

New crisis in U.S.-Mexico relations

U.S. demand for Ixtoc damages casts pall on September summit

Observers who hoped that U.S. relations with Mexico had nowhere to go but up following President Carter's provocative and tasteless performance in Mexico last winter received an unpleasant jolt last week, when an aggressive new expression by Washington of its displeasure with Mexico's plans to use its oil wealth for industrialization brought U.S.-Mexico relations to the brink of complete collapse. On the eve of President Jose Lopez Portillo's state visit to Washington, the Carter administration, through its special ambassador Robert Kreuger, announced it had sent a cable to Mexico demanding that that country accept juridical and financial liability for the possible damages to U.S. coastlines from Mexico's Ixtoc-1 oil spill.

The demand provoked outrage in Mexico, particularly as the U.S. has been known in the past among the international community as a strong proponent for the view that there is no international law to guide action in such cases as the Ixtoc-1 accident. Washington's transparent attempt to put pressure on Mexico—in the midst of an active dispute over the sale of Mexican natural gas to the U.S., as well as of the more fundamental, simmering disagreement over Mexico's plans for development of its oil resources—sparked an angry official response from the Mexican Foreign Relations Ministry the next day: "Mexico is not in a position to start conversations [on the Ixtoc case] ... by virtue of the fact that there are no bases within international law to recognize the existence of international legal responsibility by the government of Mexico."

In a press conference the next day, Aug. 24, Mexican President Lopez Portillo attacked the U.S. demand as a "new, unexpected and disconcerting" element in U.S.-Mexico relations. And the deterioration in the relations between the two countries has gone so far that the Mexican leader even questioned the usefulness of the visit to Washington scheduled for Sept. 28.

In the eyes of impartial observers, not only is the U.S. entirely to blame for the crisis in the two countries' relations, but is the big loser as well. In the view of Carter administration Mexico-policy gurus—Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor, is regarded as a leader of this group, especially since the departure of Energy Secretary James Schlesinger—the benefits of

U.S. oil-for-technology deals desired by Mexico must be sacrificed to the broader "geopolitical" goal of preventing the emergence of a major industrial power on the U.S.'s southern border. Although industrialization is precisely what the Mexicans seek—and the price they are asking for Mexico's oil wealth—U.S. strategists reason that the Mexicans can be bullied into coughing up Mexican oil to the U.S. at a minimal cost.

The result of the U.S. policy has so far been only a series of fiascos, the latest, Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda's announcement last week that negotiations for the sale of Mexican natural gas to the U.S. have been suspended, and will not be included in the agenda for the Lopez Portillo-Carter summit. As well, U.S. firms are being shut out of a potential export market that will eventually produce "billions of dollars" in capital goods orders, according to some experts.

"Tough guy" approach

For the time being, the U.S. seems to be persisting in its bullying tactics. In an interview in the Mexican press recently, William Colby, former CIA director and protégé of Henry Kissinger, declared that "the greatest threat to the United States is its relations with the three-quarters of the world which lives in underdevelopment, and the most obvious threat is Mexico, with 60 million inhabitants becoming 120 million by the end of the century." "There aren't enough bullets to go around" to stop the "invasion" of Mexican labor, Colby stated, so the only solution is to prevent any capital-intensive development and industrialization in Mexico, and to create labor-intensive jobs for Mexican peasants who are attracted to jobs in U.S. industry.

The Mexican answer to Colby will come at the United Nations in late September, where Lopez Portillo will officially present Mexico's world energy policy to the United Nations, one day before he is scheduled to meet with President Carter. That proposal calls for making energy "the common responsibility of mankind," to ensure that supplies and prices are best apportioned to provide for global industrial development. The U.S. has yet to officially recognize the existence of that plan.

—Elsa Ennis