

Stronger bonds across the Southern border

As Mexico promotes its own federalism, interest has risen in cross-border cooperation with U.S. states at the same time as security concerns are tightening border access.

BY CHRIS WHATLEY

President George W. Bush welcomed Mexican President Vicente Fox to the White House on Sept. 5 with these words: “The United States has no more important relationship in the world than the one we have with Mexico.” Less than one week later, the tragic events of Sept. 11 would compel the administration to shift its foreign policy focus to the war on terrorism.

Despite this shift, it remains clear that the long-term prosperity and security for citizens in both nations requires close cooperation between the United States and Mexico. State government leaders have long recognized this fact and are working hand-in-hand with their Mexican counterparts to expand cooperation on environmental management, law enforcement and a broad range of other issues.

Mexico’s “New Federalism”

The election of Fox as president in July 2000 represented a historic turning point in Mexico’s 200-year political history. After a competitive campaign and an election credited by international



President Bush walked with Mexican President Vicente Fox as they reviewed troops during a ceremony at the White House on Sept. 5. State government leaders also are working with their Mexican counterparts to expand cooperation on environmental management, law enforcement and a broad range of other issues. Associated Press photo.

observers as broadly fair, Fox was elected under the banner of the Alliance for Change, an opposition coalition headed primarily by the National Action Party (PAN). Fox became the first Mexican president to be elected from a party other than the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) since 1929.

Fox’s election followed a long process of institutional reform, including a significant effort to transfer power from the central government to the states. In 1995, former President Ernesto Zedillo launched a “New Federalism” initiative to reduce excessive centralization and executive control. In a series of policy reforms, substantial powers

over public education and health care were handed to state and local government.

These reforms helped transform many of Mexico’s state governments into laboratories for policy innovation and breeding grounds for new political leadership. State governments seized their newfound powers to implement public education programs, promote exports and pursue other reform agendas.

By 1999, three-fifths of Mexico’s population lived in states controlled by opposition party governors, including then-Gov. Vicente Fox of Guanajuato. The political space afforded by the decentralization effort gave opposition parties a chance to

cultivate voter loyalty and demonstrate their ability to govern. These developments, combined with a series of electoral reforms, contributed to the historic transfer of power in the July 2000 election.

Border cooperation

The process of decentralization and reform within Mexico has taken place against a backdrop of growing cooperation between Mexico and the United States. The North American Free Trade Agreement has integrated the two countries' economies to an unprecedented level, with two-way trade reaching \$250 billion in 2000. At the same time, new mechanisms for collaboration between government leaders at all levels have been established both through the U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission and the independent efforts of state governments, associations and private institutions.

Governors on both sides of the border meet regularly with their counterparts to share best practices and pursue joint endeavors through the Border Governors Conference. The conference has hosted annual meetings since 1980, linking the governors of the states of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas with the governors of Mexico's six border states, Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Sonora and Tamaulipas. The Conference is held in alternating locations in the United States and Mexico.

The Conference has enhanced joint border efforts to address issues such as the environment, economic development, health care, social development and trade. At the July 2001 meeting of the Conference in Tampico, Tamaulipas, the governors of all the border states released a joint declaration calling for cooperation on a broad set of initiatives on agriculture, border cross-

ings, economic development, education, environment, health care and tourism.

U.S. legislators have also played a critical role in promoting cross-border cooperation. The legislatures of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas all have committees with a mandate for promoting cross-border relations. However, because the legislative branch lacked an institutional structure similar to the Border Governors Conference, in 1998, The Council of State Governments-WEST and the Southern Legislative Conference worked together to form the Committee on the Southern Border.

This committee conducts annual Border Exchange Forums, bringing together U.S. state legislators and their counterparts in Mexico to promote mutual understanding and share legislative experiences. The committee also has compiled a comprehensive directory of legislators from all the bordering

Mexico revitalizes its states

The Veracruz conference on federalism serves as a workshop for democratic societies.

BY KENT BRIGGS

Start a discussion of federalism with most American politicians today and watch their eyes glaze over within minutes. Start a discussion of federalism with most Mexican politicians today and watch out.

Mexico's political elites have entered into an energetic national conversation on the reform of their federal system on the call of President Vicente Fox, who sees the devolution of political and governmental power as the cornerstone of the reform agenda on which he was elected in July 2000.

It was in this spirit that Mexican leaders passionately debated the proper relationship of the central government to the states at an international conference convened by the Forum of Federations in



Kent Briggs, left, executive director and president of Westrends at The Council of State Governments-WEST, talked with Ralph Lysyshyn, president of the Forum of Federations, at the Veracruz conference in Mexico.

Veracruz, Mexico, on Nov. 15-17 at the request of President Fox. U.S. participants were transported back to what it must have been like in this country when the leaders of the Federalist Party argued for the ratification of the Constitution for

the newly independent states of America more than 200 years ago.

The Forum of Federations is a non-profit, international organization based in Ottawa, Canada, that promotes the study and practice of federal governance

Mexican states to facilitate ongoing contact among legislators.

In September 2001, CSG-WEST received a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development to expand the work of the Committee on the Southern Border. The new grant will allow CSG-WEST and the SLC to conduct an expanded series of exchange programs and forums for legislators throughout the border region. The goal is to create a lasting mechanism for mutually beneficial cooperation that builds upon and enhances the existing efforts of individual states.

Looking to the future

Mexico's efforts to reform and restructure its federal system remain a work in progress. The federal government continues to play a dominant role through its control of most revenue. In addition, the systems of checks and balances within

Mexico's state governments remain weak due to the strong powers of governors.

Fox, however, has committed his administration to fundamentally altering the way the federal government interacts with the states and the way all levels of government relate to citizens. Mexico's state governments also will need further strengthening if they are to play an effective and accountable role in meeting the pressing needs of their constituents.

At the same time, the events of Sept. 11 have created new complications for border cooperation. Prior to the terrorist attacks, U.S.-Mexico relations were already challenged by differing views on access of Mexican trucks to the United States, immigration concerns and other issues. Since Sept. 11, increased security precautions along the border have created a new set of challenges as the security-related delays have reduced traffic at some border crossings by as much as 35 percent. These

delays also have led to thousands of layoffs on both sides of the border in industries closely tied to border trade.

Complicated by the uncertain future of Mexico's institutional reforms and new security concerns, the task of achieving effective cross-border cooperation has become more difficult. At the same time, the prosperity of both nations' economies and the security of citizens throughout the border region depend on continued partnership on a wide range of issues, from joint economic-development initiatives to cooperation on law enforcement. State government leaders are well aware of these factors and are working with their Mexican counterparts to address these concerns, even in the face of daunting challenges. ★

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around the world. The Council of State Governments, which has a long-standing commitment to improving the workings of the American federal system, is a member of the Forum's advisory board. The Guardian of Federalism award, presented annually by CSG, recognizes the efforts of American political leaders at the state and federal level in sustaining and supporting the world's oldest functioning federal system.

President Fox served as keynote speaker and chair of the three-day conference that brought delegates from many of the 24 countries around the world that are considered federations and govern nearly 2 billion people. Fox urged the conference to serve as a laboratory to work toward the development of an "authentic federalism for Mexico" that would allow Mexico to break with a past of a highly centralized and often autocratic political system and move political and economic power back to the Mexican states. To a great degree, Fox is committing his term in office and his place in Mexican history to the success of this initiative.

It is a commitment that seems consistent with the spirit of times. At the conference, Ronald Watts, professor emeritus and fellow of the Institute of Intergovernmental Relations at Queen's University, Ontario, examined the historical forces that have caused the federalist model to come in and out of favor in the calamitous 20th century. Prior to 1945, federalism was seen as a curious form of government largely confined to the North-American continent and of little use or value. "Federation was seen by many, especially in Europe, as an incomplete national government, as a transitional mode of political organization, as a not really desirable but necessary concession in exceptional cases to accommodate political divisiveness," Watts said.

Following the breakup of the colonial empires at the end of World War II, the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa found that the federalist template was an ingenious way of accommodating the competing linguistic, ethnic and religious communities lumped together within their national boundaries. At the same time, Watts said, there was a grow-

ing recognition in Europe that the federal model also was very useful as a check on the raw power of the unitary state that had been captured by fascist governments in Italy, Spain and Germany. In 1949, West Germany became the second state in Europe after Switzerland to adopt a federal system of government, setting in motion the formation of the European Union.

As Europe moves toward economic and political integration, it provides yet another example of the power of the federalist experiment. European and South American participants in the plenary and workshop sessions at the Veracruz conference expressed enthusiastic, even audacious support for change and experimentation with their political systems. There was a contagious confidence federalism as a political system will be validated by the events of the 21st century, and the conference convened by the president of Mexico might be seen in retrospect as the first of those events. ★

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