

President Fox reviewing troops at Campo Marte.



AP/Wide World Photos (Claudio Cruz)

# Mexico's Search for a New Military Identity

By CRAIG A. DEARE

**T**he election of Vicente Fox Quesada as president of Mexico has dramatically changed the political reality of his country and the region. Before the election of 2000, *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) was in effect the Mexican political system for more than seven decades. Just as the end of

the Cold War required a thoroughgoing reassessment of U.S. national security strategy, the stunning defeat of the ruling party will significantly alter the way Mexico faces the future. These changes may well reshape both the country's security partnership with the United States and the role of Mexico in the Southern region.

## Change and Challenge

Mexico's geostrategic importance to the United States has been a constant for years; thus its underlying political, economic, and social stability is

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extremely significant. It is the second largest U.S. trading partner after Canada and the second largest market for goods and services, surpassing Japan since 1997. As the fifth largest producer of oil in the world, 1.5 million barrels of Mexican petroleum exported each day satisfy almost 17 percent of the 9 million barrels demanded daily by its neighbor to the north. Increased trade with Mexico reduces poverty in Central America, easing illegal immigration into the United States, and maintains stability and economic health in that region.

Relations with Mexico will depend on how well it manages political, economic, and social transformation. The transfer of power from PRI to the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) was the first time there has been a peaceful change of regimes in the nation's history. The implications of the fall of PRI are difficult to overstate. When the party took control in 1929 from the *Partido Revolucionario Nacional*, Mexico had a primarily rural population of 15 million. When PRI left power, the country was 75 percent urban, increasingly industrial, and had nearly 100 million people. The political culture of Mexico was described in the past as corporatist-bureaucratic-authoritarian.

*The system is authoritarian in the sense that one party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, has monopolized the national political life for six decades. It is top-down and "democratic-centralist" almost in a Leninist sense. It is bureaucratic in that it is a machine and a system that governs Mexico, not any single individual. It is corporatist in that the PRI incorporates within its ranks the major corporate or functional groups in Mexican workers, peasants, and the so-called "popular" sector which is supposed to include all others.<sup>1</sup>*

For over a half century one-party rule permeated every aspect of political and economic life.

Disassembling the legacy of PRI presents serious challenges. First is a largely centralized and command-directed economy that up through the 1980s left the country vulnerable to external market forces. It is true that



President Fox visiting military relief shelter.

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real economic liberalization and reform began in the early 1980s, largely as a reaction to economic crises. Nonetheless, the growth has been unevenly distributed and remains focused on oil and sectors favored by central planners. Land reform, a fundamental issue of the 1910 revolution, remains problematic. Vast areas once held by wealthy landowners have been redistributed among millions of *campesinos*, a popular political move. But owners of small plots are finding it difficult to compete with efficient agro-businesses of developed nations, and further reforms are necessary. Endemic and constant corruption is more serious because of its effect on drug traffic. Moreover, the surprising uprising in 1994 by the *Zapatistas* in Chiapas underscores the fundamental problem of social and economic inequities in different regions.

### Military Contacts

Though some social and economic problems of transformation have military implications, they require nonmilitary solutions. On the other hand, these problems must be

tackled as security issues, with illegal drugs among the chief concerns. U.S. demand for cocaine, coupled with supplies from the Andean ridge, has created a situation that threatens Mexico through increased criminal activity and corruption. Ideally, better relations with the United States should ease the burden of coping with military as well as nonmilitary threats to national and regional stability.

The objectives of Mexican foreign policy are national sovereignty, nonintervention in the affairs of other states, and adherence to international law. This policy has evolved because the country is located next to the United States. Given its geographical asymmetries, Mexico has sought to reduce intervention in its internal affairs. To further limit outside influence, it has preferred bilateral to multilateral dealings. This challenges policymakers in the conduct of affairs with their counterparts who find themselves screened from external actors by the *Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores* (SRE), or foreign ministry, a condition which leads to complication and delay.



Zapatistas supporters  
in Oventic, Chiapas.

AP/Wide World Photos (Eduardo Verdugo)

Mexico's perspective on national security issues must be appreciated before considering bilateral relations. Basically *national security* is not found in

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the country's lexicon. After World War II, such expressions were avoided to escape confusion with the national security doctrine concept being used in the Southern Cone by authoritarian regimes. Mexico only began to use the term in the 1970s and 1980s, but without defining its scope. The military has historically seen its role as reinforcing national stability.

The debate over an acceptable definition has continued without either official or academic agreement. This is emblematic of a nation that has struggled with its place in the world despite being a major power on the Caribbean and Central American scene. Because the government has difficulty deciding

what constitutes national security, it has trouble assigning roles and missions. As a result, the army and navy have been relatively free in defining their missions over the past 40 years, principally because of governmental autonomy whereby accountability has not been traditionally demanded by the legislature or society. Indications from the new administration suggest that this approach could change. The United States must be attentive to this development.

It is also worth noting that the army and navy are independent cabinet-level agencies within which the air force and naval infantry function. This explains why these organizations are essentially different and must be dealt with independently in the short term.

As PRI built on support from various segments of society, a pillar of the corporatist model was the army.<sup>2</sup> By design, the army was part of the political structure. The navy has not occupied a similar role since it has developed on the margins and has not been formally included in the PRI system. Although most modern militaries have gradually

integrated services into a unified armed forces, the Mexican army and navy are established under the *Secretarías de Defensa* and *Marina* and exist separately and compete for scarce resources, a situation that generally favors the army. Although not a fortuitous relationship, the navy accepts it as a fact of life. Furthermore, there is no organization like a joint chiefs of staff, much less an office of the secretary of defense. This may change under the new administration, but it is a legacy of a political system developed by PRI and is regarded by many as a stabilizing relationship which should not be modified.

Attracting the attention of U.S. defense policymakers is a difficult proposition for Mexico. Its structure does not lend itself to dealing with the Pentagon. The defense and naval departments are led by four-star flag officers who are uneasy working with civilian officials at home, much less foreign governments. Similarly, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has no equivalent, nor does the Joint Staff. The defense secretariat owns the land and airspace while the naval secretariat controls the coasts and inland up to the ten kilometer mark. The army and navy coordinate when necessary, but the concept of jointness is foreign. Mexican services simply operate independently of one another. Clearly the structural interface is problematic.

One anomaly is the unified command plan. U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) has an area of responsibility that includes the land mass south of Mexico, the waters adjacent to Central and South America, the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and part of the Atlantic. However it does not include Mexico which, like Canada to the north, is not assigned to a regional commander, a condition that satisfies Mexico. The country did not interact with SOUTHCOM when it was located in Panama and continues that practice now that the command is headquartered in Miami.

When defense matters require a high level of attention, Mexico turns to Washington which presents structural problems. The army or navy may appeal to one of several places. If



Mexican soldiers  
boarding truck,  
Chiapas.

AP/Wide World Photos (Eduardo Verdugo)

the issue is training or equipment, it may fall within service equities. If it is operational, the logical focus may be the Joint Staff, even though that organization does not support unified commanders. If it is a question of policy, Mexico may consult the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Needless to say, this interface structure cannot be described as user friendly.

### Bilateral Relations

The coinciding interests and policies of Presidents George Bush and Carlos Salinas led to subtle improvements in relations between their militaries beginning in the early 1990s. The North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993 was a major help, a pact that would have been inconceivable ten years earlier. The *Zapatista* rebellion was seen on both sides of the border as potentially destabilizing for Mexico. As Presidents Bill Clinton and

Ernesto Zedillo continued to nurture a broader relationship, bilateral military affairs entered a new phase.

In the early 1990s the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, General Gordon Sullivan, and his counterpart, General Antonio Riviello Bazón, established a close relationship. In 1995 General Enrique Cervantes, Riviello's successor, went to Washington for Sullivan's retirement ceremony. There he called on Secretary of Defense William Perry and extended an invitation to visit Mexico. Later that year Perry made the first trip by a Secretary of Defense to Mexico and proposed forming a bilateral working group. The original five issues addressed by this group centered on items considered by Washington to have mutual interest: counternarcotics, education and training, force modernization,

airspace sovereignty, and disaster relief. The last issue was selected to ensure that Mexico would continue contributing to the process. Perry suggested the working group to Cervantes, who was interested but suggested such a decision had to be reached by President Salinas. Perry understood and raised the matter with the President. Because Salinas liked the idea, *Defensa* was tasked to make the system work.

The working group was organized with representatives from the Departments of State and Defense. State participation was seen as tied to the Mexican foreign ministry, needed because of the inability or the unwillingness of *Defensa* to participate without top cover. The Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy was charged with running the group because Mexico had indicated that its lead official would be the under secretary for bilateral affairs. The official of corresponding

protocol rank in the United States was the Deputy Secretary of State. The issue of interface was alive and well, with the Washington team led by a civilian DOD official and his counterpart being a civilian foreign ministry official from Mexico City as the military endeavored to act in this uncomfortable new role.

Another awkward aspect was the insistence on including *Marina* in the lashup. From the U.S. perspective, this bilateral relationship needed to include all elements of the Mexican defense establishment because the Department of Defense controls all components of the Armed Forces. In reality, the participation of *Marina* was seen by *Defensa* as unnecessary and unwelcome.

The first meeting was held in December 1995 in San Antonio at a downtown hotel rather than a military installation. Over the next four years the group experienced successes and failures because of many factors. Of the original topics, airspace sovereignty was dropped at the outset because of Mexican reluctance to discuss such issues with the U.S. military.

In the end the group focused on counternarcotics, owing to Mexican interest in the issue. This underscores a major lesson: Mexico aggressively pur-

### **Mexico aggressively pursues matters of national interest but only politely entertains others**

sues matters of national interest but only politely entertains others. In an effort to make the relationship work, DOD developed a plan to assist in counternarcotics. The first element was a train-the-trainer program, implemented with counterdrug funding. More than 3,000 soldiers were trained between 1996 and 1999, mostly at Fort Bragg by the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group in tactics, techniques, and procedures for Mexico's airmobile special forces groups. This aspect of the program was relatively successful.

The second component was providing *Defensa* with 73 UH-1H helicopters drawn from the Army. Despite

continual warnings that the operations and maintenance expense would be the responsibility of Mexico, the aircraft eventually were returned to the United States. The failure of this initiative came at the cost of goodwill established over years. Skeptics warned of the pitfalls of such an undertaking, but the players chose to believe that a new era of cooperation had arrived. It will take time to rebuild the lost trust.

Affairs between the United States and Mexico are among the most complex and extensive in the world. The textbook model for conducting foreign policy used by the Department of State does not fit this relationship. Federal agencies have intimate links with Mexico while many local and state governments operate bilaterally across the border. Rather than adopting a coherent policy, the United States pursues a bureaucratic maze of policies toward its neighbor. Thus relationships are difficult, especially in the realm of military contacts.

An assessment of military-to-military affiliation must consider differences between the two nations in strategic, political, and military terms. Transformation puts enormous internal pressure on Mexican institutions. Among issues that must be addressed are the change in regime (including an assertive legislature), economic transformation, endemic corruption, growing criminal activity, illegal immigration, and narcotics trafficking. Increasing wariness in Washington on the part of Congress has made these challenge even tougher. U.S. domestic political realities suggest that the near term prognosis is not promising.

Policymakers on both sides of the border will place greater attention on matters of mutual economic interest, while military issues are relegated to the periphery. The Department of Defense must continue to deal with

Mexico cautiously and respectfully. The fundamental lack of trust and confidence on the part of the Mexican military toward the United States, in particular in the army, makes it important to not push too far too fast, especially with the regime change. Time alone will reveal how successfully both sides handle the situation. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Howard Wiarda, "Mexico: The Unraveling of a Corporatist Regime?" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 1988), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> President Lazaro Cardenas includes the army inside the ruling party. See Roderic A. Camp, *Generals in the Palacio: The Military in Modern Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).