

Two elements further muddied the diplomatic waters—the outbreak of revolution in Central America starting in Nicaragua (where the FSLN came to power in 1979), and then spreading to El Salvador and Guatemala, and the question of greater economic integration between Mexico and the United States. The governments of Luis Echeverría (1970-76), José López Portillo (1976-82) and—to a lesser extent—Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88) were all interested in questions of Latin American development, and sought to play the role of “helpful fixers” in the Central American quagmire. (This was for reasons both selfless—since Mexico holds a place of moral and economic leadership among the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America—and also selfish, since Mexico sought to increase its political influence over the continent).

The question of political leadership, and of humanitarian solidarity with the oppressed of Central America can not be discounted out of hand. Mexico had traditionally offered refuge to political exiles (Leon Trotsky being perhaps the best example over seventy years ago, while in the late 1930s Lázaro Cárdenas welcomed 10,000 Spanish Republican exiles to Mexico), and throughout the 1980s refugees flocked to Mexico from troubled areas of Central America. Fidel Castro himself, after being released from prison following his 1953 attack on the Moncada garrison, fled to exile in Mexico. The tradition of offering a haven for exiles, then, is deeply rooted, and a source of pride for Mexicans. In addition Mexico also offered its good offices to negotiate peace agreements in the region, a position regarded well in Latin America—but which was seen by powerful circles in Washington as meddling. (This was in large degree because the Reagan and Bush administrations were determined to impose a military solution on the Central American maelstrom. While the Mexican government could appreciate the underlying socio-economic basis for revolution, Washington interpreted virtually everything through a Cold War prism). Needless to say, these efforts of Mexico were generally well seen in Havana.

Mexico's love-hate relationship with the United States, and the desire of the business class to develop strong ties between the two countries, have also played an influential role in determining the nature of Cuban-Mexican relations. To put it bluntly, whenever Mexico has pursued closer ties with the United States (such as during the Zedillo and Fox administrations), the issue of Cuba has been quickly relegated in importance, apart from its potential leverage in supporting U.S. initiatives vis-a-vis Havana. Conversely, whenever Mexico has felt itself slighted by Washington, the Cuba card has often reappeared quickly—in no small degree to goad Washington into reacting—and in particular to recognizing the importance of its neighbour to the south. It is a strategy that has been employed on several occasions, and Mexico has employed it well.

In the first half of his presidency, for example, López Portillo sought stronger commercial ties with the United States, but when these did not materialize he quickly fell back on nationalist aspirations, and produced the Cuba card. More recently President Fox—who had caused bilateral ties with Cuba to plummet to their lowest point ever—retreated to a more balanced position on Cuba but only after the failure of his government's efforts to have undocumented Mexican workers in the United States recognized. The relationship with Cuba can thus be resurrected by