

Pursuit of cross-border benefits

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ZAPOPAN, Mexico --As President Vicente Fox of Mexico toured the United States, it became apparent he was using his skills as a former Coca-Cola executive to sell his ideas on improving both country's relations while tapping into some of America's economic elite.

This proactive move is generating concerns by xenophobics on both sides of the border. This is reflected in comments from a Mexican politician in Mr. Fox's conservative National Action Party (PAN), Javier Corral Jurado, who just said, "It means a risk to the sovereignty of our country, especially in areas of national security interest, like our satellite industry", a fledging Mexican industry about which most Americans have no idea. This coupled with actions like Citi Group recently buying out Banamex, causes our "below-the-border friends" to balk at visions of a closer relationship being promulgated by our respective presidents.

Both President George W. Bush and President Fox share common bonds like being semi-businessmen and farmers, and semi-politicians. Additionally, they developed years of friendship having been governors of important regions of their respective countries. Now, with their "promotions," they are in a position to deal on a macro level, addressing thorny issues dealt with poorly and in an "ad hoc" manner in previous administrations. However, these matters are complex and delve into sociopolitical, economic and security realms that interconnect even historically. Then on top of this template is a layer of negative special interest groups that cannot picture moves meant to reduce problems or advance conditions.

Things such as emigration, cross-border transportation issues, economic development, organized crime and the feasibility of common borders are some of the sticking points that must be dealt with in a equitable manner to have the envisioned success. As an example, President Fox has brought up the amnesty issue for Mexican citizens in the United States, because of his concern over his people risking their lives crossing the border. Some compromise position may be generated from this particularly difficult idea, which would be satisfactory for both parties. He points out that Mexican labor, skilled and unskilled, coming to America is an important strength to the U.S.

Therefore, to ensure their health and well-being is in our mutual interest. President Bush in the other hand, has pointed it out that reducing corruption and crime is also in our collective interest. On this point, Mr. Fox has responded by commanding a more earnest attack on drug operations, showing a clear attempt at "quid pro quo."

One must understand, according to the National Population Council in Mexico, that there are 21 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S., reflecting about 8 percent of the total population. Of that, approximately two-thirds of those workers are economically engaged. Only 1 in 10 works in agriculture, and only 1 in 4 lives in poverty, according to American standards. Therefore, they reflect "horsepower" to America's economic engine.

There is a relationship between each country's economies and the ebb and flow of cross-border labor.

The worse the economic situation is in Mexico, the higher the illegal immigration is into the U.S., producing cheaper labor on the American side. Conversely, there is a corresponding effect too. The object is to find a balance advantageous to both neighbors. It is simply a matter of finding that state of "economic Zen."

A cautious optimism exists in many sectors of Mexican society about their relations with their "gringo" neighbors. This sea-change is being felt by most American tourists like one 80-year-old former chemist from Wilmington, Del., who said last month in Puerto Vallarta that it was his "fourth time in Mexico since the '70s, and he is seeing a lot of good changes, and wants to come back."

Super highways to all parts of the country, mixed with resorts on the sea coasts, and factories with NAFTA trade, have redefined the Yankees' view of a more modern Mexico.

President Fox's meeting with key businessmen, to include Microsoft's Bill Gates, shows he understands that bilateral money will fuel much of this continued metamorphosis. Ironically some of this change is cultural to the core. As we see Hispanic influence in our country, throughout Mexico one sees American culture reflected also. This mutual assimilation mandates that we both follow Mr. Fox's and Mr. Bush's examples to work harder at mutual solutions, instead of being mired in the status quo and shallow prejudices.

Furthermore, the encouragement of closer cooperation and training between transportation, police, health authorities, and other appropriate governmental elements, will ease many concerns of both sets of citizens. To appreciate our dilemma, one must read a paper recently published for the Council on Foreign Relations by U.S. Coast Guard Cmdr. Steven Flynn, documenting that there can be no effective border control under present circumstances. Therefore, moving dynamically, thinking creatively, and implementing carefully, our partnership can flourish.

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