 Capitol Siege. Additionally, the Mexican congress approved legislation weakening the diplomatic immunity of DEA agents operating in Mexico, hitting bilateral security relations that were already reeling from the U.S. arrest and subsequent release of ex-Defense Minister Salvador Cienfuegos.

There has rarely been a more contentious moment in bilateral relations since the nationalization of Mexican oil in 1938. Nonetheless, once Biden was sworn in as President, an amicable phone call took place between the two heads of state, and there appears to be a willingness on the part of the Biden administration to try to build a positive relationship with their Mexican counterparts.

This collection seeks to draw together the insights of a number of leading experts on the bilateral relationship to both analyze the current moment in the bilateral relationship and to identify potential paths forward in nine different areas. We are indebted to our Global Fellows and our invited authors for sharing their knowledge of and ideas for the relationship in the areas of security, the economy, migration, energy, public health, shared values, anti-corruption, North America, and foreign policy.

The outlook is by no means uncomplicated. In almost every area, there are ample reasons to be pessimistic about the potential for collaboration, with obstacles blocking the way along a number of paths. Nonetheless, the contributions here provide some well-grounded concepts for finding common ground and for seeking mutual benefit. The Mexico Institute under its new leadership remains committed to advancing the bilateral relationship and continues to believe that the health of that relationship directly impacts the well-being of hundreds of millions of Mexicans and Americans in both countries.