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Smart Power Meets Star Power: Hillary Clinton in Mexico ^[1]

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent trip to Mexico (March 25-26) demonstrated, once again, the power of public diplomacy. The trip was a tour de force (with only one minor mishap) that opened a window of opportunity in a bilateral relationship that had become badly damaged. Prior to her trip, the mood toward the United States in Mexico was quite sour, the consequence of both Bush administration policies and recent developments.

Mexico still harbors disappointment at have been shunted from the center of the U.S. foreign policy stage during the Bush administration's first months to the margins of Washington's concerns in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Disappointment turned to resentment with what Mexicans widely perceive to be a hostile turn in U.S. treatment of Mexican immigrants, a hostility Mexicans see as extending to Mexico itself. These perceptions have been shaped by rhetoric that sometimes turned insulting toward Mexicans and by concrete actions such as the 2006 legislation to build the border "wall" and immigration raids that have split thousands of families since mid-2007.

The declining esteem for the United States further reflects Mexicans' deeply rooted fears about the main features of the Bush foreign policy and especially its unilateralism. Like many others in the United States and abroad, Mexicans have been disheartened by a series of events including the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, its seeming loss of a moral center evidenced by the violations of human rights committed at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo and apparent support for a 2002 military coup against a democratically elected government in Venezuela, and its unwillingness to listen to the concerns of historic U.S. allies, especially those located in the Western Hemisphere. In a 2006 survey, only one-third of Mexicans said they admired the United States, while 38 percent expressed resentment toward their northern neighbor, and fully half said they distrusted the United States (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, *México y el mundo* 2006).

More recently, media reports painting Mexico as a country overrun by violence and comments by former and current U.S. government officials referring to Mexico as a future "failed state" have rankled Mexicans and fed their sense of vulnerability to the whims of their powerful northern neighbor. And the decision by the U.S. Congress on the eve of the Secretary's trip to prohibit Mexican trucks from delivering their cargo beyond the border was the final straw. A frustrated Mexican government did what it had never done before – it retaliated against this illegal U.S. action with strikingly harsh rhetoric and tariffs on a wide range of U.S. exports.

Secretary Clinton started the healing process in her interviews with the U.S. and Mexican during the four hour flight from Washington DC to Mexico City, and continued it in what became a two-day routine of hitting all the right diplomatic notes. For a country that feels constantly under appreciated by the United States, she noted that the U.S.-Mexico relationship is "one of the most important relationships that exists between any two countries

in the world” and publicly thanked Mexico (finally) for the assistance it provided after Hurricane Katrina. For a country that has been pressured by the United States for decades to reduce the supply of drugs entering the U.S. market, Secretary Clinton became the first high level U.S. official to admit on Mexican soil that the U.S. shares the blame for the problem, and thus the responsibility for fixing it. For a country feeling under rhetorical attack by the constant drumbeat in the United States in recent months about crime in Mexico, she denied that any parts of Mexico are ungovernable and recalled that the United States faced similar problems with crime during the crack epidemic of the 1980s (when the murder rate in Washington DC was higher than it currently is in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico’s most violent city). And for a country that often feels taken for granted by its powerful neighbor, she referred to the two countries not as neighbors but as part of the same family, with a shared home and a shared future and with “an ongoing, absolutely important, unbreakable bond”.

Mexicans were simply stunned by the visit. They had never seen anything quite like it. Mexicans who under different circumstances are quite capable of emphasizing even the most minor slight by a U.S. official barely mentioned the fact that the Secretary mistakenly asked who painted the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe (it’s a miraculous image). Who cares about that when she prayed before the virgin, warmly greeted pilgrims outside of the Basilica, and the day before met with indigenous students who had studied in the United States and with Mexican women politicians of all political stripes? Even Mexico’s most stridently anti-American newspaper had little negative to say, settling for “Good Hillary, Bad Napolitano”.

Obviously a rhetorical message – even a strikingly well-delivered one – is not sufficient to revive a damaged relationship. The United States must follow up its words with deeds, as many in Mexico have already noted. But Secretary of State Clinton’s trip clearly demonstrated the power of the right words and actions to open a window of opportunity where one had not previously existed. As one Mexican commentator put it, “we are all Hillaryized now”.
