

Obama visits Mexico and Central America to push for economic integration

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US President Barack Obama visited Mexico on Thursday and Friday, and then went on to attend a meeting of Central American presidents in San Jose, Costa Rica. Obama steered his message away from the focus of his first term on fighting drug cartels, to increasing trade and investment between the region and the US.

Passing through a virtual armed camp in downtown Mexico City composed of tens of thousands of police and military personnel, all directed by the US Secret Service, Obama first met with Mexico's new president, Enrique Peña Nieto. Obama broadly endorsed the latter's program to open up Mexico's telecommunication and oil sectors to foreign investment, which will principally benefit American business.

More broadly, both governments are aligned on further integrating the Mexican and American economies as part of building a North American economic bloc, along the lines of the European Union.

With trade between the two countries totaling nearly half a trillion dollars last year, Mexico is Washington's second-largest trading partner.

On Friday at Mexico's National Anthropology Museum, Obama delivered, as he has done when visiting other countries, one of his vapid and platitudinous "all you need is hope" speeches to a group of high school and college students.

Obama depicted Mexico in rosy hues as "a nation in the process of remaking itself." He ignored, as Peña Nieto was forced to concede during his visit, that three-fifths of Mexicans barely scrape by, working in the informal sector, and that half of Mexicans officially remain mired in poverty.

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted one college student, who reflected the reaction of most who attended the

speech: "How nice that he came to give inspiring speeches, but what's happening in Mexico is far from what he talked about today...[W]hat Mexico was he talking about?"

Obama in his speech summed up his main message as follows: "We agree that the relationship between our nations must be defined not by the threats that we face, but by the prosperity and the opportunity that we can create together. It is obviously up to the Mexican people to determine their security structures and how it engages with other nations, including the United States."

Afterwards, on board Air Force One, White House press secretary Jay Carney said that the relation between the US and Mexico "is bigger than our security alliance." The US was not going to dictate to the Mexican government "how to structure its response to the violence that threatens the security of Mexico."

Peña Nieto told a press conference that Washington and Mexico would "cooperate on the basis of mutual respect" and stressed that the relationship between the two countries must be "multi-thematic."

Following six years in which US personnel were intimately integrated at all levels into Mexican police and military operations, the new Mexican administration has moved to revamp its security structure in order to centralize its relationship with the US through the Interior Ministry.

In January, the Peña Nieto government announced the creation of the National Intelligence Center (*Centro Nacional de Inteligencia, CNI*) as a new domestic intelligence agency which has cut across the operations of the CIA, FBI and DEA, which had free run of the country under the preceding administration of President Felipe Calderón in a "war on drugs" that has cost the lives of some 70,000 Mexicans in recent years.

As part of the transition, Mexico removed US intelligence agents from the so-called Binational Offices of Intelligence that had been set up in Mexico City and Escobedo in the border state of Nuevo León. Obama's public response thus far is to downplay this change to see how it will play out.

Conceding leadership of the "war on drugs" to Mexico is also in line with Obama's foreign policy, which publicly attempts to cloak US militarism and aggression in a multilateral approach. Of course, in reality the US continues to ramp up military and intelligence involvement in areas such as Mexico considered to be of strategic importance.

Obama also sought to soft peddle Washington's true interests in the wake of Secretary of State John Kerry's blundering reference in testimony before the US Senate to Latin America continuing as the US's "backyard," a term detested throughout the region as a synonym for US neocolonial domination.

Obama further wants to promote the notion that the new Mexican administration's reform will lessen the poverty, violence and corruption that plagues Mexico, in order to gain domestic support for his proposal to adopt new immigration legalization legislation. The message is that their reduction will lessen immigration from Mexico. But the immigration proposal is also conditioned on continuing to beef up physical barriers and police and military forces on the border with Mexico.

Thousands of demonstrators rallied outside the US Embassy in Mexico City during Obama's brief stay, demanding legalization of undocumented workers and a halt to repression, the record number of deportations and factory raids mounted against them.

After arriving in Costa Rica, Obama had a private dinner with Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla. On Saturday, he had a working meeting with the heads of state of the eight countries who are members of the System of Central American Economic Integration—Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, Belize and the Dominican Republic.

After his administration spent \$500 million during his first term under the so-called Regional Security Initiative, purportedly to fight drug trafficking, Obama again pushed the US government's new message that economic relations represented the most important

issue.

Only Chinchilla raised the US war on drugs, which she characterized as a catastrophe that has threatened the security of the entire region. The "war on drugs" has been accompanied by a rise in Central America's homicide rate to 40 for every 100,000 inhabitants, five times the world average.

Obama stressed the importance of continuing to build on the Free Commerce Treaty between the US and Central America. Under this regime, commerce between the US and Central America has increased from \$2.7 to \$4 billion a year. That growth has benefited the US, whose exports to the region doubled, while Central America's own have barely grown. In this same period, the balance of trade for Central America as a whole has negatively quintupled.

The US government has also pursued the treaty as a counterweight to other common market style economic agreements in Latin America, such as Mercosur.

Despite the focus, at least publicly, on economic issues, the Central American meeting also addressed US military involvement in the region. Obama wanted to throw his personal weight behind increasing US military penetration of regional armed forces.

In the case of Panama, the US Southern Command has developed operations in two provinces dubbed "Open Horizons." In a complementary operation, the US is sending 500 military personnel to construct a camp in the Darien Gap region, where the Pan American Highway peters out before it reaches the Colombian border.

The operation is called "Red Horse." It will include military exercises in June, with an eye to possible future operations against Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) guerrillas.



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