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Mexican Security

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It was not a coincidence that Carlos Salinas de Gotari, the President of Mexico, was the first foreign leader to meet with U.S. President Bill Clinton. Bilateral trade between the two countries exceeded \$75 billion in 1992, making Mexico the second largest U.S. trading partner for the first time. The largest supplier to the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve and the second most important source of strategic raw materials to the U.S., Mexico is also the leading foreign supplier of marijuana to U.S. markets and the transshipment country for 50-70% of the cocaine reaching U.S. illicit drug consumers. With over 300 million legal border crossings in 1992 between the U.S. and Mexico and a pending Free Trade Agreement that promises to establish the largest free trade zone in the world, Mexico has many reasons to attract the attention of the U.S. president as well as the other citizens of the Western Hemisphere.¹

With a bilateral relationship extending far beyond economic issues, the United States has a vested interest in Mexico that will continue to deepen in the years ahead. Future cooperation and improved ties between the two countries depend on mutual understanding, and few issues are as important to the success of this future vision than Mexican security. The study of Mexican security includes the topics of political stability, civil military relations, drug control efforts, and military assistance. For the United States to have a positive and rewarding future relationship with Mexico, it is imperative that these issues be explored and understood on both sides of the border.

I

The most recent seminal event in U.S./Mexican security relations occurred in 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed, ceding over 50% of Mexican territory to the United States. Largely as a result of this and other foreign interventions on its soil, Mexico has developed an ethic in its foreign relations emphasizing an absolute respect for state sovereignty. While actively participating in international organizations and rhetorically supporting multilateral cooperation on some issues, Mexico's protective stance on sovereignty has largely served as a check against U.S. attempts to expand collective security efforts in the hemisphere.

Mexico is a prominent opponent of measures within the Organization of American States favoring increased multilateral military cooperation in the hemisphere. Although Mexican elite views of security are presently undergoing some change, the fundamental cornerstone of the Mexican perspective on security and foreign relations continues to be respect for state sovereignty.

The Mexican Revolution, from 1910 to 1917, was another extremely important event shaping Mexico's historical perspective on security and foreign relations. Carried out principally in the name of land reform and freedom, the revolution gave Mexicans the ability to claim special status in Latin America. Since its inception, the ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party, or PRI, has wrapped itself in the banner of Mexican nationalism and attempted to lay sole claim to the promises and vision of the Mexican Revolution. The mystique of the revolution has helped guide Mexican foreign relations on a path often divergent and independent of U.S. foreign policy, and continues to provide Mexicans with a historic source of national pride.

Although Mexico signed the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Mutual Assistance (the Rio pact) with the United States and other countries of Latin America, it has consistently opposed all efforts to implement it. Mexico was one of only two Latin American countries refusing to condemn the government of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz prior to the U.S. sponsored invasion in 1954, and did not participate in multilateral military action against Cuba in the 1960s. By attempting to avoid dependence on foreign military hardware sales as well as implementation of entangling defense alliances, Mexico has limited foreign influence on its military and pursued an independent course in foreign policy.

Mexico has been a member of several international organizations dealing with security issues for many years, but has recently increased its level of participation in these groups and expanded some bilateral security ties. Mexico has been a member of the United Nation's Narcotic Drug Commission since 1946, and is a signatory to the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Mexico is an active member of HONLEA: Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, and hosted the most recent HONLEA conference in September 1992.² Mexico chaired the Inter-American Drug Abuse Commission of the Organization of American States in 1991-92, and by the end of 1992 had established bilateral drug agreements with eighteen foreign countries.³

Mexico is officially a signatory to the Rio Treaty and a member of the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), which was formed after World War II with the purpose of defending member nations against extra-hemispheric communist aggression. The possibility of incorporating the IADB into the Organization of American States, so it could play a larger and less archaic role in hemispheric security relations, will probably not come to pass without the support of Mexico. Mexico has historically avoided formalized security agreements with the United States because of the flexibility it allows Mexican policymakers to exercise. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s Mexico cooperated extensively with U.S. intelligence agencies in monitoring, among other things, Cuban diplomatic activity in Mexico. The absence of a written agreement for this cooperation permitted Mexican leaders to restrict these intelligence sharing operations when it suited Mexican interests. Guided by pragmatism more than ideology or nationalism, Mexico's approach to security relations with the United States has maintained a high degree of

flexibility and independence.

Civilian desire to maintain control over the Mexican military provides another reason to avoid increased multilateral military to military cooperation, on a formalized basis, which could potentially increase military independence. While supporting international cooperation in other areas, Mexico has largely shied away from increased international security cooperation and the formation of new hemispheric organizations oriented solely toward this end. Yet this position may be undergoing some modification.

Mexico's participation in the United Nation's peacekeeping effort in El Salvador points to such a change. Prohibited by its Constitution from participating militarily, Mexico in 1992 volunteered to send members of its federal judicial police force to aid the U.N. peacekeeping effort in El Salvador. Mexican policemen are primarily responsible for training Salvadoran police forces. Although not highly publicized, Mexican involvement in this U.N. effort could signal an important change from past policies regarding multilateral security related operations.

Mexico's national security concerns have historically focused predominantly on internal rather than external factors. The Mexican National Military Strategy includes two potential external enemies; its geographic neighbors to the north and the south. Mexican armed confrontation with the United States is an extremely implausible scenario as is a military engagement with Guatemala, a country for whom Mexico is the "colossus of the north" just as the United States is to Mexico. Realistically, therefore, one cannot speak of current external military threats to Mexican national security.

This was not always the case, however. During the 1980s, turmoil in Central America and particularly in Guatemala caused Mexican politicians to reevaluate their traditional security perspective. The influx of thousands of refugees into southern Mexico caused additional immigration and military personnel to be dispatched to the border area, but the region was never completely "militarized."⁴ The 1982 Guatemalan "beans and bullets" campaign drove between 30,000 and 35,000 refugees into Mexico's southern states, mainly Chiapas.⁵ Some estimates put the number even higher. Continuing negotiations have led to the return of some Guatemalan refugees from Mexican soil, which began in January, 1993. Although still not completely resolved, civil unrest in Guatemala and the immigration pressures which evolved in Mexico have subsided and are not attracting the attention of Mexican policymakers to the extent they did in the 1980s.

Immigration continues to be a national security concern in Mexico, however. For many years, Mexican leaders have supported an end to the U.S. led embargo on Cuba, which represents a potential threat to Mexican political stability. Large numbers of refugees continue to leave Cuba in 1993, and some Mexicans fear that these numbers could multiply even more if the trade embargo leads to further socioeconomic suffering in Cuba or the downfall of Castro's regime. While most Cuban refugees surviving their journey seek asylum in south Florida, Mexico has historically accepted large numbers of Cuban refugees also. The United States is apparently pursuing a "Haitianization" policy toward Cuba with its trade embargo, and the potential immigration effects of this policy on Mexico have politicians concerned.

In July 1993, Mexico was drawn into another immigration crisis which is likely to recur in the future. Chinese refugees, who had reportedly paid smugglers over \$10,000 each for safe passage to the United States on overcrowded boats, were intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard in international waters. After several days of diplomatic posturing, the Mexican government agreed to accept the Chinese refugees and deport them immediately back to their homeland, thereby allowing the United States to avoid giving each refugee a political asylum hearing required if they landed on U.S. soil.

Because Mexico is not a signatory to the UN convention requiring nations to provide asylum hearings for refugees, Mexico was able to deport almost all the refugees back to China several days after their ships were escorted into a Mexican port. Mexican officials were quoted in national newspapers defending their decision, claiming that they had not "caved in" to U.S. pressure, but rather had acted in the humanitarian interest of the refugees. With ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) pending, however, Mexico's desire to preserve an environment of cooperative bilateral relations with the United States was undoubtedly a factor in this decision. The deportation of Chinese refugees seeking asylum in the United States by the Mexican government sets an important precedent, indicated a hard-line policy toward refugees which Mexico will likely continue. Immigration is an important national security concern for Mexicans, and will continue to challenge politicians as well as the U.S./Mexican bilateral relationship in the future.

The Mexican government has initiated several changes in recent years which have reformed the institutions involved in national security decision making. In 1986 the Federal Directorate of Security was replaced by the General Directorate for Investigation and National Security. In 1989 the title of this office was changed to the Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN). Rather than reporting to the Secretary of Government, CISEN reports directly to the Office of Coordination of the Presidency. Although not the operational equivalent of its U.S. counterpart, a new National Security Council has been formed in Mexico, composed of representatives from the ministries of Government, Foreign Relations, National Defense, the Navy, and the Attorney General's Office.⁶ These Mexican reforms were the result of external as well as internal pressures, and reflect in part the increasing importance the Mexican government places on national security issues. Decision-making groups have been reformed to allow more efficient employment of Mexico's primary instrument for national security concerns: the military.

II

The Mexican military enjoys the notable reputation among its Latin American counterparts of being historically apolitical. The lack of institutional involvement by the military in Mexican politics since the mid 1940s sharply contrasts the militaristic histories of most Latin American nations. In the recent past, militaries ruled from 1976-1982 in Argentina, 1964-1984 in Brazil, 1968-1985 in Peru, 1973-1985 in Uruguay, 1954-1986 in Guatemala, and 1973-1990 in Chile. Bolivia has experienced 182 military coups in the last 169 years, and the two coup attempts in Venezuela during 1992 were reminders that Latin America's militaristic history is still felt today. The existence and preservation of Mexico's apolitical military is therefore an

extraordinary achievement, viewed in the context of its regional counterparts.

Modern Mexican history began after the revolution of 1910-1917. Mexican military officers were intensely involved in politics following this revolutionary time period, but the military was gradually weaned away from its political role. Since 1952, military members have not sought to fulfill their political ambitions outside of the ruling PRI.⁷ Military officers are granted leaves of absence to fill political positions on a temporary basis, but this activity represents military political involvement on an individual, rather than an institutional level.

Many theories have been forwarded attempting to explain how the Mexican military succeeded in undergoing professionalization without militarizing the nation's politics. Latin American military professionalization has typically led to militarization; therefore, an understanding of the dynamic which created Mexican civil-military relations is uniquely needed. Although many factors have influenced professionalization of Mexico's military, the most important characteristic promoting its apolitical behavior has been Mexico's authoritarian government.

Although ostensibly a "democracy" holding periodic formal elections, Mexico has been ruled by the same party since 1917. The PRI has undergone some reorganization including a name change since its inception, but the party's hold on power has been constant. The Constitution guarantees the PRI a legislative majority regardless of election outcomes, and although campaigns for several governorships have been won by opposition candidates, the PRI has occupied the Presidency for sixty-four consecutive years and holds the governorship in 28 of 31 Mexican states.

Domination of national politics by the PRI is relevant to the role of the Mexican military because of the problems it has averted. Since 1952, Mexican military officers have not had to decide which political party to support. The PRI is operatively equivalent to "the State" in Mexico, and a pledge of loyalty to the nation has traditionally been a pledge of loyalty to the PRI. This situation has dramatically enhanced political stability. By not placing military members in a position where they need to make a choice about political allegiance, Mexican politicians have enabled the military as an institution to "stay in the barracks" and remain detached from politics.

A second major factor influencing Mexican civil-military relations has been the lack of interference by Mexican civilian leaders in strictly military matters. Promotions to General must be approved by the President, as must appointments of regional army zone commanders, but other promotions are handled exclusively by the military. Lack of political meddling in military promotions, combined with frequent and loud praise for the vital contributions of the armed forces to Mexican society, have helped shape the Mexican military into an apolitical institution that has not threatened a coup d'état in modern history.

The Mexican Constitution of 1917 defines the military's mission as defending "the sovereignty and independence of the nation, maintaining the Constitution and its laws, and preserving internal order." Mexican territorial integrity is not purely a Mexican concern, however. Geography has made Mexico a partner in a defacto security alliance with the United States, although such a relationship has never been formally negotiated. Serious external threats to

Mexican security would be viewed as a direct threat to U.S. security as well, and would likely face military opposition from north of the Rio Grande. This fact, along with the absence of viable, traditional military threats on its southern border, has allowed the Mexican military to focus on its Constitutional directive to preserve internal order. Officially, the role of the Mexican military revolves around four primary missions: external defense, civic action, internal defense, and counter-narcotics.

The Mexican military has been involved in civic action programs since 1921.⁸ Currently these wide-ranging activities include:

reforestation, medical efforts to curb malaria, restoration of schools, cattle rustling prevention, railroad escort service, security backup to police, disaster relief, anti-narcotics operations, provision of water to remote areas, protection of archeological sites, immunization programs, and construction of housing and rural roads.⁹

Additionally, the military is involved in rural housing electrical work, flood prevention, veterinary programs, and search and rescue operations. Medical civic action programs provide dental care, mental health services, physical exams, and presentations on sexual disease and unwanted pregnancies in rural Mexico.

Civic action plays an important role in increasing Mexican political stability. The army is not viewed by the Mexican public as an arm of the PRI, but rather as a separate national institution which serves the country in very direct ways. The Mexican army works hard in rural areas, especially in places where the PRI is not working, to enhance this image of itself. In maintaining a positive public image and helping meet the needs of the Mexican population at large, the army's civic action programs help strengthen support for the government and political stability.

Disaster relief is another form of civic action which the Mexican army has been tasked to provide. Mexican Defense plan DN-III establishes the guidelines for a military response to a large public disaster.¹⁰ The earthquake which struck Mexico City in 1985 appeared to be a major opportunity for the military to demonstrate its disaster relief capabilities; but, for reasons not publicly disclosed, Mexican politicians prevented the military relief plan from being fully implemented. Some authors have suggested that politicians feared the enormous amount of public recognition and support the military stood to gain by fully implementing its disaster relief plan, anticipating that this recognition could lead to military politization.¹¹ Already severely weakened by Mexico's economic crisis, President Miguel de la Madrid likely did not want the military's public image enhanced to the point where it was viewed as a viable alternative to his civilian administration.

Despite this partially missed opportunity, the Mexican military has been active in other disaster relief operations. Lacking a National Guard force, Mexico turned to its military in January, 1993, to rebuild roads and assist stranded motorists and residents of Baja California when torrential rains overwhelmed the region. Although the military did not release a single official

press release detailing these operations, soldiers were active in the Baja California relief operation for over a month lending assistance. Despite minimal publicity of this role in the national press, the military stands out among Mexican institutions as uniquely capable of providing organized relief efforts for a variety of natural disasters.

Maintenance of internal order, including suppression of domestic unrest, is another important mission of the Mexican army. Guerrilla movements in the 1950s and 1960s were vigorously combated by the Army, especially in the southern state of Guerrero. Army units were used to quell a major railroad strike in 1959, crush a demonstration in 1968 by killing approximately 300 students in Tlateloco Plaza, breakup a student movement in 1971 known as the "Halcones incident," and quiet unrest in 1976 in northwestern states triggered by failed land reform and an economic recession.¹²

Mexico's current president, Salinas de Gotari, has utilized the military to influence election demonstrators and suppress strikes. In the heated protests which followed gubernatorial elections in Michoacan in 1992, the army was dispatched for several months to preserve order. The army allowed protesters from the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) to remain in the central plaza of the capital as long as they wished, and did not threaten civilians with the use of force. In fact, soldiers did not even have to enter the plaza to have an impact. News of the military's arrival in the area spread quickly and had an intimidating effect on protesters who otherwise might have resorted to violent tactics in their electoral protest. In this case the Mexican military not only promoted political stability by its presence, but also indirectly supported the peaceful electoral reform achieved by the Michoacan opposition protesters.

During all elections the military is in charge of processing ballots, which would superficially appear to place them in a position to prevent or effect electoral fraud. In practice, however, the army soldiers tasked to provide security at individual ballot boxes are often illiterate. The army provides a visible electoral presence but is largely incapable of changing electoral results.

Mexican police forces also play an important role in preserving internal order. Mexico's police force resembles a pyramidal organization, with those at the bottom receiving paltry wages but those on the top sometimes earning millions of dollars. The "mordida," or "bite," has become the way of life for Mexican policemen. An average policeman in Mexico City earns a monthly salary approximately equivalent to 120 U.S. dollars, a vastly insufficient sum on which to support a family. Rather than take citizens guilty of minor infractions to the police station, officers prefer to accept a mordida from the offender slightly less than the official fine amount. A large percentage of these bribes flow upward, thereby generating the pyramid-like shape of the police force and producing millionaires at the top. The mansion of one former Mexico City police chief, currently in prison on drug related charges, was at one time open as a tourist attraction in the nation's capitol.

Despite their preoccupation with personal financial gain through mordidas, Mexican police forces do play a significant role in preserving internal order. Police forces in the now defunct Federal Directorate of Security (DFS) successfully fought against insurgents in southern Mexican states in the 1950s and 1960s along with military personnel, effectively eliminating

armed, revolutionary opponents of the Mexican regime. This "success" of the DFS came at a high price, however, with hundreds of people suspected of subversion or opposition to the regime "disappearing" never to be seen again.

Counter-drug operations are the third mission element of the Mexican military. According to Mexican sources, approximately 25% of the army is utilized in the war against drugs. From a fiscal standpoint, however, 60% of the army's operation and maintenance budget is devoted to counter-drug operations.

The Mexican Constitution places responsibility for enforcing federal laws prohibiting drug production and trafficking in the hands of the Office of the Attorney General (abbreviated PGR in Spanish). Federal Judicial Police of the PGR are therefore responsible for making actual drug busts. The Mexican military is obligated to detain individuals caught engaging in illicit drug activities, however, and therefore also plays a role in drug law enforcement. Interdiction is largely the responsibility of the PGR, but occasionally when army troops are conveniently located to assist in a seizure they are utilized. The primary counter-drug mission of the Mexican army is destruction/eradication of illicit crops, and it views this mission as equal in importance to the roles of the PGR.

The Mexican military receives an undesired and highly uncharacteristic high profile for its role in manual eradication of illicit drug crops. During a 1992 visit of the U.S. Industrial College of the Armed Forces to Defensa, the Mexican National Military Headquarters, visiting U.S. military officers were given a briefing on the role of the Mexican military. The only role mentioned in the one hour briefing, however, was counternarcotics. The Mexican Army has benefited from its publicly acknowledged role in combating drug production, through force structure modernization partially assisted by the United States. Despite these benefits, however, Mexican military leaders strongly dislike the counter-narcotics mission and would prefer to instead focus their energies and resources on civic action campaigns. Irregardless of these sentiments, military eradication campaigns are an important element of Mexico's efforts to combat the drug trade, a phenomenon that poses a serious and dangerous threat to security and political stability.

III

Mexico is geographically an ideal country for the cultivation of marijuana and opium poppy, and a natural smuggling platform for cocaine as well as other illicit goods into the United States. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) estimates that Mexico supplies 60-70% of the foreign produced marijuana consumed in the U.S., and approximately 23% of U.S. heroin consumption. Although not a producer of coca, the plant from which cocaine is made, Mexico's vast territory provides many alternatives for the transshipment of cocaine: via air, land and sea routes. U.S. officials estimate that Mexico is a transshipment country for 50-70% of the cocaine entering the U.S. market.

In 1988 Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado declared drug trafficking a threat to Mexican national security, and this position has been reaffirmed by the current President

Salinas de Gotari.¹³ A similar announcement in the United States by President Ronald Reagan in 1986 had important repercussions for the U.S. war on drugs, since it brought the Department of Defense on board as a participant in the counter-drug effort. Declaration of the drug trade as a threat to national security did not have a similar effect in Mexico, however, since Mexican military forces have been involved in counternarcotics operations for several decades.

Mexico's military is unique within Latin America for its long-standing role in drug eradication operations. These efforts are a reflection of several Mexican sentiments. The first is Mexico's desire to be viewed by the world as an equal partner in state affairs. Mexico wants to avoid characterization as an "outlaw" state that permits widespread illicit drug production and trafficking, and instead wants to be viewed as a global partner in the universal struggle against the drug trade. Secondly, Mexican politicians have historically viewed drugs as a social ill and assumed responsibility to decrease their negative effects on society. Even prior to strong U.S. pressure for drug eradication, the Mexican military was being employed in a counter-narcotics role.

The Mexican Attorney General's Office has responsibility for aerial eradication and interdiction of drugs, and the legal prosecution of individuals involved in the drug trade. As already stated, the military's principal role in the drug war is the manual eradication of illicit crops. In the past military forces used long sticks to chop down drug crops, but currently eradication consists of physically uprooting marijuana and opium plants and subsequently burning them. The military discovered that simply knocking down poppy flowers allowed seeds to dry and spread naturally, so their strategy had to be altered.

The Mexican military currently participates in three different drug eradication programs. The first is the Condor Task Force, which began in 1976 and operates in the states of Sonora, Sinaloa and Durango. Marijuana production levels in these three Mexican states are extremely high, and for this reason the states were chosen as the location for a year-round army eradication campaign. The second operation, named Plan Canador and also called "the permanent campaign," began in 1966 and focuses on opium as well as marijuana eradication. Troops involved in Plan Canador operate year round throughout the country, and number between 8000 and 12,000. Once in their selected region, Canador troops establish an operations base, patrol roads, and survey clandestine airstrips. Airstrips are surveyed at irregular times in an attempt to deter trafficking. Mexico is divided into 36 different military zones, and the local zone commander exercises complete control over Canador troops operating in his region. The final eradication program involving the Mexican Military is Task Force Marte. Marte deploys smaller, self-sufficient units which carry out eradication campaigns for four month periods in selected areas. One month is spent training, and the remaining three months are spent deployed in the field. Since troops are deployed into this program at different times, units in Task Force Marte also operate throughout the year.¹⁴

The military is one of many Mexican governmental institutions involved in the fight against drugs. According to the Mexican government, the goals of its drug control program are:

to protect the health, in mind and body, of all Mexicans, especially the children and the youth. To safeguard the nation's sovereignty and security, and to strengthen the solidarity

established with the international community.¹⁵

Mexico seeks to lower domestic levels of drug addiction, as well as reduce drug production, processing, trafficking and marketing. A significant portion of Mexico's counter drug strategy is aimed at prevention. The goal of Mexican drug abuse prevention is to:

help people think independently and critically about risks involved with drugs-- the risks of being criminally involved with trafficking, and helping children develop behavior and attitudes that reject drugs.¹⁶

To further these goals, in March 1991 Mexico announced the creation of the Drug Control Planning Center (CENDRO), which coordinates all government agency activities related to drug control. CENDRO was inaugurated in June 1992 by President Salinas de Gotari and its 24 hour operations center opened in October 1992. Ministries tasked to participate in this effort include the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Defense, the Navy, Treasury and Finance, Agriculture, Communications and Transportation, Public Education, Health, and the Office of the Attorney General.

In June 1993, as a result of the public outcry following the assassination of Cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo on May 24, 1993, by gunmen hired by drug traffickers, the Mexican government created a new organization within the PGR: the National Institute for Drug Trafficking. This organization will assume responsibility for all PGR counter drug efforts, and is cooperating with the U.S. DEA to train its agents in an effort to avoid the corruption problems that have plagued the PGR for years. CENDRO will operate as an organization within this new drug fighting organization, but military counter drug operations will continue to be separated from civilian law enforcement efforts.

Discussion of Mexican drug trafficking and the impact which passage of NAFTA will have on drug flows from Mexico into the United States has been virtually nonexistent. Security concerns, like drug trafficking and immigration, have been excluded from the topics discussed by negotiators of the trade accord. In June 1993, however, the leading Mexican news magazine "Proceso" published a recently declassified U.S. Pentagon report which examined the potential effects of NAFTA on Mexican drug trafficking and drug cartel activities. Predictably, the report concluded that free trade would benefit the illicit as well as licit activities of Mexican traffickers, facilitating shipments of illegal drugs into the United States. Despite this prediction, drug trafficking continues to be an avoided topic in articles and discussions regarding NAFTA.

Approximately seventy percent of Mexican police and military forces are located in and around the nation's capitol. Despite this fact, economically motivated crime is common in Mexico City and in other parts of the nation. Mexican police deserve some credit for helping maintain stability and limiting incidents of violent crime, though, mainly through their visible armed presence in cities and towns.

Such a generalization about the Mexican police's ability to preserve law and order cannot be made about the entire country, however. Some authors suggest that drug lords exercise defacto control over several Mexican states, including Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua, Guerrero,

Veracruz, and Oaxaca.¹⁷ Headlines in Mexican newspaper headlines describing massacres linked to narcotraffickers have become commonplace. As an example, on February 9, 1993, 25 people in Guerrero state were killed by 40 assassins in a narco-trafficker sponsored ambush. Events like these are unfortunately not rare in states apparently controlled by drug lords.

Many Mexican states, including Sinaloa, Michoacan, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Sonora, Nuevo Leon, Jalisco, Durango, Chihuahua, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Oaxaca, are renowned for high production levels of illicit drugs and have become nightmares for Mexican government officials at all levels. Heavily armed with automatic weapons and large numbers of personnel at their disposal, Mexican drug lords pose a formidable threat to law enforcement authorities. In most cases, justice and order in these regions are determined not by due process but rather by the barrel of a gun. Although Mexican drug lords have received relatively little attention in the U.S. press, their power is none-the-less enormous and critical to appreciate in a study of Mexican security.

Mexican authorities presently face five primary drug cartels located throughout the country. In Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, Sinaloa, Guadalajara, and Matamoros, cartels compete not only for control of locally produced illicit drugs, but also for control of the transshipment of cocaine originating in Colombia bound for U.S. markets.¹⁸ Numerous drug relating shootings occurred in Mexico during 1992 and 1993, but most received relatively little publicity in the U.S. press. The murder of Cardinal Posadas in Guadalajara in May 1993, however, attracted more attention within Mexico as well as the United States. It revealed the historical failure of Mexican law enforcement officials to aggressively attack drug trafficker organizations, and highlighted the official corruption which makes halfhearted Mexican drug law enforcement a persistent reality. In addition to the drug traffickers and their hired agents arrested in police investigation following Posada's murder, two Federal Judicial Police commanders, the top two Jalisco police officials, the former Mexico City police chief Santiago Tapia Aceves, and at least nine other federal, state and local officials connected to the killing were also arrested (Robberson footnote). Traffickers are only one element in Mexico's drug related problems. Official corruption is another major obstacle.

For many years Mexican police and military forces have received loud criticism from the international community for recurring human rights abuses. As a result of the 1990 America's Watch report which alleged that "torture and political killings are still institutionalized in the [Mexican] military," President Salinas de Gotari established a National Commission on Human Rights. In 1992, the Mexican military was mentioned in only three of over five hundred incidents of reported human rights abuses, which is a marked improvement compared to the past. Reports still persist, however, that abuses continue to be committed on a broad scale by Mexico's other internal security forces. These include policemen from the Attorney General's Office, Federal Judicial Police, State Judicial Police, and other locals. Amnesty International's 1992 report on human rights violations around the world stated that in Mexico in 1991:

the widespread use of torture and ill-treatment by law-enforcement agents continued to be reported...Torture was frequently used throughout the country by law-enforcement agents, principally the state and federal judicial police...Confessions extracted under duress continued to be admitted as evidence in courts. Torture methods reported included beatings, electric

shocks, near-asphyxiation in foul water or by covering the head of the victim with a plastic bag containing ammonia or other irritants, forcing carbonated water with chili pepper into the nose, and psychological torture.¹⁹

Preservation of internal order and law enforcement in Mexico still have a long way to go before these activities meet international standards requiring respect for human rights.

Mexico's overall perspective on drug production and counter-drug efforts is strikingly different from that of the United States. For decades U.S. strategy has focused attention on countries producing illicit drugs, and allocated approximately 70% of its resources for the drug war on "the supply side." Many Mexicans strongly believe that this emphasis is misplaced, however. In their view, illicit drug production, trafficking and sales are fundamentally U.S. problems, since these phenomena exist because of the enormous U.S. demand for their consumption.²⁰ As long as there is demand there will be supply, and Mexicans resent having "the blame" for the drug problem placed on their shoulders by some U.S. policymakers.

Yet Mexicans can ill afford to simply redirect the blame for the drug problem at the United States and stand idly by without taking strong action. While not posing as drastic a challenge to government institutions as in Colombia, drug traffickers pose a significant threat to Mexican national security. By challenging government authority in many states, undermining public health, and corrupting many government officials, drugs and drug traffickers demand the attention and action of the Mexican government to protect its people and institutions.

IV

Mexico's insistence on absolute respect for its sovereignty has sharply limited cooperative efforts with the United States on security issues. In Mexican terms, respect for sovereignty means refusing to accept U.S. foreign military aid (grant aid), purchasing a limited amount of U.S. military equipment in an attempt to avoid exclusive dependence on U.S. arms producers, and refusing to participate in combined military exercises with the United States. Mexico officially opposes "hot pursuit" of suspected drug trafficking aircraft into Mexican airspace by U.S. aircraft, although it is allowed on a case-by-case basis when Mexican air assets are unavailable. Over flights of Mexico in 1990 by U.S. drug surveillance aircraft caused a loud public outcry in the press, and resulted in operational guidelines for U.S./Mexican cooperative counter-drug activities to be amended. Despite these restrictions, prospects for an enhanced security relationship between the United States and Mexico in the future appear positive.

U.S. security assistance to foreign countries takes several forms. The Foreign Military Financing Program (FMF) provides loans and grants for arms purchases that are licensed by the U.S. government. Mexico does not receive FMF credit assistance, however, since politicians want to avoid the perception that Mexicans accept U.S. "handouts." Instead, Mexico directly purchases military related equipment from the U.S. government. Mexico also accepts the transfer of out-of-date and excess defense related equipment from the U.S. military, and has modernized its army, air force and naval forces through these transfers. 309 HUMMWW trucks were acquired by the army in May 1992, and over the past two years the Mexican marine corps

has obtained over 750 jeeps, ambulances and jeep trailers from U.S. stocks. The Mexican navy acquired three 95 foot patrol boats and two 82 foot boats during 1991 from the U.S. Coast Guard to support counternarcotics operations, and spare parts are provided to support Mexican naval destroyers. The most publicized recent Mexican Air Force modernization was the purchase of twelve F-5E fighters in the early 1980s.

A second form of U.S. security assistance is the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET), which provides grants for Mexican military and civilian defense specialists to obtain professional and technical military training in the United States.²¹ IMET funds for Mexico have steadily reduced in recent years, from \$620,000 in fiscal year (FY) 1991 to \$565,000 in FY 1992. Mexico ranks eighth in IMET funds distributed among nineteen Latin American countries for fiscal 1993.²²

U.S. security assistance to Mexico goes beyond military programs involving equipment purchases and professional education, however. U.S. drug control funds allocated to Mexico are largely provided to the PGR, and made Mexico the number one recipient of such funds from 1976 through 1992. The majority of these funds were spent on aviation maintenance projects for the PGR. The U.S. gave Mexico \$15 million a year in 1989 and 1990, and \$18 million in fiscal 1991 out of a budget of \$150 million. In fiscal 1992 the U.S. allocated over \$20 million for Mexico, but the budget was slashed to \$1.1 million for fiscal 1993.²³

The Mexican Government has begun a process of "Mexicanization" of its counternarcotics programs, and this change in policy is responsible for the dramatic reduction in FY 1993 drug control funds for Mexico. In July 1992, the Mexican government announced that programs previously supported by U.S. narcotics control funds would be fully paid for by Mexico in the future. By July 1993, Mexico allocated over \$24 million to assume these program costs. Because of this change, sharply reduced U.S. counter drug support will be channeled primarily into specialized training and technical assistance.

A series of highly publicized events in Mexico led to the declaration of "Mexicanization." The kidnapping, torture and murder of U.S. DEA agent Kiki Camarena in 1985, the kidnapping of Mexican doctor Alvarez Machain in 1990 allegedly linked to Camarena's torture, and the 1991 "Veracruz incident," focused Mexican media and high level political attention on the role of the U.S. government in Mexican counter-narcotics efforts. Mexico's desire to be viewed as an equal partner with the United States in drug control efforts, its wish to avoid a public perception of dependence on the United States, and public intolerance of perceived U.S. interference in internal Mexican affairs led to Mexicanization of drug control programs.

Like other countries receiving forms of U.S. aid, Mexico is subject to "certification" by the U.S. Congress at the beginning of each calendar year to insure that allocated monies are properly spent in their respective programs. During the 1980s, however, Congressional certification was used more as a policy tool for administration priorities in Latin America than as an objective test of program effectiveness or appropriate resource allocation. Certification of U.S. assistance is based upon the cooperation foreign governments extend to the United States in joint counter drug programs, and on the efforts that nations take to implement the 1988 UN Convention related to drug control. Historically, the United States has been more concerned

with the integrity of Mexico's efforts aimed at drug control than with the effectiveness of these programs.²⁴ While viewed as a necessary precondition to aid by the U.S. Congress, certification largely serves to upset the independently nationalistic Mexican government and create anti-U.S. sentiment in the Mexican academic community aware of this process. Fortunately for the United States, the certification process is not widely publicized in the Mexican press, and the general population is unaware of it. For informed Mexicans, however, certification an insult to their nation's sovereignty.

In the decade of the 1980s, levels of U.S. security assistance to Mexico rose dramatically due to the increased emphasis the Mexican and U.S. governments placed on drug control. Presently both governments are involved in a cooperative campaign to interdict drugs being shipped through Mexico to U.S. markets, although cooperation is still limited. The Northern Border Response Force (NBRF) was established in 1990 in northern Mexican states along with an Information Analysis Center (IAC), located in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. Mexican Federal Judicial Police (MFJP) agents are the primary action arm of the NBRF, responding to intelligence about drug traffickers passed on to them by officials in the U.S. Embassy.²⁵

When an aircraft suspected of carrying cocaine departs South America, the plane is tracked by U.S. navy ships positioned above the northern coast of South America and by military air assets. These aircraft include Navy E-2C Hawkeyes, Navy P-3s, and Air Force E-3A Airborne Warning and Control (AWACs) aircraft. U.S. Customs Service and U.S. Coast Guard aircraft and ships are also utilized to track aircraft. Once radar contact has been established and maintained, aircraft are dispatched to make a visual identification. These interceptor aircraft are usually F-15 or F-16 fighters, dispatched from Howard Air Force base in Panama where they are stationed on a rotational basis from Air Guard units in the continental United States.

Before suspicious aircraft enter Mexican airspace, Mexican agencies are notified. The U.S. Embassy IAC in Mexico City receives continually updated radar information about tracked targets on a system providing a computerized display of the aircraft flight routes. Ships suspected of transporting illicit drugs are also monitored on the system. The IAC is in radio communication with USSOUTHCOM, as well as the Mexican PGR. To keep Mexican military organizations updated, the IAC passes on current information to CENDRO, which relays the pertinent data on suspected smugglers to appropriate Mexican military units.

The Mexican PGR operates two Cessna Citation aircraft equipped with the "look down" radar of the General Dynamics F-16 fighter. Using intelligence obtained from the U.S. Embassy IAC, the Mexican Citations track and follow suspicious aircraft across Mexico to their landing or drop-off point. Additional aircraft carrying PGR agents are also usually dispatched with the Citations. Once the drug carrying aircraft has landed or air-dropped its cargo, MFJP agents attempt to seize the drugs and arrest traffickers on the ground. Military personnel under the direction of the local zone commander are also sometimes dispatched to seize the drugs and detain the traffickers.

As has been the case historically in the war on drugs, strengthened efforts to combat traffickers have forced them to change their tactics. Aircraft landing in Mexico to deliver a drug shipment are normally on the ground fifteen minutes or less, which makes it extremely difficult for

government agents to arrive on the scene in time to seize the aircraft. To avoid this risk, in 1992 drug traffickers in Mexico began to use land and sea air-drops much more extensively. This change in strategy decreased risks for the pilots, but has also proven to be much more difficult to execute than simply landing and offloading cargo. Missed airdrops have resulted in traffickers flying less at night, utilizing daylight to significantly improve their chances of putting the air-dropped drug cargo on its target site.

Aircraft are tracked not only to their landing or air-drop point, but often are also monitored as they fly back to Colombia. Several seizures of drug aircraft returning from Mexico occurred in 1992 through the cooperation of the Colombian government.

Overall cocaine seizures by the Government of Mexico in 1992 were 38.8 metric tons (mt), which was approximately 10 mt less than in 1991. The majority of Mexican cocaine seizures in 1992 were made by the NBRF. In 1992, the NBRF seized a record 28.7 mt of cocaine, up from 18.1 mt in 1991. This increase in NBRF seized cocaine demonstrates the effectiveness of joint Mexican/U.S. cooperative interdiction efforts, but also reveals the high transit rate of Mexico by cocaine laden aircraft from Colombia.²⁶ Although several hundred "tracks" of suspected drug flights are monitored each year by U.S. radar assets, only a small number are eventually interdicted in Mexico.

The U.S. Customs Administration also operates two Cessna Citation aircraft in Mexico, which are used in a training role for Mexican pilots and also assist the Embassy IAC in tracking aircraft. Participation of foreign citizens in law enforcement activities on or above their country's soil is a sensitive issue for Mexicans. Although the United States is currently playing a large role in assisting the Mexican drug interdiction effort, a low profile is maintained by U.S. personnel to avoid negative press reports and an inevitable outcry should our efforts be publicly reported. Such a response to the initial activities of the NBRF caused U.S. participation in the interdiction effort to be slightly curtailed only six weeks after the joint program had begun.

When military units are dispatched to intercept a drug shipment, difficulties arise because of the Mexican system of military zones. As previously mentioned, the country is divided into 36 different zones, and Zone Commanders have authority over all troops in their region. For this reason, it is necessary to contact the appropriate zone commander for the area in which the drug traffickers have or are expected to land, or in some cases drop off their shipment. Given the unpredictability of the flight routes of the drug planes, notification of the appropriate zone commanders is often difficult. Follow-on tactical movement to the sites is also challenging, even with good communication links between the IAC and the Mexican army forces.

Problems also arise from the fact that tactical intelligence about the location of suspected drug smugglers is passed simultaneously to Mexican military and PGR personnel. PGR personnel are usually dispatched to intercept drug shipments, but military forces are also used. Lack of communication and coordination between the two organizations led to the November 1991 "Veracruz incident," in which seven PGR agents were killed by Mexican military personnel.

The Veracruz incident not only highlighted operational problems in the Mexican drug interdiction effort, but also raised a top concern of Mexican and U.S. policymakers alike: drug related corruption. In November of 1991, following established procedures, the U.S. Embassy IAC tracked an aircraft suspected of transporting drugs into Mexican airspace. The PGR was notified and dispatched one of its Citations along with MFJP agents in an additional aircraft. The suspected drug aircraft landed at a clandestine airstrip near Veracruz, but the PGR officials were surprised to find the airstrip occupied by Mexican Army troops.

The suspected drug aircraft landed on the airstrip and was immediately followed by the PGR aircraft. In the confusing scene that followed, Mexican Army troops opened fire. Seven PGR agents were killed, and one army soldier was injured in a gun battle that lasted several hours. During the skirmish between army soldiers and PGR officers, the drug traffickers managed to escape from the airstrip.

Officially, the army soldiers were deployed to this particular airstrip in Veracruz as part of a national program of clandestine airstrip surveillance and destruction. Since the PGR aircraft did not possess any identifying marks showing it was a government aircraft, the army personnel apparently assumed it was another drug trafficker aircraft. The fact that some of the PGR agents were killed at point blank range, however, makes it difficult to interpret the incident as wholly a case of "mistaken identity" on the part of the army personnel. The filming of the entire scene by U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents helped insure that the incident would not be successfully covered up by embarrassed Mexican army personnel.

Allegations have been raised that members of the Mexican Army were connected to the traffickers and assisted in protecting the clandestine airstrip near Veracruz. These allegations have not been publicly substantiated, however. A joint press release by the Mexican Secretary of National Defense and the Attorney General's Office after the incident glossed over the issue of corruption, and attributed the unfortunate killing of seven PGR agents to confusion and miscommunication between the two organizations.

The Mexican National Commission on Human Rights investigated the Veracruz incident but in its report refrained from denouncing it as proof of corruption problems within the Mexican military or PGR. Three Army generals were arrested in the wake of the investigation and were put in jail, as well as a PGR official suspected of corruption linked to the incident. Publicity forced the military to take some actions against involved members, but as an institution the military sought to avoid the implication that its officers and soldiers have been corrupted on a large scale by the drug trade. Effects of the Veracruz incident on operational procedures for Mexican drug interdiction efforts have been virtually negligible, and although it highlighted possible official corruption, current Mexican efforts to curb drug corruption do not appear to have intensified.

Among the multiplicity of bilateral issues facing Mexico and the United States, none is more controversial or sensitive than corruption. Officials do not like to publicly discuss it because it is "bad press," but it is clear that official drug corruption is a problem on both sides of the border.

Corruption is a unique bilateral concern in part because it is so difficult to measure and define. Two views exist on the nature of drug corruption within Mexico, but both rely on subjective judgment. The first holds that Mexican drug corruption is individualistic in nature. It is therefore concluded that people caught accepting payoffs from drug traffickers are merely isolated individuals acting for their own self-interest, an anomaly among Mexican government officials.

The second view postulates that rather than individualistic in nature, official drug corruption in Mexico is institutionalized. The power of drug money and the capabilities of Mexican drug lords to buy off or intimidate officials is vast. "Plata o Plomo," silver or a bullet, was and is the option given to many public officials cooperating with drug traffickers. The institutionalized view of official drug corruption holds that government officials at all levels are involved and implicated in the illicit drug trade, and the activities of only a handful are ever brought into the public light.

Many authors and U.S. officials believe that the Mexican police force, including the MFJP under the PGR, demonstrate institutionalized corruption at all levels. The Mexican military, however, is perceived to demonstrate individualistic corruption. The military is a prestigious institution in Mexico, deeply concerned about its public image. The military therefore tends to "police itself" better than Mexico's police forces, in terms of keeping its members clean from corruption. Corruption still exists in the Mexican military, but not at the institutional level which can be found within other Mexican internal security forces.

The primary constraint on deciding which view of corruption is more accurate is the limited availability of information on Mexican drug corruption. Incidents like the one in Veracruz in 1991 or the 1985 assassination of DEA agent Kiki Camarena provide only small windows into this dark world. The investigation of Camarena's kidnapping, torture and murder revealed extensive ties among Mexican government officials and drug traffickers, and continues to haunt the U.S./Mexican bilateral agenda. Yet even events like these cannot give observers a complete picture of how extensive official drug corruption may be in Mexico.

Since the onset of his six year term in 1988, Mexican President Salinas de Gotari has emphasized official efforts to capture and punish corrupt public officials. Despite the desires of U.S. policymakers to augment and assist in this fight, the capabilities of the U.S. to reduce official corruption in Mexico are limited. Exposure of official corruption and cover-ups to the international media, like the attention which followed Camarena's murder in 1985, can have an effect in pressuring Mexican government officials, but ultimately Mexican corruption is a Mexican problem that can only be strongly attacked when the political will exists in Mexico to do so.

VI

The most recent topic causing conflict in the U.S./Mexican bilateral relationship was the 1990 kidnapping of Mexican doctor Humberto Alvarez Machain. Resulting from the investigation of

DEA agent Camarena's murder in 1985, the Machain kidnapping and subsequent ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court on the case in 1992 caused an uproar in Mexico and tested the nation's bilateral relationship with the United States.

On 2 April 1990 Machain was flown to the United States and arrested, after being kidnapped in Guadalajara, Mexico. His kidnappers, who were private citizens, were paid a promised "bounty" by the DEA for his delivery. On 15 June 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a San Francisco Appeals Court decision that ruled in favor of Machain. The Supreme Court ruled that Machain's abduction had not technically violated U.S. law. According to the Ker-Frisbee rule, U.S. courts do not consider how a defendant was brought within their jurisdiction unless the defendant suffered severe mistreatment.²⁷ The highly publicized Machain Supreme Court ruling was contentious because it effectively legitimized the kidnapping of foreign citizens in their own countries that had committed crimes, with the intent of bringing them to justice in U.S. courts.²⁸

In reaction to this announcement, DEA activities in Mexico were suspended for 24 hours and 30 minutes. Mexican officials claimed DEA operations were reinstated because a lapse in activity could be exploited by the drug traffickers. Operations were not renewed, however, until an assurance had been received in Mexico from officials high in the Bush administration that the action would not be repeated. Despite its plain violation of international law, as pointed out by dissenting Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist, the U.S. government legally condoned kidnapping of foreign citizens on their own soil and drew the strong disapproval of the international community.

Machain's kidnapping had several precedents, but none led to the public outcry and strain in the U.S./Mexico bilateral relationship that Machain's case triggered. Other individuals kidnapped in Mexico and brought to the United States for arrest and trial include:

Manuel Salazar in 1984 in Nuevo Leon
Jose Contreras Subias in 1985 in Tijuana
Rene Martin Verdugo Urquidiz in 1986 in Mexicali
Ayala Mendoza in 1989 in Palau, Coahuila
Teodulo Romo Lopez on 13 June 1992 in Naco, Sonora.²⁹

In each of these cases the DEA was ostensibly not involved directly in kidnapping individuals. Announcements had been made previously by the DEA promising large bounties for the delivery of these people to U.S. soil, however. In this way, while perhaps not technically violating U.S. law, the DEA acted in violation of international law inciting the kidnapping of suspected criminals in Mexico.

In a speech before the Association of North American Newspaper editors in Los Angeles, Mexican President Salinas de Gotari said:

Everyone wants better international cooperation in the war against drugs, but the action taken against Machain is not the type of act we need to fight illegal trafficking. We cannot hope to eliminate one illegal act with another illegal act.³⁰

President Salinas is just in recognizing that unilateral action of this kind by the United States or any other government is not the proper way to combat drugs or drug traffickers. U.S. President Clinton has assured Salinas that such kidnappings will not be pursued or tolerated under his administration. Fulfillment of this promise is essential for security cooperation between the United States and Mexico to continue and have a chance of expanding in the future.

The Machain case created a large amount of media publicity in Mexico and in the United States, but did not appreciably damage U.S./Mexican bilateral relations. This highlights the fact that counter drug activities are but one small part of the two countries' bilateral relations, and neither country can afford to let a single event disrupt cooperation in other areas.

VII

As Mexico and the United States move further into the decade of the 1990s, cooperation and positive relations will continue to be essential for the economic health and national security of both nations. Understanding the perspectives of Mexicans on national security issues is therefore a critical task for U.S. policymakers. Despite historical events that continue to influence the attitudes of Mexicans and U.S. citizens alike toward security relations, prospects for enhanced cooperation in areas of mutual interests look bright.

The participation of U.S. military aircrews in the February 1992, Mexican Air Force Day activities at Santa Lucia Air Force Base near Mexico City was a symbol of this improving relationship. A U.S. C-141 transport aircraft airdropped Mexican airborne troops and a U.S. F-15 fighter performed a brief flying demonstration in front of the international dignitaries and thousands of Mexican citizens present for the day's festivities. Approved by President Salinas, this symbolic participation of U.S. military forces with Mexican military forces bodes well for the future bilateral security relationship of the two nations.

Upcoming Mexican presidential elections in 1994 promise to be interesting, as opposition parties to the PRI have been gaining significant support over the past several years. A presidential victory by an opposition candidate is not likely to happen for many years in Mexico, however. Such a victory would certainly set a momentous precedent. The apolitical orientation of Mexico's military appears to be so deeply institutionalized, however, that instability stemming from opposition in the ranks of the military after such an electoral result appears unlikely.

Mexico can be expected to continue to emphasize respect for state sovereignty in its foreign relations, and demand respect for international law from the United States as well as the other nations of the world. Under these guidelines, Mexico is poised to enter an era of increased economic cooperation with the United States as well as increased security cooperation, giving new definition to an old bilateral relationship in the new world order.

FOOTNOTES

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