



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Mexico's Sheinbaum needs to extend all the charm she can towards Trump



It was 189 years ago that Mexican troops defeated a small group of Texan defenders holed up in the Alamo Mission as part of their independence battle. But Mexico failed to win the war, and the Battle of the Alamo on 23 February 1836 remains a potent symbol of freedom in the US.

It would be an understatement to say US-Mexican relations appear to be plunging into another rocky period. But Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum appears to be something of a Trump whisperer, like French President Emmanuel Macron and in contrast to other leaders, such as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Colombian President Gustavo Petro.

The US may be gearing up for further military action against Mexico, but this time against the drug cartels, whose products are overwhelmingly consumed by Americans, but curbing their demand has proved impossible over the last few decades.

Speculation about possible US bombs striking against the cartels rose after the US on 19 February **added** six Mexican cartels to its list of foreign terrorist organisations (FTOs) and called for the “total elimination” of the groups. The designation is more usually applied to political and not criminal groups.

Furthermore, this week US President Donald Trump said his tariffs against Mexico as well as against Canada would start next week after he had delayed them by a month.

Agreement over the tariffs

But the erratic Trump appears to hold some esteem for Sheinbaum, whom he has called a “marvellous woman.” He has also described the former climate scientist who won the presidency last year as “wonderful.”

She still appeared confident about reaching agreement over the tariffs in further discussions with Trump this week. “You have to keep a cool head and not take President Trump’s isolated statements out of context,”

said Sheinbaum. “The agreement needs to be finalised this week: we continue to talk with them on the issues of security and trade.”

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She also said the US needed to look at its own consumption of illicit drugs and not just blame Mexico. She could have added that the flow of relatively small amounts of the potent drug fentanyl compared with other drugs such as cocaine is mostly moved by US citizens.

Trump argues the tariffs - set at 25% of imports from Mexico - are needed to stop the smuggling of fentanyl as well as curb illegal immigration. He delayed the tariffs when Sheinbaum agreed to send 10,000 more soldiers to control Mexico’s border with the US.

Cross-border raids

The cartels are already under sanctions, so analysts viewed the FTO designation as symbolic while perhaps paving the way for expanded operations by the US military. Pete Hegseth, who worked for Fox News before becoming defence secretary, has not **ruled out** cross-border raids. “All options are on the table,” he said.

Trump’s ambassador to Mexico, Ronald Johnson, is a former CIA paramilitary officer, while Joe Kent, a former Army Green Beret, is director of the National Counterterrorism Centre.

The US has also increased drone flights over Mexico to look for fentanyl labs, under agreement with Mexico, says Sheinbaum, while the CIA is expanding surveillance on its side of the border.

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The FTO designation also gives Washington the power to impose sanctions on “entities” linked to the cartels. It will be up to the Trump administration to decide how to interpret what and who are the “entities” providing “material support”.

It could extend the definition to include financial services and ensnare unwitting US companies as well as migrants who pay smugglers with a connection to the cartels. It remains to be seen if the US citizens who sell the guns that end up with the cartels might also face charges.

For her part, Sheinbaum has promised constitutional reform not only to protect Mexico’s sovereignty but also to apply the strongest penalties against foreigners involved in the smuggling and distribution of guns. Mexico has often demanded the US do more to prevent guns reaching Mexico from US gun shops and manufacturers.

The Gulf of...

Sheinbaum reacted with grace and laughed when Trump, perhaps forgetting that Mexico is part of North America, said he wanted to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. She suggested instead he call it “América Mexicana”.

Mexico is **waiting** for a response from Google after requesting it fully restore the name Gulf of Mexico to its Google Maps service before filing a lawsuit. The Associated Press has already sued senior aides to Trump over a decision by the White House to restrict its access for continuing to refer to the Gulf of Mexico in its news coverage.



Mexico faces very real economic pain if it faces an all-out tariff and trade war - Port of Ensenada, Mexico

But Mexico faces very real economic pain if it faces an all-out tariff and trade war. The Bank of Mexico last week halved its growth forecast for the economy from 1.2% to just 0.6% this year.

A trade war would also hurt US pockets, with the Yale University Budget Lab **estimating** that Mexican and Canadian tariffs could depress average US incomes by \$1,170 to \$1,245 a year. More Americans oppose the tariffs than support them, **according** to a poll by Public First for Politico.

Such evidence will be useful for Sheinbaum if she is to convince Trump of his folly.

France’s Macron appeared to have come back empty-handed after he tried to steer Trump away from giving in to Russia over Ukraine, but they still seem to enjoy cordial relations.

Canada’s Trudeau also had nothing to show after he rushed to Trump’s estate Mar-a-Lago last November. Last month, Colombia’s Petro was forced to accept military flights carrying migrants deported from the US after Trump threatened tariffs and sanctions for previously refusing such flights.

Sheinbaum will need to muster all the charm that she can if she is to talk Trump down.