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Mexico: Current and Future Political, Economic and Security Trends

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's Mexico is a far cry from traditional perceptions of it as a laid-back and uninspiring nation only considered part of North America by courtesy. The country has moved, in the last two decades, to open up and then consolidate a democracy and to build a strong and relatively modern economy; however, two threats seem looming where the sustaining of such progress is concerned. They are the deeply entrenched security problems of the country which have so far withstood all attempts at addressing them successfully, and the dependence on the United States in the economic sphere that is currently threatening Mexican economic growth. Continued advancements will depend upon how this North American partner deals with each of these issues.

INTRODUCTION

Mexico, not only a full member of the North American Free Trade Area for nearly a decade and a half, but also now a player in the North American Security and Prosperity Partnership for three years, is nonetheless more than able to provide surprises for those who feel it already fits comfortably into these new connections with its more prosperous, stable, and structured neighbours to the north. The country is growing rapidly and changing centuries of entrenched customs even faster, but the road is not always a smooth one and the heavy weight of history still shows its strength even today and may well do so into the future.

This short paper provides analysis and some key data on what the political, economic and security trends appear to hold in store for Mexico as it faces the challenges both of addressing its future and attempting to avoid the boom and bust past that has so scarred the country and shaken the international community's confidence in it for centuries. In order to do this, the paper examines each of these elements (politics, economics, and security) in individual sections; however, nowhere more than in Mexico can one say that the three are difficult to disentangle and all three intersect constantly in any analysis.

THE POLITICAL SCENE

General

The country we now know as Mexico was born in a ferocious revolution against Spain that was also, in many senses, a civil war between its rural, *mestizo* and Indian peoples and its central government, dominated by a white and urbanized elite accustomed to power over centuries. A century later, in what came to be known as the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and which lasted well over a decade, civil strife along remarkably similar lines destroyed much of the country's wealth and resulted in massive loss of life. Despite claims to the contrary, the 'revolutionary' government put in place by that upheaval proved in practice to be anything but. Despite much progress under the eventually victorious Institutional Revolutionary Party (the PRI – whose name says so much about its, and Mexico's contradictions), its nearly seven decades in power did not change much in the basic elements of political power in the nation.

A context of modernizing elements facing deep-seated conservative interests has been the basis of Mexican politics since Independence and remains so today. Within that context certain trends have appeared in recent years: political modernization and the anchoring of democracy; the integration into wider political and economic blocs including modifications in the historic relationship with the United States (the key foreign element in modern Mexican life); and the persistence of regional issues of great influence on national progress.

Domestic

The most important trend in recent years, and one seemingly well set to continue, is the anchoring of democracy in Mexico. While Mexico has been a formal democracy since Independence, in reality the nation has been plagued by essentially a series of *caudillos*, representatives of local and regional power arrangements that have been successful at reaching national levels.

As the PRI's dominance waned in the wake of growing calls for real democracy and an opening of the nation to the world in the 1970s, eighties and nineties, there was a true awakening of democratic forces in the country. New political forces such as the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* or National Action Party – centre-right) and the PDR (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática* or Party of the Democratic Revolution – centre-left) increasingly challenged the PRI and eventually, in 2000, this led to the electoral victory of the PAN under President Vicente Fox. This was the first time a non-PRI candidate had won a presidential election since 1929.

The trend in Mexico has been an opening of the state and the political system, undeniable improvements in the respect for the human rights of the population at large, and improved transparency and accountability. But those improvements, almost all observers would agree, have a long way to go before they are at acceptable standards. Politics are still corrupt and scandal-ridden, with parties often focused more on individuals than on programmes for action. And while progress has been made, the Mexican state is still far from comfortable with the concepts of accountability and transparency.

In this context the international, and particularly North American (i.e., United States), role is difficult to overstate. The relationship with the United States has always been a complicated one. The liberal fathers of Mexican independence often looked to the U.S. as the model for their new state but repeated invasions by the U.S., the forced cession of roughly half of Mexico's territory to Washington during the middle of the 19th century, and nearly constant support for Mexican anti-reform elements by the U.S. government, eroded such positive impressions and eventually led to widespread rejection of the U.S. at the political level.

Although the facts of life made Mexicans look north for trade, investment and outlets for labour, the U.S. was distrusted and generally disliked and defence against it became the hallmark of Mexican international politics and defence. In more recent years, and especially since the end of the Cold War, this situation has significantly changed. Mexicans have been willing to see their own failings as the key reason as to why the nation has not advanced further. U.S. successes, especially on the economic front, but also on the political front, obliged Mexicans to examine how their own nationalism was possibly preventing them from seizing opportunities for advancements.

This new thinking and the shocks that Mexico suffered, especially on the economic front over the 1970s and eighties, pushed the country to consider opening up to its northern neighbour as never before. As Mexico's attempts to diversify its trade and investment portfolio failed in the 1980s, the fear of U.S. protectionist tendencies increased. At the same time the break-up of so much of the world into economic blocs underscored Mexico's dangerous isolation. It was then that the new ideas finally began to prevail with the opening up of much of the economy to foreign influence. This was in great part aided by the negotiations towards, and the signing of, the North American Free Trade Accords and their enforcement in January 1994.

In all of this, the U.S. role cannot be exaggerated. The greater connection between Mexico and the U.S. led to the flourishing of the democratic ideals which were to work their way forward until the reforms and electoral victories of 2000.

Regional

Mexico is a large nation, with 31 states totalling 1,972,550 square kilometres, a population estimated in 2007 at 108.7 million people, and vastly different topography and peoples. There are some 62 Indigenous languages spoken as well as the official and totally dominant language of Spanish. A federal system of government is in place reflecting this size and diversity.

While Caucasians make up a significant percentage of the population in official terms (figures given range from 9% to 17%), social observers point out that these figures in fact reflect social preference more than reality. What is clear is that mestizos represent at least 60% and perhaps even as much as three-quarters of the population, and indigenous peoples are estimated at between 12% and 30% of the population. Full-blooded Caucasians are thus not as numerous as is often asserted.¹

¹ Basic figures for Mexico's demography and economy are taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico>.

Indigenous-dominated areas tend to be poorer and less developed than those where mestizo (and to a degree, Caucasians) populations are the majority. Regions such as Chiapas and parts of the Yucatán Peninsula and the South, but also many regions farther north in the country, are among those where the indigenous presence is strong and where historic poverty has been the hardest to reduce. It is also in these regions where the most problematic political context often prevails.

The country is dominated by two roughly parallel mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre Occidental, stretching north to south. The Sierra Nevada, another mountain range, crosses the country east to west in the centre. There are other smaller ranges and all of these make for a country of generally high altitude, especially in the centre and the North.

In general, the regions away from the capital have felt themselves ill-served by the federal government and while nationalism is strong, in large part as a result of an effective national government education system, discontent is widespread. Increasing prosperity since the Second World War has dampened this unhappiness with the status quo in many local sectors but far from all of them.

Regional politics is dominated by local entrenched strongmen who often represent families who have been powerful since colonial times. Clientilism is rife and corruption is a way of life as shown by the effective way the PRI kept power for so long. While such networks have often been shaken by modernizing trends and the advent of something closer to developed democracy, they are still strong and very powerful in the regional political sphere, especially in the more backward areas of the country.

THE ECONOMIC TRENDS

While currently shaken by doubts largely related to the perceived recession in the United States, in fact recent years overall have been ones of impressive growth in the Mexican economy. Such growth is not without its problems such as excessive dependence on the results of intra-firm trade related to NAFTA-linked arrangements that essentially aim at profiting from low labour costs in Mexico. Yet, it is in most terms the greatest progress the nation has made in a century.

The Mexican economy has grown in recent decades to become the world's 12th to 14th largest, with a GDP of some \$840,012 million in 2006. Since the 1994 crises was successfully resolved and NAFTA began to apply in that same year, the Mexican peso has never been more stable during any other time in recent history.

With per capita income standing at \$8,066 per annum, Mexico enjoys the 55th highest in the world and is fully a nation of middle-income status. No longer chronically poor, the percentage of its population in extreme poverty has fallen nationally from 24.2% to 17.6%. Indeed the progress in rural areas has been even more impressive with those in this condition falling from 42% to 27.9% in the period between 2000 and 2004.

This has largely been the result of stability sustained since early 1994 under the Zedillo and Fox governments. From 1995 to 2002 the average growth of the economy was some 5.1%. This has been particularly visible in the macroeconomic and fiscal spheres although it is also more generally visible with inflation down to record lows and growing middle class prosperity. It is important to note that the previous short downturn in the U.S. economy in the early 2000s, on which Mexico is so dependent, brought that rate of growth down; however, it must be said that recovery was quick following the fast recovery of the U.S. economy by 2004. In the latter year the economy of Mexico grew by 3% and by the next to 4.1%.

Mexican dependence on the U.S. is notable. After the failure of the drive to diversify trade patterns in the 1970s and eighties (the local equivalent of Canada's Third Option policy), a 'realist' approach began to mark the nation's traditional nationalist and protectionist economy. From opposition to excessive U.S. dependence, Mexico moved to welcome it as inevitable. With time, the Mexican economy became even more dependent on the United States than the Canadian economy.²

Presently the United States represents well over 80% of total Mexican trade. Such dependence, especially with the current trend of including increasing amounts of strategic materials, is deeply disturbing to nationalists.³ Also as China makes continuing inroads into that market and the U.S. economy weakens, such concerns mount apace.

THE SECURITY CONTEXT

The Mexican security context is a highly complex one. Located next to the greatest power on earth, and bound to that country by all manner of connections that are related to security, Mexico is obliged to include in its own security concerns those of its vastly larger neighbour. Additionally, it has its own more direct security problems but few of these can be easily separated from those related to the United States. The complexities are reflected in an unusual defence organisation as well. SEDENA (*Secretaría de Defensa Nacional*) is the closest thing to a defence ministry but its minister is a serving army officer and is only responsible for the Army and the Air Force. The Navy has its own ministry (SEMAR – *Secretaría de Marina*) and minister who is also a serving officer.

Internal Security

Mexico is beset by any number of threats to its internal security including dissident groups who use violence to pressure the government, narcotrafficking, trafficking in persons, illegal migration, illegal arms transfers, and other elements of international crime. Little wonder then that its security concerns occupy the country's government and deeply trouble its people.

Undeniably the central part of this dismal picture is narcotrafficking. It is this scourge that spills over into the demand (and supply) of illegal arms, and that leads, in large part, to the massive levels of urban and even rural violence that characterises Mexico's national life today. Struggles for control of the lucrative trade in illegal narcotics stimulate widespread fighting, often with quite heavy weaponry, and occasion thousands of deaths every year.⁴

This context is complicated by a nation that has literally hundreds of police forces at the national, state and local levels, not to mention specialised security forces of a variety of kinds and in considerable numbers. Perhaps equally important is that these police forces are among the world's most corrupt and are often far from interested in fighting or resolving crimes from which they directly and indirectly profit. In the context of poor pay, few perks, low prestige, and insufficient and unimpressive training, it is hardly surprising that these officers rarely resist the temptation of high-paying and powerful criminal elements.⁵

Under these circumstances the Mexican government has long been obliged to have recourse to the institution most respected in the state, the armed forces, in order to put at

² See Diego Cevallos, "Mexico-Economy: Sunny Today, Cloudy Tomorrow," IPS.NEWS/net, 1 June 2008.

³ For annual trade figures see U.S. Bureau of Census, Foreign Trade Division, Washington, DC.

⁴ See the series of articles on this theme in *Proceso*, the national magazine of Mexico, since early 2007.

⁵ See Benjamin Reames, "Police Forces in Mexico," San Diego, Centre for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 2003.

least some pressure on the *narcos* and those engaged in other crimes connected with drugs. Since the early 1970s, when the United States first 'declared war' on drugs, the Mexican armed forces have been called in to do the same. This situation, however, merely worsened from the 1990s until today and some 25,000 military personnel at one time, roughly one-seventh of the total deployable force, are engaged directly in crop eradication, direct support and training for the police, and engaging in actual fighting with those in the illegal business.

Even with the military engaged, the poisonous effects of corruption are never far away. SEDENA therefore keeps units and individuals in the anti-drugs campaign engaged for a maximum of four months at a time. This is testimony to the remarkable ability of the narcotics situation in the country to corrupt even the *relatively* incorruptible military. Little wonder then that the forces are not entirely keen on this role, especially since 2007 when the President sent them in even larger numbers not only to engage in crop eradication, but to fight against drug cartels in the cities of the North of the country.

While such engagement has doubtlessly pleased the United States and brought respectability (and much assistance) to the government, many senior military officers feel that this war is not only impossible to win but also simply too costly for what it is worth. This sentiment is joined by a much more widely held one, especially among the still powerful nationalists, that this is somehow a U.S. problem and asks why thousands of Mexicans are dying trying to solve it. This has been exacerbated by the decision of the Bush and Calderón governments in October 2007 to launch the 'Mérida Initiative'.⁶ Probably the most important single security (but especially police) cooperation programme ever undertaken in the Americas, it reflects growing U.S. willingness to cooperate closely with the Mexicans in this field. This is based on U.S. assessments of the current administration in Mexico as having produced real results in the anti-narcotics and related fields.⁷

The *narcos* are thus under heavy pressure and as a result, resort even more to arming themselves in ways that permit them to resist the rather ineffective police and, to some extent, the army. Drugs sent north are often used to purchase the arms that protect the businesses farther south. As seen by the vastly increasing drug-related murders, some 1,400 in the first four months of 2008, the challenge of winning against these criminals is great.⁸

Most frustrating in this situation is that no such 'war' can be won merely with weapons. All experts are agreed that the key is timely access to information but the reputation of the Mexican police forces is such that the United States is reluctant, to say the least, to share vital information with Mexico. Thus the Mexicans, already hard-pressed to succeed in any case, are even further hamstrung by those who should logically be their natural allies in the struggle. This situation may improve with the increased involvement of the Mexican Army in whom the U.S. has some greater trust.⁹

Added to this security issue is the widespread urban violence that has been characteristic of Mexican cities, and especially the capital's Federal District, for the last several decades. Citizen security is simply an unknown in larger urban areas and that which does exist is provided only for the rich in the form of private security firms, private bodyguards, and the like. Thus the state is generally seen by individual citizens, especially the poor and the lower middle class, as simply incapable of protecting them. This, in turn, negatively impacts the legitimacy of Mexican democracy and national institutions. This situation is merely exacerbated by the lack of effective control of migrations: those moving from Mexico into the

⁶ "Mexico-U.S. Anti-drug Plan Shrouded in Suspicion," IPS.NEWS.cult/news.asp?idrews-39907.

⁷ "Mexico, U.S. step up drug war cooperation," www.csmonitor.com/2008/023/po7s03-woam.html.

⁸ Op.cit., fn1/.

⁹ "What if the Mexican Military Doesn't Win the Drug War?" www.mexidocs.info/id1837.html.

southern U.S. and those, almost equally impressive, moving north across Mexico's southern borders with the objective of staying in Mexico or moving on to the United States.

Mexico is sensitive in this southern region more because it is home for the still smouldering and unresolved conflict in Chiapas than for its status as a border; however, Mexican intelligence services are keenly aware of the links between Chiapas and the Central American wars of the 1980s and nineties. It is also true that in the neighbouring state of Guerrero there is a still active, if small, armed dissident group, *Ejército Popular Revolucionario* (EPR), that occasionally strikes at civilian state and even military targets in its drive to stimulate popular rebellion in this part of Mexico. So far the movement has attracted little support but police and military in Guerrero and its neighbouring regions watch the evolution of events closely.

External Security

Mexico does not have any real external enemies. While its Defence Plan No. 1 retains steadfastly its likely enemy as the United States and its job that of deterring and defeating an invasion, there is actually an increasingly effective defence cooperation between the two countries across a vast range of areas of interests. As previously stated, ever since Mexico lost just about half of its national territory to the United States in the middle years of the 19th century, national defence in a formal sense has concentrated on the threat viewed as coming from the U.S. When Mexico City and Washington became allies during the Second World War, this perception changed.

Mexico permitted radar stations on its coasts, let the U.S. Armed Forces use some of its bases, gave that country assured access at favourable prices to strategic goods, sent an air squadron to fight alongside the U.S. in the Pacific, and even allowed its citizens to be recruited into the U.S. military or to cross the border to replace American males on the nation's farms. By the time the cold war was in full force in the late 1940s, however, this cooperation was forgotten and Mexico's defence forces returned to their traditional deterrent role vis-à-vis the U.S.

In the 1980s this began to change but with Chiapas' indigenous insurrection of January 1994 it accelerated beyond control. Such was the surprise for the Mexican intelligence forces, and the lack of preparedness of the Mexican armed forces and especially the state's public relations apparatus, that massive U.S. cooperation was sought immediately. Major purchases of equipment and arms were made and brought across the border with speed.¹⁰ While the North American Free Trade Accords were not supposed to include political, and certainly not military cooperation, it proved impossible for Mexico to avoid dependence on the United States at this crucial time. Not only did the U.S. provide great financial assistance to Mexico, it also provided an unprecedented level of military assistance. Mexican officers and even senior NCOs began to undergo all manner of training north of the border in ways they had never known.

When the events of 11 September 2001 burst onto the world scene, there was thus an already impressive military connection between the two countries. Mexico had just announced its withdrawal from the Rio Pact (the hemisphere's central collective security arrangement) when it was suddenly required to join the Organisation of American States and its measures to fight international terrorism. Mexico also entered into a series of ongoing negotiations for better security in North America, especially regarding its borders. In 2005 to these agreements was added the Security and Prosperity Partnership, an open-ended informal accord between the three continental heads of government to coordinate many aspects of defence, security and even their economies in order to fight what were perceived

¹⁰ This new context, with its historical background, is well discussed in Raúl Benítez Manaut, *Mexico and the New Challenges of Hemispheric Security*, Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center, 2004.

as common threats and encourage common approaches to economic issues.¹¹

Mexicans are not surprisingly deeply divided, even more so than Canadians, about defence cooperation with the United States in yet another 'war' – this time on the very loosely defined international terrorism. Accusations that the new accords merely serve as a cover for U.S. dominance of others' freedom to decide on these matters abound in Mexico even more so than in Canada. Questions of control of vital resources, especially water and energy, are of great importance and could not be more strategic.

Mexico's southern border, as previously mentioned, is hard-pressed to exercise control of the arms passage, migration, the illegal narcotics trade, or much else. But there is no traditional threat here. Guatemala is much smaller (about 12 million people) with a vastly smaller military (some 15,000 total personnel), and relations between the two countries are without major irritants except occasionally the immigration/border question. With Belize, despite a small dispute over territory, relations are really very good indeed.

Other concerns Mexican authorities mention on the international front are few. There is occasional worry over any potential terrorist threat to far-flung oil rigs in a variety of exposed positions, especially in the South. This, however, is as much connected with any further flare-ups of the Chiapas situation or the worsening of the security context in Guerrero than about international terrorists. On the other hand, the Mexicans are well aware that their highly limited ability to control their airspace, maritime zones or even territory may some day become a temptation for international terrorists to use as strategic positions to launch an attack on the United States from. They are equally aware that the U.S. is immensely keen to see its southern neighbour make improving its capacity in these areas an issue of the highest priority.

CONCLUSIONS

Mexico has been able to establish a remarkably stable democracy and begin to anchor democratic processes which have, until these last few years, been noticeable only by their absence from national political life. In two decades it has been able to move from autocracy to democracy even though many improvements still need to be made. It now has robust political parties, even if they are still much more personality driven than in many developed countries.

The country has also been able to make some progress with the vested interests of powerful *caudillos* in much of the countryside; however, it is important to note that here progress has been less impressive than in many other areas. Elections are held in an orderly way and while accusations of corruption and distortion of results were and are still frequent, they are not as believed by the public as they once were. The country does seem to be on the road to an even more stable and less 'partial' democracy if the security and economic situations can be made to hold steady and not worsen.

Mexico is arguably enjoying its biggest boom since the days of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. Exports are, as we have seen, growing impressively although the slowing down of these is troubling. Investment is impressive as well, with domestic savings feeding the trend as well as foreign savings. The peso enjoys a stability not seen in many decades. International confidence in the country is high.

Against this must be set the points made earlier. Many economists argue that far too much of the growth in trade is based on intra-firm trade and that real growth is not impressive and

¹¹ For the official U.S. view, see uninfo.state.gov/is/Archive/05/Mar/23/209281.html.

is even less so in traditional labour-intensive fields of endeavour. A continued downturn in the economy in its northern neighbour, given the massive dependence of Mexico on this market as a source of imports and investment, would undoubtedly damage the country even more. All questions of increasing food prices, as at present, must trouble a nation so dependent now on imports of these true necessities.

The government must somehow get a grip of the public security dimension of national life if democracy is to flourish, if investment is still to be encouraged, and if confidence in the state is to be sustained. U.S. and other assistance can help but it is difficult not to reach the conclusion that only a massive effort at reform can address this vital issue, for the economy and politics of the nation, and resolve it.

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