

# The Legacy of an Ambiguous Relationship

## Nineteenth Century Mexico-U.S. Relations<sup>1</sup>

(Part Two)

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In part one of this essay (*Voices of Mexico* 49), the author examined the different stages of Mexico-U.S. bilateral relations from the time the United States recognized Mexico as a sovereign nation (1832) to the end of the French intervention (1867): from an alliance between both nations in 1832, the break-off of diplomatic relations (1837), their renewal (1839) and the war of 1846-1847, to their becoming partners of convenience in 1867. All that time, Mexico was the weak, subordinate partner, while the U.S. exercised expansionist policies in its attempt to achieve hegemony over the entire hemisphere. The second part of the article, printed here, deals with the zigzags in relations during the last stage of the Juárez administration and the whole Porfirio Díaz period.

With the end of the French intervention, the Mexican government took a position on foreign policy for the first time. The “Juárez Doctrine” shaped the doctrine for Mexican foreign policy during the twentieth century. Its principles were non-intervention, self-determination and the sovereign equality of states. It isolated Mexico from the European powers that had broken relations with Mexico after the execution of Maximilian of Habsburg.<sup>2</sup> This isolation strengthened U.S.-Mexican relations with a dual effect: it generated new vulnerable spots in Mexican sovereignty but also opened up new opportunities for the reconstruction of the Mexican economy.

One important reason why Mexico and the United States became partners of convenience in 1867 was that the American leadership and the victorious Mexican liberal cadre shared the perception that the European powers were a menace to the security of their respective countries. It is important to underline that, during that period, the European powers' position did not offer a clear alternative to Mexico to compensate for the increasing

U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere. Spain was busy with its internal conflicts, with no clear idea of its international role; France was caught between maintaining its continental role or becoming an imperial power; and, finally, Great Britain was already a dominant empire with a pragmatic outlook in which Mexico was of only secondary interest.

The year 1876 was a turning point in the history of Mexico and the United States. In Mexico, it brought the victory of Porfirio Díaz's inner circle over the Juárez group of liberals, and in the United States, it saw the end of the Reconstruction with the election of Rutherford Hayes. By then, the United States was gaining control of the enormous resources throughout its territory, developing its technological tradition and consolidating its internal market. These trends would rapidly make it a leader in international affairs. At the same time, Mexico needed resources to develop its economic potential, but the scope of alternatives was not very broad due to its self-imposed international isolation. Also, the political, entrepreneurial and intellectual elites in both countries were influenced by social Darwinist positivism, which emphasized material progress over social concerns. Hence, the political upper echelons in both countries were in

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a basic agreement. On the other hand the European powers entered into a period of rearrangement of their own interests inside and outside their continental realms, and were permeated by a neo-colonialist drive directed mostly at Africa and Asia, without altogether leaving aside the Americas.

During the Porfirio Díaz presidency, bilateral relations were cordial after President Rutherford Hayes' refusal to recognize the government of the Mexican general. Cooperation during this period was possible due to several factors. On one hand, Mexican diplomacy was very nimble in the exploitation of American investors' interests, creating a real Mexican lobby. On the other hand, border and claims issues were dealt with on a case-by-case basis so that none were harmful to the big picture of bilateral relations.<sup>3</sup> It is very likely that the model for today's pattern of cooperation in bilateral relations is the one implemented in those years. However, the cornerstone of this diplomacy was the Mexican government's interest in allowing American investment in key economic sectors to foster national growth. Railroads and mining received a significant amount of American investment. In 1880 a second trade reciprocity treaty was negotiated, but it never went into effect because the U.S. House of Representatives never issued the tax laws required for its implementation. Nonetheless, in the early years of the twentieth century, the U.S. was the recipient of 76 percent of Mexico's exports, and it was the country of origin of 50 percent of Mexican imports. U.S. assets accounted for 38 percent of foreign investment in Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

Cooperation in political and economic relations were not, however, significant enough to change latent Mexican distrust toward the United States. Porfirio Díaz always remembered the Hayes administration's conditioning U.S. recognition of his government when he first seized the presidency. Some of his cabinet helped him not to forget it. Consequently, a counterweight foreign policy was developed. Relations with European powers were reestablished, fostering investment in Mexico, and

closer diplomatic relations were forged with countries in Europe, Latin America and Asia, especially Japan. By 1910, the Mexican government had developed a highly diversified network of international relations, which had allowed it to compensate for the significant presence of U.S. interests. Yet, the hemispheric policies of the United States were growing and forcing Mexico into its security and geopolitical domain, thus imposing further burdens on Mexican foreign policy, as social conditions deteriorated.

The United States again made a priority of its foreign policy objectives at the beginning of the twentieth century. The extraordinary economic growth of the 1880s and 1890s forced the adoption of an aggressive economic strategy to compete for international markets with old European powers like Britain and France and with new powers like Germany, Italy and Japan. The Western Hemisphere and the Pacific Rim were termed vital areas of influence for U.S. national security and economic growth.<sup>5</sup>

The new policy for the Americas was developed in the call for the First International American Conference in 1889, with the aim of establishing a customs union and a dispute settlement mechanism.<sup>6</sup> This initiative was followed by two corollaries to the Monroe Doctrine: Richard Olney's in 1895<sup>7</sup> and Theodore Roosevelt's in 1904. The United States would unilaterally become an arbiter in conflicts between the countries of the region and extra-continental powers. At the same time, its victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the control of the Panama Canal Zone in 1903 resulted in virtual American control over the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America. "Dollar Diplomacy," the U.S. government's instrument to protect American investment interests abroad, was also part of this new foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> The European powers, particularly England, permitted these U.S. policies to some extent.<sup>9</sup> So, by the turn of the century, Mexico was close to being swallowed up in the strategic area of the United

States. Mexico's predicament, then, was to overcome that threat.

The Porfirio Díaz government was aware of these circumstances and tried to design policies to diminish the risks involved. On the domestic front, this meant pursuing a policy of reaffirming Mexico's Latin cultural background and subsequently reasserting Mexican nationalism, mostly in terms of patriotic concepts. Internationally, it meant tying Mexico to the countries with Iberian or Latin backgrounds; Spain, France and the Ibero-American countries. In foreign policy, it meant pursuing four aims: the first was to seek closer relationships with potential important rivals of the United States: Germany and Japan.<sup>10</sup> The second was aimed at seeking agreements among the Latin American countries to counteract U.S. demands or intentions. The third was to maintain a sort of neutral position on critical international issues, such as the Venezuelan crisis of 1895 and the War of the United States against Spain in 1898. The fourth was to foster international recognition of the tenets of the Juárez Doctrine and legal principles in dealing with problems of foreign citizens in a host country, within the recently created Pan American Union.<sup>11</sup> To a certain extent, Mexico upheld the Calvo and Drago Doctrines.<sup>12</sup> By 1910, then, Mexico was pursuing a realistic foreign policy aimed at making the country a middle-sized power in order to maintain some degree of autonomy in its international relations and reduce the risks of being engulfed by the United States. Yet, the cooperation with its northern neighbor was never abandoned,<sup>13</sup> and it can even be said that on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, it had reached an unexpectedly high level.

At that time, unfortunately for Mexico, the leading elite's policy design had overlooked the country's internal conditions. From 1900 on, Porfirio Díaz's rule progressively lost legitimacy and commitment to the nation. At the same time, in the United States the reform movements, particularly Progressivism, were moving forward. Hence, sym-

pathy toward the authoritarian Mexican regime began dropping in some political circles; even private organizations provided assistance to the growing number of Mexican dissidents on U.S. soil, which in turn bred apprehension within the ruling Mexican cadre. At the end of the Porfirio Díaz regime, there was a premonition of the conflict that was about to arise. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This work was carried out under the auspices of the Mexican Association for Culture.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Cosío Villegas, "La Doctrina Juárez," *Política exterior de México. 175 años de historia* vol. 2 (Mexico City: SRE, 1985), pp. 712-729.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Cosío Villegas, *Historia moderna de México. El porfiriato. La vida política exterior*. Part 2 (Mexico City: Hermes, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *México frente a Estados Unidos (Un ensayo histórico, 1776-1993)* (Mexico City: FCE, 1994), p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> James Chase and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable. The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 109 on.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy* vol. 1 (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988), p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> Walter La Feber, "President Cleveland and the Venezuelan Crisis of 1895-1896," William Appelman Williams, ed., *The Shaping of American Diplomacy* vol. 1 (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1971), p. 305 on.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Connell-Smith, *Los Estados Unidos y la América Latina* (Mexico City: FCE, 1977), pp. 133-173.

<sup>9</sup> Walter La Feber, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Roberta Lajous, *México y el mundo. Historia de sus relaciones exteriores* vol. 4 (Mexico City: Senado de la República, 1990), p. 112 on.

<sup>11</sup> Julius Pratt, Vincent O. De Santis and Joseph M. Siracusa, *A History of United States Foreign Policy* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1955), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> The Calvo Doctrine was delineated by Argentine diplomat and historian Carlos Calvo in his work *El derecho internacional teórico y práctico* (1868), in which he stated that foreigners must enjoy conditions equal to those of the citizens of the country in which they reside; hence diplomatic protection was a tool used by stronger nations against weaker ones. The Drago Doctrine was put forward by the Argentine foreign relations minister in 1902: it considered the use of force by creditor nations to seek payment from debtor countries unlawful.

<sup>13</sup> Ricardo Ampudia, *Los Estados Unidos de América en los informes presidenciales de México* (Mexico City: SRE/FCE, 1997), p. 59 on.