

# Trump's Mexico visit was great for Trump, but backfired on President Peña Nieto.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/06/trumps-mexico-visit-was-great-for-trump-but-backfired-on-president-pena-nieto/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/06/trumps-mexico-visit-was-great-for-trump-but-backfired-on-president-pena-nieto/)

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*Last week, Donald Trump made a surprise visit to Mexico to meet with President Enrique Peña Nieto. [Jesus Velasco](#) and [Cody Holmes](#) write that while both Trump and Peña Nieto are experiencing tough times politically, Trump was able to use the meeting to appear presidential, while the Mexican president only looked defenseless and indulgent. They comment that Peña Nieto's cluelessness at handling this year's US election highlights that Mexico has lacked a consistent and coherent foreign policy towards the US in recent years.*



Last Wednesday, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto and Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, met for a private meeting in Mexico City. This was an ironic union of two men experiencing difficult times politically. Peña Nieto's approval ratings, are in the twenties. The poor behavior of the economy, several corruption scandals, and recent revelations of plagiarism in his law school thesis are affecting his reputation as Mexico's executive. Once a promising golden boy, Peña Nieto, today, has become a president of disenchantment. Similarly, Mr. Trump is falling behind Hillary Clinton in the polls, and he is desperately attempting a revival after several weeks of slow-motion suicide.

Since Mexicans first learned about Trump's arrival to the Aztec land, two questions milled in the mind of the people: Why did Peña Nieto invite Trump to Mexico in the first place? Granted, the invitation was also extended to Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, but she has yet to respond. Furthermore, what does the Peña Nieto administration seem to gain from this? The obvious answer may be that he is trying to play both sides, but it has become increasingly clear that this unexpected conference has strongly backfired on President Peña Nieto for a few simple reasons.

First, for both politicians, this meeting was intended for domestic consumption. Often Trump has been criticized for not being presidential, for not behaving as a statesman. Peña Nieto wanted to show his constituency that he and Mexico can properly confront Trump and the northern colossus. In doing so, he could increase his favorability. During the press conference, and for the first time in his life, Trump looked presidential while Peña Nieto appeared as defenseless and indulgent. For a few minutes, Trump put on a façade, only to become the same ultra nationalist candidate in Phoenix on Wednesday evening. Trump achieved his goal. Peña Nieto certainly did not. However, Trump's successful visit to Mexico and his speech in Phoenix should be taken with a grain of salt. Trump's performance in Mexico, quite probably, strengthened his base and perhaps was seen with sympathy for those who are indecisive. Unfortunately for him, his address in Arizona did not help him expand his most needed base. It is difficult to believe that Latinos or African Americans were seduced by Trump's words in Phoenix. Above all, the Mexican President still allowed Trump to sparkle.



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- Jesus Velasco and Cody Holmes, Tarleton State University

Second, Peña Nieto's invitation for Mr. Trump seems to highlight a larger problem here: the sheer lack of knowledge and professionalism of his administration to conduct Mexico's foreign policy. In general terms, the Mexican president has named some intelligent people to the forefront of Mexican diplomacy, but they have limited knowledge on foreign affairs. Only complete ignorance and a lack of discernment can explain why his administration conferred the Order of the Aztec Eagle—the highest Mexican recognition to foreigners—to King Salman bin Abdulaziz who, among other things, has the reputation to often order the beheading of his fellow citizens. In the case of the United States, Peña Nieto has shown a lack of interest in bilateral relations. In 2015 he went seven months without naming a Mexican ambassador to the US. Conversely, he has spent more time in Turkey than in the United States, and his administration did not conduct active lobbying until several months after Trump had started his attacks on Mexico.

Needless to say, his current public relations campaign in the US is feeble. The Mexican president and his foreign officials seem to be clueless on handling this particular US election year, as is evident with this prearranged meeting. This indifferent and mindless strategy toward the US will come at a cost, especially in the realm of politics. With no consistent foreign policy with the US, the Mexican government is highly susceptible to the unintended consequences that may arise as a result from the meeting with Trump. Today, the consequences of this decision are evident. Mexicans feel humiliated and betrayed. Almost unanimously, they are condemning their President for welcoming one of the most detested men in Mexico. In a [poll](#) conducted by *Reforma* newspaper on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 85 percent of the Mexicans expressed that Peña Nieto's invitation to Trump was a mistake. Likewise, Peña Nieto is facing a very serious cabinet crisis because top officials of the Mexican government were overlooked in the decision to invite Trump to Mexico. Mexican nationalism has strongly reemerged—not only in response to an undesirable foreigner, such as Trump, but also in response to the Mexican president's actions.

In the Peña Nieto administration and in others that came before, Mexico has lacked a consistent and coherent foreign policy to the United States. Most of the time, Mexico reacts to American policies, and those reactions are basically the outcome of improvisation rather than the result of a clear vision of what the country wants to accomplish with its northern neighbor. If Mexico wants to conceive and implement a reasonable foreign policy with the US it needs to have a deep knowledge of American politics and history. Mexico must also understand the way main political and economic actors behave in the United States. Knowledge on American political tendencies and culture along with competency of the decision-making process is necessary for Mexico's foreign affair success with the US. And lastly, the Mexican administration must have a clear and a viable perspective of their nation's long term interests. In a country that privileges Mexican politicking knowledge of the US is a superfluous commodity, and a

long term, consistent, and coherent foreign policy might be an implausible task.

For now, President Peña Nieto has done a great favor for the campaign of Donald Trump. It is quite probable that Trump may exclaim, thank you, your Excellency.

*A version of this article originally appeared at the [Dallas Morning News](#).*

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