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Obama in Mexico for Talks on Economy, Security

Obama is scheduled to meet with President Enrique Pena Nieto

By JIM KUHNHENN | Thursday, May 2, 2013 | Updated 2:01 PM PDT



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President Obama's Second Term

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The president arrived in Mexico City on Thursday afternoon, opening his first trip to Latin America since winning re-election. He is scheduled to spend the day in meetings with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, who took office in December. The two leaders will also speak at a joint news conference Thursday evening.

Obama will be looking for more details from Pena Nieto about changes he is making to the robust security relationship between the neighboring countries. In a dramatic shift from his predecessor, Felipe Calderon, Pena Nieto has moved to end the widespread access U.S. security agencies have had in Mexico to help fight drug trafficking and organized crime.

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The White House has treaded carefully in its public response to the changes, with the president and his advisers saying they need to hear directly from the Mexican leader before making a judgment about the new arrangement.

"With the new Mexican administration coming into office, it certainly stands to reason that President Pena Nieto would want to take a look at the nature of our cooperation," said Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser. "So we're currently working with the Mexicans to evaluate the means by which we cooperate, the means by which we provide assistance."

The White House, hoping to move the discussion surrounding the president's trip beyond security, has emphasized in recent days a desire to boost economic ties to Mexico.

Already the economic relationship between the two countries is robust, with Mexico accounting for \$500 billion in U.S. trade in 2001 and ranking as the second-largest export market for U.S. goods. A stronger Mexican economy would result in even more trade and job growth on both sides of the border, Obama aides say.

Among the cadre of advisers traveling with the president is Michael Froman, a longtime White House international economic adviser who was nominated by Obama just hours before the trip to serve as the next U.S. Trade Representative.

A host of other pressing issues are vying for Obama's attention as he launches his quick trip to Mexico and Costa Rica, where Obama will travel on Friday. Among those issues are possible chemical weapons use in Syria, the arrest of three more people in connection with the Boston Marathon bombings, and the delicate immigration negotiations underway on Capitol Hill.

Obama will be looking for a nod of support for the immigration effort from Pena Nieto. The Mexican leader is expected to back the effort, although it's unlikely he will take a public position on specific components of the bill in order to avoid the impression that Mexico is meddling in U.S. domestic politics.

Still, Pena Nieto's support — particularly for stricter border security efforts — could help Obama sell the measure to wary Republicans, many of whom have long opposed giving legal status to people in the country illegally before securing the border. A bipartisan Senate bill Obama is backing would make a pathway to citizenship for people in the U.S. illegally contingent on a secure border.

"They are critical to our ability to secure the border," Rhodes, the Obama adviser, said of Mexico. "All the immigration plans that have been contemplated put a focus on securing the border as an essential priority and starting point for immigration reform."

On Friday, Obama will speak to an audience of Mexican students before heading to Costa Rica for talks with Central American leaders. His meetings there are expected to focus on bolstering regional economic cooperation, as well as security issues.

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