National Defense University
Institute for National Strategic Studies

COLLEAGUES FOR THE AMERICAS SEMINAR SERIES
"Mexico's Views on Hemispheric Security Reform"

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Featured Guest: Raúl Benítez-Manaut, Ph.D., Visiting Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center and Lecturer of Political Science and International Relations, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

On June 23, INSS hosted the fifth 2003 "Colleagues for the Americas" seminar. The seminar, titled "Mexico's Views on Hemispheric Security Reform" focused on Mexico's unique perspective on hemispheric security cooperation; a view shaped by historical doctrines and political culture that uphold sovereignty and nationalism as the key pillars to Mexico's foreign affairs. The following report summarizes the key points presented by Dr. Raúl Benítez-Manaut at the seminar.

Mexico's approach to national security responds to a broad array of transnational threats and public policy issues that range from narco-trafficking and terrorism to organized crime, poverty and natural disasters. These are not uniquely Mexican concerns, many Latin American and Caribbean nations share them, but it was not until the mid-1990s that the Mexican government accepted the fact that it could not resolve them unilaterally and began actively supporting regional security cooperation through the Organization of the American States (OAS) and its Committee on Hemispheric Security. Mexico's past reticence to cooperate has had as much to do with its domestic politics and traditional foreign policy as with an unwillingness to join U.S.-led initiatives shaped by what it saw as American cold war logic.

Mexico's interactions with foreign countries are in large part shaped by a deeply rooted national doctrine, devised in the aftermath of its early twentieth century revolution, that espouses a nationalistic and defensive approach to foreign affairs and defense policies. At the doctrine's core are the principles of non-intervention and respect for sovereignty. The country's tendency toward isolationism and status quo security policy stems from the seventy years that the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, held the presidency and the Party of Democratic Revolution, or PRD, dominated the Mexican Congress. Despite the broad reform agenda of President Fox's National Action Party, or PAN, which took power in 2000, it has been largely unsuccessful in changing Mexico's traditional approach to international affairs. His administration does not have sufficient congressional, bureaucratic and popular support. The PAN has never held a majority in Congress and today only accounts for 30% of the deputies. With opposition from several directions, for example, President Fox suffered defeat in 2001 in his attempt to create the Mexican equivalent of the National Security Council.

Many U.S.-led activities in the region fueled the country's isolationist posture. Mexico strongly objected to the inter-American resolution on Guatemala in 1954, the expulsion of Cuba from the OAS in 1961, U.S. intervention in Chile in 1973, and U.S. involvement in Central America in the late 1970s and 1980s. During most of the last century, Mexico tended to take a contraire stance toward collective and cooperative security arrangements. Its PRI governments did not even see a need for active participation in efforts to ban nuclear weapons in the hemisphere, which resulted in the Treaty of Tlatelolco (1967), and to achieve peace and stability between neighbors.

With the dual collapse of the Soviet Union and trend toward political and economic convergence in the early 1990s, Mexican leaders saw the balance of power in the inter-American system begin to shift. The United States no longer manipulated the international organizations to support its anti-communist policies. Latin American and Caribbean nations had more space and freedom to voice their views and shape the regional agenda. It was during this time of change that the Mexican government decided to work more actively inside the OAS. Mexico's first major step was to propose reforms to two security mechanisms from the 1940s – the Rio Treaty (1948) and the Inter-American Defense Board (1942), which it saw as a U.S.

controlled military body with little relevance to Latin America.

In calling for reforms to Inter-American system, Mexico's approach today is contradictory. On one hand, the government has remained tied to its nationalistic doctrine, unwilling to accept an active and interventionist role in foreign affairs. On the other hand, Mexico's leaders criticize Inter-American security arrangements and call for reforms. The contradiction can be seen in President Fox's bold September 2002 decision to withdraw from the Rio Treaty, claiming it reflects a different era with very different security threats and is now obsolete. At the same time, he beseeched the OAS, successfully, to allow Mexico to host the Special Security Summit in 2003. The hemisphere's presidents and heads of governments had directed the OAS to draw up an inter-American security architecture that responds to the region's contemporary security challenges. The Fox administration's simpler alternative would have been to attempt to modernize the security framework by remaining an active signatory to the Rio Treaty instead of trying to lead an overhaul of arrangements from outside. Mexico's difficult task has been complicated by many divergent security interests among neighboring nations and the active status of the Rio Treaty (Brazil invoked it in response to the 9/11 attacks). Given these conflictive circumstances and the complexity of the issues at hand, it is doubtful how much progress can be achieved in the area of security architecture reform - especially as it relates to the controversial Rio Treaty and Inter-American Defense Board- at Mexico's Special Summit in October.

In addition to recognizing the need for hemispheric security reform, President Fox understands that Mexico is in need of internal security changes as well. The armed forces, for example, have not gone through processes of democratization and demilitarization that have influenced other Latin American military institutions (Argentina, Brazil and El Salvador, among others). Still, Mexico has not experienced a crisis in civil-military relations. Political appeasement of the military has been customary for three quarters of a century and has kept the institution under civilian "control". The Fox Administration is credited with promoting good civil-military cooperation and improving coordination and success of counter-drug operations. He has followed tradition, however, with his appointments of high-level military leaders to national security related organizations, including the justice and national police systems.

While President Fox's approach to the military maintains the status quo, he could use the Constitution's three missions for the armed forces to better regulate their actions. The first of these defense missions, DN-I, is related to the military's preparation for external defense. The second, DN-II, serves to guarantee the internal security and social peace of Mexico, while the third, DN-III, is connected with the military's protection of the population in cases of natural disasters. In Mexico's present geopolitical context, the DN-I mission is hypothetical -- Mexico has no external enemies. Mexico has invoked this measure only three times: against France (1862-1867); against the United States (1914 occupation of Vera Cruz); and against Germany, Italy and Japan (1942-1945). A fourth instance is not likely. The DN-III category, in place since the 1960s, is a well-regarded military mission that has been invoked successfully to respond to natural disasters in Mexico and in neighboring countries.

DN-II is the Mexican military's primary area of activity and is of most concern to the Mexican people (an interesting parallel to the Canadian citizenry and military attention to issues of poverty, crime, environment, etc.) This mission, involving internal security and social peace, presents the Mexican armed forces with a dilemma. They must chose between a role based on reality and one that is a democratic ideal. Military leaders either have to continue to support a national government that cannot sustain its own political stability, which in turn forces the military to play a dominant role in maintaining social order, or to serve a state that is modernizing and reforming itself and that expects the armed forces to operate in a professional capacity that precludes their political involvement.

The success of the Mexican government's attempts to consolidate civil-military relations and to subordinate the armed forces to civilian leadership will be closely linked the government's ability to control the social and economic situation of the country, which is threatened by worsening poverty. In an economically integrated world, Mexico's socioeconomic condition is directly affected by other nations, especially its NAFTA partners, the United States and Canada. Influenced by the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York City, there has been talk about the possibility of having a NAFTA-Plus program that would, for the first time, include elements of security and defense cooperation to complement the free trade policies. In its characteristic isolationism, Mexico rejects such a multinational approach. Especially in its dealings with the United States, the Fox Administration prefers bi-national arrangements, agency-to-agency contact and minimal congressional involvement. Unfortunately, of late, Mexico's relations with the United States have been strained in part due by the Bush administration's neglect of immigration issues put forward by President Fox in 2001 and, more recently, by Mexico's refusal to support the United States' position on Iraq. Relations have degenerated further after the United States suggested in March 2003

that NAFTA could be in danger if Mexico did not support its posture on Iraq at the UN. Now, however, Mexico is interested in moving beyond these issues and rebuilding relations with the United States.

Mexico has a similar modus operandi in dealing with its southern neighbors; it prefers bi-lateral relations to multi-lateral ones. For example, Mexico is working only with Guatemala in developing a “Smart Border” type arrangement that will inevitably impact all Central American nations. Moreover, in its efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the Central American nations affected by Hurricane Mitch, Mexico preferred informal bi-lateral aid arrangements. (This is in part due to the administration’s unwillingness to put official policy to a Congress where the classical doctrine is likely to dominate.) Due to its preference for bilateralism, Mexico has not developed a comprehensive foreign policy relating to Central America. This is a mistake given its proximity and mutual interests.

Mexico is relatively isolated in the area of security and defense. It does not want to be an actor in the day-to-day processes of cooperative security. The traditional principles that have shaped defense and foreign affairs persist in contemporary Mexico. These nationalistic and isolationist tendencies that served a third-world country well during the cold war era are difficult for a more sophisticated country to adapt to today’s hemispheric and global realities. As a part of that tradition, the Mexican Armed Forces do not have a doctrine that addresses international and transnational security issues. They should create one. Such a forward-looking approach could guide Mexico’s reluctant foreign affairs, helping to create more consistent and more proactive international policies in a time when no country can ensure its security on its own.

The INSS Colleagues for the Americas Seminar Series is a program of monthly meetings that commenced in 1994 to further research on hemispheric security and defense issues and to contribute to the professional education of United States and foreign practitioners.

The opinions, conclusions and recommendations expressed or implied within this report are those of the contributor and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

The July meeting of the INSS Colleagues for the America Seminar Series will feature Mr. Dan Fisk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central American Affairs. For more information, please contact Minas Khodagolian, NDU-INSS, (202) 685-3849, email: khodagolian@ndu.edu.