

In many ways a parallel argument can be made in the domestic arena—since the Fox government has been sharply criticized by virtually all parties in Mexico for its handling of the Cuba file. As a result the administration has pulled back from its harsh condemnations of the Cuban human rights record, has distanced itself visibly from the United States position on pre-emptive strikes and intervention (preferring instead the multilateral approach to conflict seen clearly by the United Nations in the recent Iraq conflict), and has sought—belatedly, and to date only partially—to make peace. The end result is an uneasy truce, although after the traumatic events of 2002—when Mexico was close to breaking formal relations with Havana—it is a clear improvement.

Cuba too needs Mexico as an ally. Mexico's importance in the region is great indeed—perhaps surpassed only by that of Brazil, which is now itself developing a warm relationship with Havana. But Cuba, while doubtless having broken out of the total diplomatic isolation that Washington attempted to impose in the 1960s, has still been unsuccessful in turning its rapidly developed formal links with the rest of the world into profitable connections which actually bring the island concrete things it needs. This is especially true of the hemisphere. With Mexico as an enemy, Cuba would be significantly isolated in Latin America. Conversely, with Mexico onside—albeit none too enthusiastically—Cuba can continue to improve its “acceptability rating” in the region. All of this helps, to a small degree, the ongoing process of contributing to make Cuba a member of the community (and it is important to remember that in 1962 all countries of Latin America apart from Mexico agreed to suspend Cuba from the OAS).

For Mexico too maintaining relations with Cuba remains a useful bargaining chip in its relationship with Washington, obviously one which is far more important for the Mexican government. Various governments have offered their good offices as mediator in the troubled Cuba-U.S. relationship, and at some point when cooler heads prevail Mexico—or indeed Canada—could play an important role. More importantly, in the short run Mexico can—as it has done consistently in the past—play off to some extent Washington against Havana.

In the long run too, the Fox administration or its successor may well have a role to play in a post-Castro government. Obviously it is to be hoped that it will be the Cubans who will decide to what point this will be the case—and indeed many of them think (with some justification) that Cuban-Americans, Mexicans and indeed any other group are being wildly optimistic if they believe that they will have any real say in the subsequent development (in economic or political terms) of the island. Nevertheless in Mexico City there are many who believe that it makes tremendous sense to maintain a foot solidly in Cuba for eventual changes in the island. In any event, given Cuba's commercial potential once a normalization of relations with the United States, Mexican companies—who in many cases have been on the island for the past decade—believe that they will play a significantly important role.