

conservative sectors of Latin America, there is a respect for the achievements of this small (pop. 11.3 million) country. Significantly when there are large summit meetings of the Americas, it is Fidel Castro who attracts by far the most media attention—not the leaders of any other country, and noticeably not the president of the United States. Mexico, with its aspirations to be the leader of the Americas, can therefore not afford to be seen to be the regional Judas.

Unfortunately, the role of Castañeda as Foreign Minister precipitated a symbolic fall from grace of Mexico in the region. Traditionally Mexico has been viewed as the interlocutor of the region with the United States. Respected for its independent role, its ability to express (occasional) disagreement with the United States, its peace-brokering role in Central America in the 1980s, its support for many thousands of the region's refugees, Mexico has traditionally been in many ways the leader of Latin America. Indeed, despite its own economic difficulties, Mexico can perhaps be seen as the moderately rich uncle in an extremely poor family—all of whom respect the uncle for his support, compassion and understanding in time of need. Like many of them it has been the victim of U.S. expansionism, and like them it has many communities which depend for their existence upon remittances sent by poorly paid workers in "el Norte." In sum, Mexico and they come from similar roots, speak the same language, and understand the dilemma of each other perfectly well.

The role of Jorge Castañeda changed that equation dramatically, however. He brought a willing Fox administration ever closer to the United States, in one fell swoop rendering the traditional values of Mexican foreign policy independence worthless. This context has been well described elsewhere:

One can entertain a certain amount of sympathy for the ex-foreign minister in his struggle to achieve these goals. Enticed by President Bush's early statements that "the United States has no more important relationship in the world than we have with Mexico," and that he would "look south not as an afterthought, but as a fundamental commitment of my presidency," Castañeda could be forgiven for thinking that Mexico would be handsomely rewarded for his unbridled pandering to the wishes of the White House, even if it meant selling out its cherished principles.<sup>11</sup>

The leaked phone conversation between Fox and Castro revealed ever more clearly just how Mexico was willingly jumping into the U.S. sphere of influence, spurning its Latin roots. The neighbours quickly picked up on the messages emanating from the Fox administration, and as a result Mexico's currency among Latin Americans has declined. In this context, making peace with Havana and striving to return to what passes for normalcy could well prove to be in the best interests of the Fox administration. Put simply, the tacit agreement with Washington never got past the starting line—and in the process Mexico lost a lot of face with its neighbours. It remains to be seen if it is now in the best interests of the Fox administration to establish a respectable distance between itself and the United States—and the Cuba card to a certain extent can contribute to that.