

### **Almost at the Point of No Return: Mexico-Cuba Relations under Fox**

The arrival of Vicente Fox in December of 2000 has without doubt continued this rapid downward spiral in Cuba-Mexico relations. Again Fidel Castro attended the presidential inauguration (to have refrained from doing so would have been unthinkable rude), and was pleased to receive assurances in a private interview with the new president that he was keen to reinstate the bilateral relationship to its previous positive nature. Ideological differences would be respected by Fox, Cuba's large debt to Mexico could be renegotiated, and Cuba's independence from the United States was of course understood. It all sounded too good to be true—and it was.

The appointment of noted Mexican intellectual (and himself the son of a former Minister of Foreign Affairs) Jorge Castañeda to set Mexico's foreign policy augured badly for any development of the already badly-battered relationship. His book on the dissolution of the Latin American Left published in 1993, *La utopía desarmada*, and his scathing remarks about the Cuban revolution, had been poorly received in Cuba. His later book on the mythical figure of Che Guevara (*La vida en rojo*) was also controversial because of claims that Fidel Castro had abandoned Che's guerrilla attempts in Bolivia—and was widely criticized in Cuba. Clearly Castañeda would find it difficult to make inroads into the widespread resentment against his appointment.

In many ways, however, Castañeda was merely mirroring the official line emanating from the office of presidents Zedillo and Fox, both of whom were displeased with the traditional Mexican approach to Cuba, which they viewed as grossly out of touch. Both presidencies had swung to the right, had decided that the most important foreign policy strategy for Mexico was to focus on strengthening relations with Washington, and were displeased with what they perceived as badly outdated revolutionary rhetoric emanating from Havana. There had been a noticeable shift in the importance given to the traditional terms of solidarity with Cuba, and the revolutionary discourse from the Mexican government itself has been steadily and studiously neglected.

In fact in both 2002 and in particular May of 2004 Mexico came perilously close to breaking diplomatic relations with Cuba. The main reason for this development has been the decision of both Mexican administrations—particularly that of Fox—to “modernize” the political system of the country, and deal with the nagging problem of human rights. Put simply, the Fox administration feels that it is time for Mexico to adopt a radically new approach to the thorny issue of human rights—both in domestic and foreign policy. In terms of foreign relations, both Zedillo and Fox had also decided that it was time to accept the brutal reality that Mexico's economic future was inexorable linked to the United States. The combination of this commercial pragmatism, clear turn to the right, increased bilateral trade with the United States, and the advent of presidential elections in the United States, all contributed to a rejection of traditional approaches—and a closer identification with the foreign policy goals of Washington. The first target of this new approach to foreign policy was to be Cuba.