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Obama's Next Foreign Crisis Could Be Next Door

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Mexico's economy is being dragged down by the recession to the north. American addicts have turned **Mexico** into a drug superhighway, and its police and soldiers are under assault from American guns. Nafta promised 15 years ago that Mexican trucks would be allowed on American roads, but Congress said they were unsafe.

United States-Mexican relations are in the midst of what can be described as a neighborly feud, one that stretches along a lengthy shared fence. That border fence, which has become a wall in some places, is another irritant.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton arrives in **Mexico** on Wednesday for what will be the first in a parade of visits by top administration officials, including President Obama himself next month, to try to head off a major foreign policy crisis close to home. They will find a country mired in a deepening slump, miffed by signs of protectionism in its largest trading partner, and torn apart by a drug war for which many in **Mexico** blame customers in the United States.

There is plenty of angst on the other side as well. Many American communities are worried about drug violence spilling over the border, and about Mexican immigrants taking scarce jobs. That is forcing the Obama administration, already managing two wars and a deep recession, to fashion a new **Mexico** policy earlier than it might have wished.

Mr. Obama, like President George W. Bush before him, is finding that these foreign challenges touch on some of the thorniest issues in domestic politics, including immigration, free trade and gun control. The Bush administration disturbed relations by failing to deliver on its promise of immigration reform. And the Obama administration, in its first weeks in office, has set off new tensions with a series of conflicting signals and false starts.

Some in the administration have suggested that the Mexican government is not in control of all of its territory, even as other officials praise President Felipe Calderon's resolve to fight the drug trade. Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. urged and then backed away from reinstating a ban on sales of assault rifles, which are fueling the drug violence.

Mr. Obama acknowledged contingency plans to deploy troops to the border if too much of the violence spilled over into the United States, but he said almost in the same breath that no such deployment was imminent.

"I think it's unacceptable if you've got drug gangs crossing our borders and killing U.S. citizens," Mr. Obama told reporters when asked if he might deploy troops. "I think if one U.S. citizen is killed because of foreign nationals who are engaging in violent crime, that's enough of a concern to do something about it."

The bloody drug war, which has caused 7,000 deaths in 16 months, has become the principal sore point between the countries. Although addiction rates among Mexicans

are on the rise, the vast majority of the drugs flowing through **Mexico** will be sniffed, smoked or injected by Americans. On top of that, 90 percent of the guns used by Mexican drug cartels originated in the United States, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

The suggestion by Mr. Obama that American troops might be moved toward the border to combat drug cartels prompted Gen. Guillermo Galvan, **Mexico's** defense secretary, to assert that no deployment of foreign soldiers would be allowed on Mexican soil. History was at the root of the concern here, as even Mexican schoolchildren know of the war a century and a half ago in which the United States seized half of **Mexico's** territory. Also riling the Mexicans was Congressional testimony by Dennis C. Blair, the director of national intelligence, suggesting that drug cartels controlled some parts of **Mexico**. The Calderon administration reacted angrily, with Interior Minister Fernando Gomez Mont saying that such remarks "are unfortunate and don't contribute to generating a climate of confidence that is indispensable to win this fight."

For his part, Mr. Calderon has spoken of an American "campaign" against **Mexico**, and has pointed out that the murder rate is higher in New Orleans than in his country.

Mexico's battered image, as outlined in State Department travel advisories, is of particular concern to Mr. Calderon because it scares off potential investors and tourists. The litany of angry rebuttals from **Mexico** has grown so fierce that an American diplomat here, Leslie Bassett, wrote a column in a Mexican newspaper the other day, saying, "No Obama appointee has referred to **Mexico** as a failed state; every Obama appointee posed the question has acknowledged the existing security challenges, commended President Calderon's fortitude, and dismissed the idea out of hand."

State Department officials said that one of the critical goals of Mr. Obama's visit would be to "open the aperture" of the bi-national agenda so that the relationship was not limited -- some say, held hostage -- to a single issue.

"It is important to underscore that this is a big relationship," Assistant Secretary of State Thomas A. Shannon Jr. said in an interview. "It is very broad and deep. And it should not be narrowed down to a couple of issues."

Few of those issues are simple, however.

After the United States shut the border to Mexican trucks, in violation of a promise it made under the North American Free Trade Agreement, **Mexico** placed tariffs on 89 American products, from grapes to dishwashers, in some cases appearing to select items from the districts of well-connected members of Congress to increase the action's impact.

Mexico is reeling from the recession in the United States. Although Mr. Calderon speaks often of how well prepared his country is for the global downturn, **Mexico's** export factories have lost some 65,000 jobs since October, one of many tangible effects. Exports fell 32 percent in January, and automobile exports fell 50 percent in the first two months of 2009. **Mexico's** central bank expects the economy to contract no more than 1.8 percent this year, but some investment banks forecast shrinkage of as much as 5 percent.

Last week, Mr. Obama made clear that many problems, including the drug trade and immigration reform, will have to be dealt with together.

"I don't think we can do this piecemeal," Mr. Obama said during a town hall meeting in California. "I'm going to be working with President Calderon in **Mexico** to figure out how we get control over the border that's become more violent because of the drug trade. We have to combine that with cracking down on employers who are exploiting undocumented workers."