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Raúl Benítez Manaut*

Mexico and the United States Security: Historic and Current Dilemmas

Different Territories And National Construction

The history of “the bilateral” in security issues has been a difficult process between Mexico and the United States. In 1823, the two governments recognized each other, but both were still constructing their identities, defining their territory, and building their institutions. Relations with their neighbors were difficult. The United States was born in 1776 and Mexico in 1821; that’s a forty-five-year difference, and the impetus and strength of each at birth were also different.

The United States was born as thirteen colonies, which it turned into states, and quickly expanded southward and westward. Mexico was born with a huge territory, reaching to what is now the northern part of California, but

without Mexicans and, instead, indigenous inhabitants who did not identify with the new nation.¹ To the south, in 1824 the Central American provinces declared their independence from the Mexican empire and the country began to “whittle down.” In other words, the United States was expanding and Mexico was shrinking. The United States did not manage to annex Canada to its burgeoning federation of states; English troops clashed with U.S. forces in U.S. territories from 1812 to 1815; peace was signed; and during the nineteenth century, the U.S. established its definitive northern border in 1867 when it bought Alaska from Russia. In the late nineteenth century, the United States continued to expand in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The victory of the North over the Confederacy in the Civil War (1861-1865) also determined what would be the great industrial power of the twentieth century. To the south, the 1846-1848 war with Mexico demonstrated the U.S. impetus as an expansionist nation. The Mexicans were divided and weak and had lost Texas in 1836. President James K. Polk declared war on May 13, 1846 and sign-

* Raúl is a researcher at the Center for Research on North America, National Autonomous University of Mexico; you can contact him at manaut@unam.mx.

ed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848.² Nationalism was being constructed in both countries: the United States as a strong, successful, expanding entity, and Mexico, still under construction, as a space in which the liberals and conservatives were going head to head. Without determining the way forward for the state, Mexico invited a European emperor, supported by France, to govern it. The liberals managed to expel him, but the cost was building a militarist, oligarchical state under the long dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz between 1876 and 1911.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, the 1910 Revolution broke out in Mexico, and the United States, as the Great War began, occupied Veracruz on April 21, 1914, under the pretext of preventing the unloading of arms from Germany. The occupation lasted nine months.³ The United States again intervened in Mexico, looking for Pancho Villa, in 1916. It did not find him, but it did leave the mark of its power on the country. In January 1917, the United States was on the brink of entering World War I and would be the determining factor in the conflict. It was on its way to becoming the world's foremost power militarily, economically, and politically.

By the third decade of the twentieth century, the two countries were on different paths. Mexico was just emerging from its civil war and was slowly rebuilding its institutions. The United States was already a great power. One of its concerns *vis-à-vis* its neighbor to the south was to normalize diplomatic relations and negotiate the "issues pending" after the revolution, such as some articles of the 1917 Mexican Constitution regarding the ownership of natural mineral resources and oil. President Lázaro Cárdenas decreed the nationalization of oil on March 18, 1938, affecting big U.S. and British companies. After long negotiations and due to the approaching outbreak of World War II, the two countries grew closer together and Mexico supported the Allied cause.

"Manifest Destiny" Made Reality, Not without Conflicts

World War II was at the root of the first great strategic rapprochement between the two countries. Between 1942 and 1960 they went from being neighbors to being partners. The Cold War came to this hemisphere in 1947, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 was a cause for conflict. The

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United States backed the military efforts to fight the communists and the nascent armed guerrilla groups. Mexico decided to take the opposite track diplomatically. It did not break off relations with Cuba and it opposed the coups d'état like the one in Guatemala in 1954, supporting its neighbor only on the issue of nuclear weapons. In 1967, Mexico promoted the signing of the Treaty of Tlatelolco, whereby the Latin American countries would not develop either nuclear technology or weapons, to avoid another event like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

In the 1970s, a new version of nationalism emerged in Mexico. It drew close to the movement of non-aligned countries, strengthened ties to China, and condemned the U.S.-backed coup d'état in Chile; President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) also made many trips to socialist countries. From 1977 on, Mexico became an oil-producing country. The differences with the United States sharpened with the outbreak of important conflicts in Central America beginning in 1979. Mexico defended its own national security interests, promoting closer relations with guerrilla groups from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. This was not to the liking of President Ronald Reagan, who supported counter-insurgency strategies. In other spheres, Mexico promoted dialogues and peace negotiations. It was the promotor of the UN-backed peace accords in El Salvador in 1992 and Guatemala in 1996.

The New Geo-economy and Geopolitics

In late 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. The Cold War was rapidly dismantled and a new era of multilateralism, economic integration, and geopolitical re-ordering started. People began to talk about radical changes all over the world. Canada and the United States referred to themselves as North America and invited Mexico to join in. NAFTA was signed in November 1993 and came into effect on January 1, 1994.

Mexico changed its perception of the world and its role in it. However, to remind Mexicans that it still belong-

ed to the underdeveloped world, the Zapatista uprising broke out that same January 1.⁴ NAFTA, plus the indigenous uprising, were the new reality; that is, Mexico had a door open to the developed world, but without having resolved its circumstances as a backward country.

NAFTA accelerated Canadian and U.S. investments, but Mexico had to democratize. The long-lived authoritarian political regime headed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was going through its final moments at the turn of the century.

Terrorism and the War Against Drug Trafficking

With the victory of President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), of the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) in Mexico, many thought that free trade plus democracy would carry Mexico out of underdevelopment. With that, migrants, able to find work in their places of origin, would stay home, the economy would grow rapidly, and North America would be strengthened.

In the United States, George W. Bush took office as president on January 20, 2001. Everything was set for signing agreements in both countries to create what came to be known as “the whole enchilada.”⁵ From Asia, Osama Bin Laden ordered an attack on the United States and September 11, 2001 changed global geopolitics. The U.S. closed its borders, asking its North American neighbors to sign the smart borders treaties (Canada in December 2001 and Mexico, in March 2002), and economic integration faded into the background, overwhelmed by the new threat.

Another challenge appeared on the horizon: in Latin America the cocaine trade expanded and invaded the United States. The drug traffickers from Mexico partnered with producers from Colombia and “the war against drugs” began. All this overshadowed the advance of free trade and opening of borders. Mexico modernized its immigration control system in airports and sea ports to prevent the entry of

potential terrorists into the United States, but it could not easily stop the invasion of white powder from Colombia.

Little by little, the two countries began to talk about improving the systems in place to control drug trafficking. When Mexico’s administration changed in 2006, the new president, Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), began negotiations to design what would be the Merida Initiative. In 2008, the U.S. Congress authorized this program to control Mexican criminal groups, and between 2008 and 2022, more than US\$3 billion in aid has been authorized. The Merida Initiative consists of a large number of military and legal training programs, equipment delivery, training Mexican authorities against money laundering, border surveillance, and even helping strengthen social cohesion to favor vulnerable people. It was in effect under the administrations of Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Donald Trump (2017-2021). However, since the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), its efficiency has come into question in Mexico. This is because the criminal groups have expanded, increased their power, continued to dominate entire territories in the states of Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Michoacán, and Guerrero, and the flow of drugs into the United States has not abated. Other substances, such as fentanyl have even flooded U.S. streets.⁶

The so-called “war against drugs” led high-ranking Mexican officials to be accused of complicity with organized crime, such as former minister of Public Safety Genaro García Luna. Toward the end of Donald Trump’s presidency and at the beginning of the current Mexican administration headed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico’s former minister of Defense, General Salvador Cienfuegos, was captured in October 2019. However, he was only under arrest for one month.

The presidents of the two countries do not look kindly at free trade. However, the economic opening is vital for the two economies to function. In 2021, Mexico became the United States’ main trade partner, surpassing China.

Donald Trump’s nationalism was added to an anti-immigration position, based on which there was talk of suspending trade in mid-2019. Mexico had to use its armed forces to contain the advance of migrants from Central America and other parts of the world. Trump, as a nationalist, also questioned free trade, but renegotiated NAFTA with Mexico and Canada, giving rise to a new treaty, the USMCA, which came into effect on July 1, 2020.⁷ Trade and immigration became security issues for the United States.

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Friendship with Differences

The change in U.S. administration in January 2021 was accompanied by the most serious political crisis in the country since the 1861-1865 Civil War. Trump did not accept the election results and his followers violently attacked Congress on January 6. This shook up not only the country, but the world. The new president, Joseph Biden, has to heal the wounds in his divided nation. Trump's followers, many of them nativists, anti-immigrant, and anti-free-trade, see Mexico as a threat. Governors like Greg Abbott from Texas spout a very strongly anti-Mexican discourse. President Biden has good relations with Mexico, but a lot of pressure is exercised on our country. Also, in Mexico, President López Obrador's nationalism creates friction with the United States. The two governments declared the Merida Initiative dead in 2021 and have called the new security cooperation instrument the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework.⁸

Mexico constantly accuses the United States of being interventionist. One of the very serious security problems is that Mexico considers that the Department of Justice's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) acts against Mexican interests, which is why its liaison office was closed down for being infiltrated by criminals. López Obrador argued, "That group, which was supposedly a high-level strategic group, was infiltrated [by criminals]; we put Mexico's relations with the United States in order. Past administrations had allowed those ties to infringe on Mexico's sovereignty."⁹

Final Thoughts

The differences between the two countries' levels of development are very large. The two democracies operate differently. In security and foreign policy matters, Mexico considers the United States interventionist, and the latter thinks that many Mexican officials are corrupt and cannot enforce the law. With regard to the central security issue in bilateral relations, drug trafficking, the populations of both countries are affected similarly. In 2021, approximately 100,000 young people in the United States died due to fentanyl consumption. In Mexico, more than 32,000 people died due to criminal violence in the same year. Proportionately, this is the same number of deaths

given the fact that the United States has three times Mexico's population.

As a super-power, the United States bears great responsibility in grave matters of international security. The war in the Ukraine, which broke out February 24, 2022, placed Mexico in a dilemma. Its foreign policy doctrines are based on non-intervention and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. At the United Nations, our country has backed the group of countries that condemn Russia, but it has not opened up an option for important humanitarian assistance to the civilian Ukrainian population affected by the war. It also does not share the policy of embargos and economic sanctions, which have not been effective in Latin America against Cuba or Venezuela.

Undoubtedly, these differences in global security policy will continue. Nevertheless, the two governments are working to ensure that this war does not affect our bilateral relations. ■■■

Notes

1 Marcela Terrazas and Gerardo Gurza, *Las relaciones México-Estados Unidos 1756-1867*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: UNAM/Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2012), p. 123.

2 Craig A. Deare, *A Tale of Two Eagles. The U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Defense Relationship Post Cold War* (Boulder, Colorado: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 38.

3 Secretaría de Marina, *La invasión a Veracruz en 1914: enfoques multidisciplinarios* (Mexico City: Semar, 2015), p. 337.

4 The movement headed by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), whose most widely known leader is Sub-commander Marcos, emerged on that day. [Editor's Note.]

5 The celebration of an immigration agreement favorable to Mexico became the priority in binational relations. "The whole enchilada" was the term coined by Jorge Castañeda, minister of Foreign Affairs under Vicente Fox, to refer to a comprehensive immigration reform, which was on the brink of becoming a reality until the events of 9/11. [Editor's Note.]

6 Clare Ribando Seelke and Joshua Klein, "Mexico: Background and U. S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, Washington D. C., March 21, 2022.

7 "T-MEC entrará en vigor el 1º de julio de 2020," press release no. 37, April 24, 2020, http://www.sice.oas.org/tpd/USMCA/Entry_into_Force/USMCA_EiF_s.pdf.

8 U. S. Department of State, "Summary of the Action Plan for U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities," Fact Sheet, January 31, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/summary-of-the-action-plan-for-u-s-mexico-bicentennial-framework-for-security-public-health-and-safe-communities>.

9 Reuters, "Mexican President Confirms Closure of Counter-narcotics Unit Working with U. S.," April 21, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/mexican-president-confirms-closure-counter-145650792.html?guccounter=1>.