

“Cuban example” of revolution might prove contagious in their own country, rife with socio-economic disparities. (The Cubans have studiously refrained from fanning the flames of subversion in Mexico, and have steadfastly adhered to a policy of non-intervention, even during the difficult Chiapas situation of recent years. At the same time, many Mexican officials have been wary of Cuban intentions, particularly in light of acute social tensions in Mexico).

As a result of this complex background, there has traditionally been an unusual basis to the relationship in Mexico, one of official (albeit tentative) support for Havana, as well as an underlying worry about the example of the Cuban revolution spreading to Mexico: “The Mexican dilemma created a neurotic policy toward Cuba. In its public stance, Mexico was a staunch defender of Cuba’s independence and sovereignty and insisted that the United States comply with the principle of nonintervention toward the island.”<sup>4</sup>

Privately, however, this level of support for Cuba was far more nuanced, with Mexican governments—regardless of their political stripe—consistently expressing a wariness about Havana’s intentions. “Hasta cierto punto” (up to a certain point) was thus the traditional underlying theme in Mexico’s approach to the Cuban revolution.

The relationship was further complicated by the difficult balancing act which Mexico consistently needed to perform, both in domestic politics and in regards to Washington. Clearly it needed to cultivate strong commercial ties with its powerful neighbour, and traditionally its major trading partner, the United States. At the same time various Mexican administrations sought to project an image of firm independence from Washington, a process which was often aided by a process of aloofness and occasionally what seemed to be racism from the U.S. neighbours. Even more important, the traditional allegiance to the values of the revolutionary legacy of Mexico had to be respected in domestic political circles—a fact easily proven by the extraordinary number of references to revolutionary aspirations found in official political discourse. Given the increasing importance of Cuba as an obsession for U.S. policy-makers after 1959, the question of Mexico developing a relationship with the Cuban revolution became even more challenging.

The relationship was (and in fact is) therefore rather bizarre. On the one hand Mexico was seen in some U.S. circles as being overly close to the Cuban revolution (an understandable position given the traditional revolutionary discourse employed by the PRI), while on the other Mexico was in fact often working hard behind the scenes in essence to protect U.S. interests. This was never done overtly—since to do so would not only have led to charges of Mexican administrations being “vendepatrias” (or “sell-outs”)—but also quietly Mexican officials passed along intelligence reports to Washington, and expressed deference to key aspects of U.S. policy. In the spring of 2004, when bilateral relations fell to an all-time low, the Fox administration was accused of voting against Cuba in Geneva at the U.N. Human Rights Commission (following a phone call from President Bush), and then seeking to appease Washington—and at the same time discredit a leftist candidate for the next presidential election—in the so-called “Ahumada affair.”