

Following Trump election, Mexico begins to move towards deepening ties with China

By Clodomiro Puentes
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As the initial shock of the US election results begins to wear off, Mexican ruling circles are beginning to grope towards a response to the political and economic implications of an incoming Trump administration.

Dissatisfaction with perceived mismanagement of Mexico's position relative to Washington by the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto is increasingly articulated not only by the overwhelming majority of the population, but by sections of the ruling class and its political representatives as well.

Dissension within ruling circles has been fueled by Mexico's underperforming economy, which has consistently fallen short of projected growth rates for four years, as its currency has gone down in value from about 13 pesos to the dollar at the beginning of the EPN administration, to nearly 21 pesos in the wake of the election of Donald Trump.

There are growing demands for policies designed to hedge against president-elect Trump's promises to renegotiate or even scrap NAFTA, deport millions of undocumented immigrants and impose tariff walls on Mexican and Chinese goods. This was reflected in a move towards deepening trade ties with China in a meeting between officials of the two countries on Sunday, and in the auctioning off of two deep water oil blocks to the China Offshore Oil Corporation last week as part of the privatization of Mexico's state-owned oil firm Pemex.

The APEC summit held in Lima in November was notable in that China all but assumed the leading role, and in particular affirmed its commitments to its trading partners in Latin America. Speaking at the summit, Peña Nieto expressed the Mexican ruling class' desire to press forward with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which now remains dead in the water as far as participation by the US is concerned. He also insisted on the need to "modernize rather than renegotiate" NAFTA and voiced Mexico's willingness to "further strengthen this strategic alliance."

Mexico's ruling elite and its representatives have grown increasingly impatient over what is seen as an overly reactive, conciliatory and cautious response by the PRI government to the US president-elect.

An editorial in *El Financiero* states: "The Mexican government can't remain with its arms crossed. Will there be a

prompt, realistic, nationalist response? Up to now, it doesn't seem so. A certain degree of prudence is understandable, but Mexico must also be prudently bold and prepare in the next four weeks a raft of urgent measures to face the diverse scenarios emerging from the US."

In remarks made to the newspaper *Reforma* earlier this month, Miguel Barbosa, head of the pseudo-left PRD's (Party of the Democratic Revolution) parliamentary group, lambasted the Peña Nieto government as "stunned, fearful, incapable of responding, with weak people responsible for foreign affairs and trade when Mexico needs to present a firm, dignified, patriotic stance and act intelligently." Continuing, he added that "each action by Donald Trump that is not met with necessary forcefulness make this government look weak and will end up undermining it."

Giving voice to a growing interest among ruling circles in lessening Mexican dependence on the US by broadening its trade relations in the Asia-Pacific region, and China in particular, Barbosa called for the opening up of trade talks with China "in a direct manner."

Last Sunday, that is precisely what was initiated in a meeting between State Councillor Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu. According to Reuters, "Yang said in the meeting that China's comprehensive partnership with Mexico was 'flourishing' day by day, adding that China wishes to deepen cooperation on trade, investment, resources, infrastructure and financial services." No details were given on what was discussed during Yang's "courtesy visit" with the Mexican president shortly afterwards.

"The China-Mexico relationship is back on again," said Evan Ellis, a research professor at the US Army War College who specializes in China's presence in Latin America. "The election of President Trump and the associated threat to NAFTA probably was one driver for (Peña Nieto) to position Mexico to diversify its foreign economic engagements," Ellis told the Reuters news agency.

The visit with Mexican state officials follows a previous meeting between Yang and retired Army general Michael Flynn, the arch-militarist Trump pick for national security adviser. The visit was clearly motivated in part by Trump's calculated and provocative violation of the "One China

Policy,” a cornerstone US-China diplomatic protocol, by setting up a phone call with the president of Taiwan.

China is Mexico’s second largest trading partner, accounting for over 16 percent of Mexico’s imports in 2014, as compared to 49 percent for the US in the same year. Unlike with the US, it remains a decidedly one-sided relationship, with a \$60 billion deficit in China’s favor. Nevertheless, the possibility of a protectionist US trade policy under a Trump administration may end up working in Beijing’s favor as it seeks to gain a greater economic foothold in the region.

The recent awarding of two oil blocks that CNOOC (China National Offshore Oil Corporation) had won in the bidding process, points to the continuation of such a trend. The auction, the consummation of the reactionary “energy reform,” was for 10 oil blocks in total, eight of which were sold, exceeding official expectations. Among other winners of the bidding process were US energy firms Exxon-Mobil, Chevron and Murphy Oil.

It is far from the case that Mexico’s ruling class is either willing or able to prepare a sudden and irrevocable shift away from Washington toward Beijing. Given the closely integrated character of production, supply and distribution across North America, Mexico’s ruling elite can ill afford, for the time being, to precipitously disengage economically or politically from its northern neighbor.

Moreover, for Washington’s part, the protectionist demagoguery of Trump’s campaign rhetoric will butt up against the demands of maintaining at all costs US imperialist geopolitical domination throughout the Americas, the US’ “backyard.” Far from providing an economic lifeline in a volatile economic climate, Mexico’s overtures to China will only aggravate political tensions as the architects and planners of US imperialist policy move to check the expansion of China’s economic presence in Latin America.

The recent appointment of retired Marine Corps Gen. John Kelly as head of the Department of Homeland Security, apart from being yet one more general in a cabinet of billionaires and generals, is significant in this regard.

Under the Obama administration, as head of the United States Southern Command, which oversees the operations of US imperialism in Central and South America and the Caribbean, Kelly was a strong proponent of an escalation of US militarism in the hemisphere.

His claim that the “near-broken societies” of the Northern Triangle posed an “existential” threat to US “national security,” aside from its patent absurdity, is made all the more repugnant by the deliberate omission of the role of US imperialism in engendering the bloody civil wars and subsequent epidemics of gang violence that plague the region in the first instance.

Much of SOUTHCOM’s energies are ostensibly devoted to the so-called “war on drugs” and “humanitarian relief,” which includes extensive joint operations with the DEA, FBI, CIA

and their counterparts in the region. Of course, “humanitarian relief” has invariably proven to be a euphemism for the imposition of martial law when natural disasters strike impoverished countries in the region.

Thus, shorn of its “humanitarian” trappings, a 2010 SOUTHCOM press release inadvertently gives the game away in one example among many when describing a joint training exercise between US and Colombian Marines: “U.S. Marines geared up with riot shields, shin guards and batons to show Colombian Marines the basics in non-lethal weapons and riot control. These skills are essential when dealing with a populous [sic] that turns desperate after a natural disaster. Security and crowd control are chief concerns when providing humanitarian assistance. Colombian Marines also learned proper takedown techniques and enjoyed practical application with both U.S. and Colombian Marines.”

The true aim of SOUTHCOM’s presence, and Washington’s propping up of the militaries of its regional allies, is not concern over human trafficking, organized crime or providing disaster relief, but rather to assert US military power and repress the working classes throughout the region.

While not technically a component of SOUTHCOM’s geographical jurisdiction, the so-called Merida Initiative, Washington’s program of funneling billions to fuel the militarization of Mexico, is nevertheless an important element of the drive for US hegemony in the Americas—the repressive apparatus of the Mexican state is in a very real and direct sense an appendage of Washington.

The recently proposed Law of Internal Security, still at this date making its way through Mexico’s Senate and Chamber of Deputies, continues in this vein, granting to the military broader powers to intervene oppressively on the pretext of protecting against anything that may “endanger stability, security or the public peace.” This effectively makes fixed what was supposed to have been a temporary measure during the initial intensification of violence stemming from the drug trade during the Calderon administration.

Were such a measure to be adopted, which could be as early as January, it would mean the direct assumption of police duties by the military, whose first target would be any organized opposition of the working class to the reactionary social policies of the government.

The authoritarian and fascistic drift of American politics is paralleled by similar developments in Mexico. These are not merely the products of decisions made by specific politicians, but are rooted in the ongoing world crisis of capitalism.

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