

Mexico's Leader Quietly Adopts A Warmer Approach to the U.S.

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Body

In a series of quiet policy changes, President Ernesto Zedillo has recently reversed some dearly held tenets of **Mexico's** historically prickly relationship with the **United States**.

For the first time, Mexico recently approved American requests for the extradition of two of its citizens to the **United States**.

Mexico also recently abandoned a long-held position rejecting international discussion of its human rights record, and in a separate move allowed Washington to begin airlifting illegal immigrants back to their hometowns deep inside Mexico.

Last week the Defense Minister approved a military agreement providing for training of Mexican soldiers at American bases and the provision of **United States** weaponry. It is the first pact on this scale since the 19th-century invasions that convinced Mexico that the **United States** was its principal enemy.

The Clinton Administration officials who have negotiated these policy changes, and who will discuss further cooperation when a senior delegation headed by Secretary of State Warren Christopher visits Mexico on Monday for annual meetings, have praised **Mexico's** more accommodating posture.

But in Mexico the changes have aroused debate over whether the country is slowly surrendering its sovereignty, continuing a trend that critics trace back to the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, and that accelerated last year when Washington and Mexico worked closely in the effort to rescue the Mexican economy.

Mr. Zedillo's Government has seemed to avoid publicity for the recent shifts. But in an interview today, a senior Government official said **Mexico's** increasingly intimate ties with the **United States** showed the tremendous respect with which both Governments viewed each other and were signs of "the intelligent management of our bilateral relationship."

On the other hand, some Mexican academics and opposition politicians portrayed the changes as a symptom of their country's financial and political vulnerability.

"These shifts carry tremendous symbolic meaning," said Lorenzo Meyer, the author of a standard history of **United States**-Mexico relations. "In the end, this chain of events means we are losing the relative independence Mexico

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achieved for 50 years. The Government is weak, and the United States, sensing a power vacuum, is injecting itself into our affairs."

At least since the 1930's, successive Mexican presidents have overseen a foreign policy characterized by polite but distant relations with Washington and routine opposition to American interests in forums like the United Nations.

"For decades Mexico sought to defend itself by saying no," said Humberto Garza Elizondo, a professor at the Colegio de Mexico, "even sometimes to United States initiatives with which the Government was not really in disagreement."

The tectonic plates of Mexican policy first shifted during the previous administration, when President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, seeking approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement, reversed decades of economic protectionism and began seeking cooperation with Washington on a broad front.

Analysts described the recent changes as mini-earthquakes, still rattling to the surface in the wake of that strategic shift.

All embody an approach to United States relations by President Zedillo that has led analysts from both countries to describe him as more pragmatic and less doctrinaire than his predecessors.

Mr. Zedillo's aides point out that he has forcefully defended Mexican interests when he has felt them to be under siege by Washington. He has encouraged Mexican consular officials in the United States, for instance, to vigorously defend the rights of migrant workers, including those without documents.

"What we have sought, and are achieving, is a new class of communication, a new form of contact with the Government of the United States," Mr. Zedillo said last week in a speech in Tijuana, in which he responded to Mexican critics who have accused him of cooperating too submissively with Washington. "We cannot confuse diplomacy with machismo."

Throughout its history Mexico has declined to extradite its citizens. But on April 17, Mexican officials delivered Francisco Gamez Garcia, who fled to his homeland after being convicted in Arizona of sexually abusing a boy in 1993, to the United States authorities in Phoenix.

The Foreign Ministry said the extradition request had been granted because Mr. Gamez could not be tried in Mexico without violating the principle of double jeopardy.

On April 25, Mexico sent another of its citizens, Aaron Morel Lebaron, to Houston, where he is charged with the murder of four people, including a child. The ministry approved that request "taking into consideration the infamous nature of the crimes," as well as the fact that the United States Government says he is an American citizen.

The extraditions followed lengthy discussions with the Clinton Administration.

American officials say they are hopeful that Mexico will now turn over top drug traffickers it succeeds in arresting to the United States, especially in cases in which the suspect faces charges in the United States but not in Mexico.

Mexico delivered the reputed trafficker Juan Garcia Abrego to the United States authorities in January, but he was not extradited. Instead, the Government declared him to be an American and expelled him as an undesirable foreigner.

The senior Government official, while acknowledging that the two extraditions were the first in Mexico's history, denied that they represented any change in policy. His comments suggested that it was not at all certain that Mexican traffickers arrested in their homeland would be extradited to the United States.

"There has been no shift in our extradition laws, and we will in the future examine each situation on a case-by-case basis," the official said.

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The recent thaw in military relations is also partly the result of United States pressure for heightened anti-drug efforts here.

Until the 1980's, Mexican military manuals portrayed the United States as the country's natural enemy.

Besides Cuba, Mexico has been the only country in the hemisphere to consistently keep the American military at arm's length, apart from the training of a trickle of officers at American military schools over the years and a purchase of American jets once in the 1980's.

But an agreement approved by Defense Minister Enrique Cervantes on April 24 in a meeting with Defense Secretary William Perry reverses course, setting up the immediate transfer of 20 UH-1H Huey helicopters to the Mexican Air Force, perhaps 50 or more additional helicopters next year and the training of Mexican soldiers in anti-narcotics tactics at Fort Bragg, N.C., as well as helicopter pilots and mechanics at other bases.

Helicopters previously provided by the United States have been transferred to the Mexican anti-drug police, not to the military.

"This is a major policy change by both Governments," said Roderic A. Camp, a Tulane University professor who studies the Mexican military.

Mexico has also markedly changed its political stand on human rights inquiries. For decades, like China, it held that international criticism of its human rights record amounted to unwarranted meddling by foreigners. But, continuing a recent trend toward more openness, Mexico announced in Washington on Monday that it had for the first time invited a fact-finding rights delegation from the Organization of American States to visit Mexico.

Such delegations, which broadly review human rights concerns, have visited nearly all other Latin American countries.

A sign of the evolution of Mexico's immigration policies came when Mexico agreed to a pilot program, financed by Washington, in which migrants who have been detained illegally crossing the border can elect to be flown back to central Mexico for return to their homes.

In four flights since April 3, 63 Mexicans have been ferried from San Diego to Guadalajara, and a United States spokesman estimated that 450 more would be flown home by July.

The United States is financing the program to get the illegals as far from the border as possible. Mexico is cooperating as a way to support would-be migrants who have spent their last pesos trying to get across the border.

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