

The End of the “Tin Drum” Blue Berets for Mexican Troops

Raúl Benítez Manaut*



STF New/Reuters

The post-Cold War world, based on globalization, made Mexico’s foreign policy break down. The so-called “foreign policy principles” had become sacred, even if occasionally discretely broken. It was so in the case of El Salvador, in 1980, when the FMLN-FDR guerrilla force—the current government—was given diplomatic recognition. Diplomatic activism was also justified by pointing out that the action served to contain U.S. “interventionism” in Central America, and, although no one said it so as not to shake the wasp’s nest, also to stop the Soviet Union and Cuba.

MEXICO’S AMBIGUOUS CONSTITUTION VIS-À-VIS THE UN CHARTER

Article 89, paragraph 10 of Mexico’s Constitution, which deals with the “foreign policy principles,” highlights ambiguously

“self-determination of peoples” and “the principle of non-intervention” as well as “the struggle for world peace and security.” The isolationist thinking that has predominated in Mexico since the end of the twentieth century is based on the first two principles, while those who promote sending troops to back up the country’s external actions base themselves on the third. In Enrique Peña Nieto’s speech before the UN General Assembly last September 24, nationalist isolationism is put to one side, giving way to making Mexico an active country in the international security system (see box, p. 24).

That speech to the UN commits the government to making Mexican troops available to the UN Security Council. The UN Charter’s Chapter VI states that it must undertake “peace building,” while Chapter VII states that it must carry out peacekeeping efforts (see Graph 1). Articles 43 to 48 stipulate that countries must commit to placing troops at the disposition of the Security Council’s Military Staff Committee. This may put Mexico’s armed forces in a tense situation, given that only in World War II, in 1945—and then only briefly—were its troops put under the command of other countries.

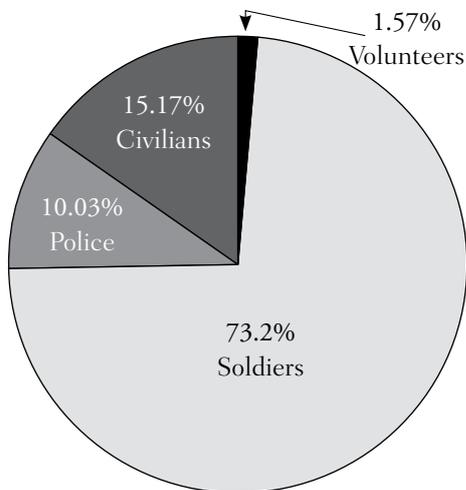
*Researcher at CISAN, manaut@unam.mx.

“My country is willing to be an active part of this transformation. It is determined to evolve with the United Nations. Mexico supports and values peacekeeping operations, the UN instrument that helps countries overcome conflicts and create conditions for a lasting peace through reconstruction, humanitarian aid, and security. For that reason, Mexico has made the decision to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations carrying out humanitarian work for the benefit of the civilian population. Our participation will be in accordance with a clear mandate by the Security Council and will adhere to the foreign policy principles set out in our Constitution. With this decision, Mexico, as a responsible actor, is taking a historic step in its commitment to the United Nations.”

Enrique Peña Nieto, “México: la ONU debe atreverse a cambiar para mejorar,” September 24, 2014, <http://www.un.org/spanish/News/story.asp?NewsID=30550#.VDQ7ZGd5P85>.

Around 1950 Mexican diplomatic activism consisted of backing the prevalence of international law, promoting disarmament and avoiding U.S. interventionism, mainly in Latin America.

GRAPH 1
PERSONS IN UN-LED PEACEKEEPING
OPERATIONS (2014) (%)
Total Number of Participants: 113 822



Source: Data for this graph taken from <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/factsheet.shtml>, accessed July 31, 2014.

Immediately after the end of World War II, Mexico looked like it was going to be active internationally, but it was not. It was an observer in the Balkans between 1947 and 1950 and in Cashmere in 1950. Another 40 years would pass before it thought of backing up UN peacekeeping operations. In the meantime, Mexican diplomatic activism consisted of backing the prevalence of international law, promoting disarmament—its greatest victory was the Treaty of Tlatelolco in 1967—and avoiding U.S. interventionism, mainly in Latin America.

Diplomatic relations did not exist with Spain, for example, because Mexico supported the Republic defeated in 1939, until the death of General Franco and the restoration of democracy. Mexico was a harsh critic of the coup d'état in Guatemala in 1954 and the attempt to isolate Cuba between 1960 and 1965—at one point, only Mexico had diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro's government. It relentlessly criticized U.S. aid for coups d'état, mainly against Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973, and then promoted détente diplomacy in Central America for 18 years, ranging from support for the revolutionary government in Nicaragua in 1979 to aiding the UN in fostering the peace process in Guatemala in 1996.

EL SALVADOR

Support for UN peace missions was concretized with the signing of the El Salvador Peace Accord in the historic Chapultepec Castle on January 16, 1992; 120 officers from different police forces were immediately dispatched. Why no troops were sent is still a question. That important diplomatic action has left positive memories in the annals of the next-to-the-last effort of Mexican activism. The last was support for the Guatemala peace process in 1996, but no Mexican police or missions were sent there. That was the death of Mexican diplomatic activism, reborn September 24, 2014.

Eighteen years had to go by for the government to react. There were many opportunities; the South Americans took advantage of them and began sending police to the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and even East Timor to support its independence from Indonesia. Their presence in the international community grew as promoters of peace efforts. When the Haitian crisis began, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay rapidly committed themselves in 2004. By contrast, in

Mexico, politicians, diplomats, and traditionalist military personnel insisted that we should not go, since the world is dangerous and we were not prepared. In addition, a very Cold-War-type discourse made a reappearance: the UN is an instrument of the United States and for that reason, we should not do any favors for our neighbors to the north. The metaphor used was that of the little boy who never grows up from *The Tin Drum*, the great novel by German author Günther Grass, who refuses to recognize what is happening under his nose and decides to stay dwarf-sized. That's how lethargic our diplomacy was.

THE TRAGEDY IN HAITI

Ten years ago, the Haiti crisis reached unsuspected heights: the government collapsed and President Jean Bertrand Aristide left—rather, U.S. helicopters “rescued” him—when he was about to be lynched by the population. The UN made an urgent call to the international community and nine Latin American countries answered. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay signed up quickly. For years, Chile and Brazil controlled the peace mission. These countries have reaped big geopolitical rewards for their presence in Haiti, in addition to all the experience acquired by their troops, police, and diplomats.

Between 2004 and 2005, the UN requested troops from Mexico and an agreement was almost reached. But, the then-minister of national defense stoutly refused. The Ministry of the Navy was on the tide that was taking the frigates to Haiti. The military elite's opinion was divided, as was that of other sectors of the country like the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, where globalists and nationalists, isolationists and those who stood on principle debated. The same happened among academics and the press. In other words, in those years, the inertia of the past won. Once again, the country was afraid of the world.

In January 2010, the Haitians were hit by a great tragedy, this time a natural disaster: a huge earthquake. More than 316 000 people were killed, 350 000 injured, and more than 1.5 million left homeless. Mexico's navy took its valuable resources there, but not even this terrible blow made Mexican politicians sensitive to the tragedy. Mexico's war frigates should not have returned home, but stayed to help with the difficult reconstruction. Haiti needed Mexico more than ever, and we were not up to the task. The internal dynamic

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in the military stifled that debate and the possibility of renewing activism seemed very far off. The protocol of Felipe Calderón's war against drug trafficking determined that no one should talk about sending troops abroad. The isolationists and nationalists came out on top again. However, in his 2013-2018 National Development Plan, Enrique Peña Nieto included a phrase that at the time seemed just like more of the same: “Mexico with global responsibility.” The question was how to do that if we refused to help the international security system and a country struck by tremendous tragedy.

How was Mexico perceived in the community of nations? It is clear that other countries with similar development levels and strategic size are present in the world: the Latin American countries already mentioned, but also Pakistan, India, Nigeria, and South Africa offer their troops. The worst part of this isolation is that much smaller countries contribute troops to UN efforts, even if only symbolically. This is the case of Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Honduras, just to name some in Latin America (see the box in p. 26, and Table 1).

Peña Nieto's capability is unquestionable. If he had opened a national debate before announcing his decision in the UN, the isolationists would certainly have been able to stop the initiative, which is what happened to Vicente Fox in 2004-2005. By contrast, Peña Nieto launched the idea at the UN, breaking with aging schema; and in time, it will undoubtedly be discussed, but the hand has been dealt by the president, and it will be hard for anyone in his administration or his party to oppose it.

We should note that the military commanders have not blocked the initiative. This speaks of more modern winds blowing and a new military way of thinking that is rapidly changing the two military institutions, the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of the Navy. Clearly, the new generations of the military are moving in favor of those who know the world, have studied abroad, and even want to venture abroad with a UN blue beret. Peacekeeping missions bolster professionalism, and the army and navy command

COUNTRIES PRESENT IN HAITI IN 2014

With troops

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Jordan, Nepal, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, United States, and Uruguay

With police officers

Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Egypt, France, Granada, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, India, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Madagascar, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Paraguay, Philippines, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Senegal, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, Vanuatu, and Yemen

Source: Developed by the author with data from <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/missions/minustah/facts.shtml>.

structures are aware of that. These are very intense experiences for the troops because of their interaction with other armies; they develop to a maximum the key to modern warfare, what is called interoperability, and many other factors like relations between civilians and military.¹

The Mexican government has not specified which peacekeeping mission it has in mind, but the logical choice is what is in our geographical epicenter, the so-called “third frontier,” the Caribbean, where Haiti urgently requires help. The best from each sector should be sent: army, air force, navy, and services such as engineering and medical personnel, to cover the Haitian people’s enormous deficits in services. The mission must be led by a diplomat, with civilians, police, troops and also, as I mentioned before, specialists in engineering and medicine.

One of the concerns is the issue of bearing arms. The troops take them to the UN peacekeeping operations, but they can only be used in extreme cases of legitimate defense. In the case of Haiti, the mission is called Minustah and its aim is “stabilization.” There are no military enemies, and it focuses clearly on helping the civilian population and on rebuilding the country’s infrastructure. The UN pays each soldier US\$1000 per month. For that reason, in many countries,

young people enlist in the armed forces to have the chance to travel abroad, have a good job, and get international experience.

MEXICAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Mexico’s military institutions have two very important qualities: the ability to aid populations in serious disasters and the high quality of military medical training, reputed to be the country’s best. Both of these are undeniable comparative advantages. In the past they have done outstanding work: during the 1996 wave of earthquakes in Ecuador, in 1998 in Haiti and Bolivia, and in Colombia in January 1999, and firefighting in Guatemala in 2000. In 1998, they helped Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala after the devastating Hurricane Mitch, which left 11 000 dead. In 1999, Mexican military forces spent three months on the Maique-

TABLE 1
UN STABILIZING MISSION IN HAITI (2014)

Uniformed troops	7 522
Soldiers	5 145
Police officers (including existing units)	2 377
International civilian personnel	346
Local civilian personnel	1 168
United Nations volunteers	132

Source: Developed by the author with data from <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/missions/minustah/facts.shtml>, accessed July 31, 2014.

Peacekeeping missions bolster professionalism, and the Mexican army and navy command structures are aware of that. These are very intense experiences for the troops because of their interaction with other armies.

tía Venezuelan coast helping the population after unprecedented flooding. In January 2005, two Mexican naval vessels, the *Zapoteco* and the *Usumacinta*, transported 184 tons of aid to Indonesia after the disaster caused by the tsunami. In September of that same year, after Hurricane Katrina, Mexican troops went to the United States to help the homeless, and in January 2010, navy and civil protection forces went to Haiti to help. They are experienced. The operations mentioned above were not under a UN flag, but now those capabilities are put at the service of the international body responsible for guaranteeing international security.

If Mexico went to Haiti, it would not extricate the broad sectors of the populace from the poverty they are in, but it is time to add a valuable grain of sand to the effort. And what is more important, our country must project itself as what it is: a medium-sized power with huge resources that must have geopolitical influence. Now is the opportunity to shake off that immobilizing ostracism alien to the geopolitical dynamics of the twenty-first century.

We must keep in mind that this would be a win-win operation. The UN needs peacekeeping forces for some missions like Haiti, and the country that sends troops earns prestige in the world. On a military level, its armed forces learn important lessons that are difficult to acquire outside of experiences directly on the ground in peacekeeping operations. On the other hand, in the day-to-day exchanges with their counterparts

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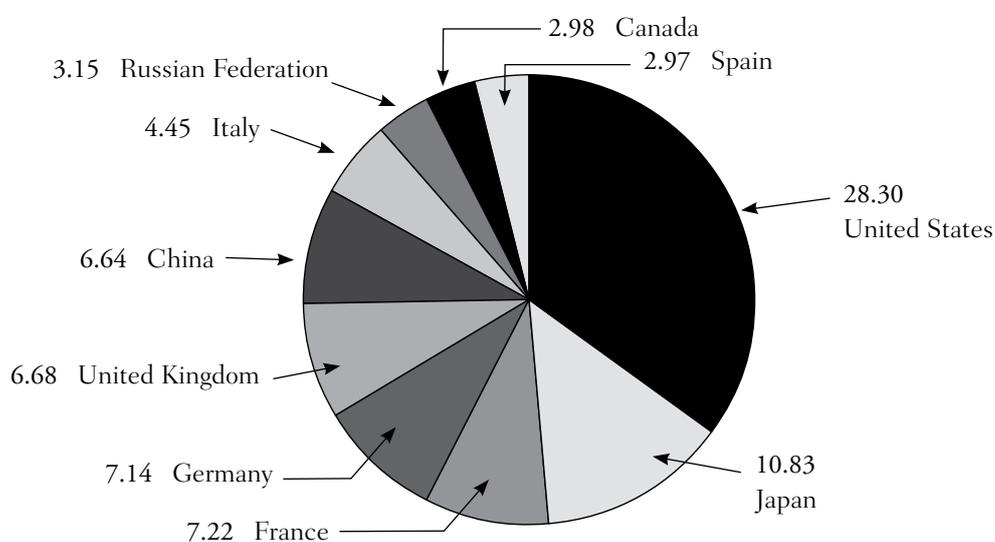
from other countries, they learn other cultures, languages, and traditions, as well as how to carry out non-combat military operations with respect for the civilian population's rights.

It is true that the soldiers have to face difficult experiences, but these are also learning situations: for example, how to operate and survive in conditions of extreme poverty, such as those the people they deal with live in; with temperatures like the Caribbean's, which are extreme; carrying out multi-dimensional operations; sometimes the dissuasive deployment of military force, or lending medical assistance; and in other cases, such as in the aftermath of a hurricane, the reconstruction of the country's infrastructure. **MM**

NOTES

¹ In the 69 UN missions from 1948 to 2014, a total of 3 263 troops and civilians have died. See http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/fatalities/documents/stats_5a.pdf, accessed October 8, 2014. Currently, 16 missions are active and 120 countries have sent troops, police, and civilian personnel to participate in them. See <http://www.un.org/es/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/factsheet.shtml>, accessed July 31, 2014.

GRAPH 2
MAIN FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTORS TO THE UN IN 2014



Source: Data for this graph taken from <http://www.un.org/en/aboutun/structure/>, accessed July 31, 2014.