



# U.S.-Cuba Normalization Allows Mexico and Cuba to Repair Old Ties

William M. LeoGrande | Monday, Nov. 30, 2015

With his state visit to Mexico earlier this month, Raul Castro took a major step forward in rebuilding Cuba's relations with the country in Latin America that is most important to the United States. For Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, the summit marked the culmination of his efforts to repair relations with Cuba after a decade of antagonism precipitated by Mexico's conservative governments led by the National Action Party, or PAN, beginning with the presidency of Vicente Fox from 2000 to 2006.

Historically, Pena Nieto's Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, had maintained friendly relations with Cuba's revolutionary government after 1959. The PRI's nationalism, its commitment to nonintervention, and its own revolutionary heritage made it instinctively resistant to U.S. attempts to overthrow the Cuban revolution. As Castro **noted in his remarks** (<http://en.granma.cu/mundo/2015-11-10/full-text-of-speech-by-president-raul-castro-ruz>) at the summit, Mexico was the only Latin American country that refused to go along with the Organization of American States (OAS) 1964 mandate that members break all diplomatic and commercial ties with Cuba. (Although, to avoid angering Washington, Mexico also agreed to share intelligence gathered from its diplomatic mission in Havana.) In gratitude, as Fidel Castro acknowledged in his autobiography, Cuba abstained from supporting armed insurgency in Mexico. Over the ensuing decades, Mexico tried repeatedly, albeit without success, **to broker diplomatic rapprochement** ([https://books.google.com/books/about/Back\\_Channel\\_to\\_Cuba.html?id=iIg7BAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Back_Channel_to_Cuba.html?id=iIg7BAAQBAJ)) between Cuba and the United States.

But when Fox won the presidency in 2000, defeating the PRI for the first time since its founding in 1929, he adopted a policy toward Cuba much closer to Washington's. Although Fox's



*Cuban President Raul Castro and Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto at a joint press conference, Merida, Mexico, Nov. 6, 2015 (AP photo by Rebecca Blackwell).*

government continued to oppose the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba, he was outspoken in his criticism of Cuba's lack of democracy and violations of human rights—far more than any PRI government had ever been. When Fox visited Cuba in February 2002, **he offended Castro** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/05/international/americas/05CUBA.html>) by meeting with Cuban dissidents.

The catalyst for the downward spiral in relations was a diplomatic incident. In March 2002, Fox asked Fidel Castro to leave early from a United Nations summit on financing for development held in Mexico because U.S. President George W. Bush would not attend if Castro was present. When Mexican officials denied having asked Castro to leave, Castro **made public a tape recording** (<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2002/ing/f220402i.html>) of his private conversation with Fox, in which the Mexican president made the request.

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The following month, **Mexico voted for the first time** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/24/international/americas/24MEXI.html>) in favor of a U.N. Human Rights Commission resolution criticizing Cuban human rights practices. Mexico cast the deciding vote, which Castro denounced as a “despicable betrayal.” Relations **hit a nadir in 2004** (<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2004/ing/f010504i.html>) when, in reaction to Castro calling Mexico a pawn of Washington for again voting in favor of the U.S.-sponsored U.N. resolution condemning Cuba for its human rights record, Fox temporarily expelled the Cuban ambassador in Mexico City and recalled his ambassador from Havana, as well.

Fox's successor, Felipe Calderon, also of the PAN, tried to de-escalate this animosity, which had also developed with Venezuela and Latin America's so-called new left, from Brazil to Bolivia. In his last year as president, Calderon visited Cuba and declared his desire to begin “**a new phase**” ([http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/usworld/calderon-goes-to-cuba-for-first-official-visit/article\\_112b8fb4-db09-5954-bb06-4737bb581125.html](http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/usworld/calderon-goes-to-cuba-for-first-official-visit/article_112b8fb4-db09-5954-bb06-4737bb581125.html)) in relations. But the PAN lost the 2012 election to a reinvigorated PRI, leaving it to Pena Nieto to rebuild Mexico's traditional friendship with Cuba.

Last year, on the eve of Pena Nieto's first trip to Cuba to participate in the summit of the

Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Mexico waived 70 percent of Cuba's \$487 million outstanding debt to Mexico. At their meeting in Mexico City earlier this month, Castro and Pena Nieto agreed to "re-establish a political dialogue at the highest level," and signed cooperative agreements on fishing, tourism, human trafficking and education. For Castro, the visit represented an important building block in his pragmatic policy of reintegrating Cuba into the hemispheric community, leveraging Latin American opinion to pressure Washington to lift the embargo, and attracting foreign direct investment to grow the Cuban economy.

For Pena Nieto, rapprochement with Cuba gave Mexico an opportunity to gain an advantage over competitors as Castro's economic reforms [open Cuba to the global economy](#) (<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12882/socialism-with-cuban-characteristics-part-i>). Pena Nieto [underscored the importance](#) (<http://en.granma.cu/mundo/2015-11-10/full-text-of-speech-by-enrique-pena-nieto>) of developing a joint commitment "to continue creating conditions for more Mexican businesses and investors to invest in Cuba. This means investors from our country seeing in this updating of the Cuban economic model an opportunity to contribute to strengthening economic relations between the two countries by investing in Cuba and at the same time creating jobs in both nations."

Castro also emphasized the prospects for growing commercial relations. "With the re-launching [of relations]," [he said](#) (<http://en.granma.cu/mundo/2015-11-10/full-text-of-speech-by-president-raul-castro-ruz>), "ties between our two countries are being renovated and strengthened not only in the political arena, but also in the cultural and economic-commercial, and scientific-technical cooperation." He made special note of Mexican investments in the [new Mariel Special Development Zone](#) (<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13671/cuba-s-new-foreign-investment-law-is-a-bet-on-the-future>), where the very first firm to sign a contract was a Mexican meat processing company.

U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to normalize relations with Cuba freed Pena Nieto to develop deeper relations with Havana without fear of incurring Washington's wrath. For more than half a century, Mexico has occupied an uneasy position between the two antagonists, trying under the PRI to maintain good relations with both, then tilting decisively toward Washington under the PAN.

The Obama administration has hoped that Mexico's improving relations with Havana might enable Mexico [to pressure Castro on the issue of human rights](#) (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/obama-seeks-help-mexicos-pena-nieto-cuba-immigration/>). But there was no

mention of democracy or human rights in the final speeches coming out of the November summit—the focus remained on issues of mutual interest, especially economic ones. Moreover, it was unlikely that Pena Nieto, determined to repair bilateral relations with Cuba, would risk repeating Fox’s unproductive strategy of scolding Havana on human rights. So while Mexico will take advantage of the new international context created by Obama’s opening to Cuba to deepen political and economic relations with Havana, Washington should not expect it to collaborate by demanding changes in Cuba’s internal affairs.

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