

Mexico: Dilemmas In the Irak-U.S. Conflict

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The U.S. threat of war against Irak, pressuring the international community to support the strategy of deposing Saddam Hussein, brought Mexico face to face with one of the most important challenges to its relationship with the United States because of its membership in the UN Security Council.

Mexico is in a strategic dilemma: it is a neighbor and partner of the United States, and in the defense of both their strategic interests, many of their current forms of cooperation and foreign policy coincide. However, for Mexico, after September 11, the United States has subordinated its relations with most countries of the world to the support given to the war against international terrorism and the attempt to oust Saddam Hussein.

In the Security Council, Mexico did not back the U.S. and British position supporting a preemptive military attack. Rather, Mexico aligned more with the position of France, Russia and China, known as the two-lane strategy: a mandate to Irak to accept UN inspectors with no limitations, even inside Hussein's palaces. This diplomatic solution to the crisis was achieved November 8, in resolution 1441, sup-



Peter Morgan/Reuters

The United Nations Security Council meets on Irak at its New York headquarters.

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ported by the council's 15 countries, including Syria, the representative of the Arab world.

Voices had been raised in Mexico criticizing President Vicente Fox from the beginning of his administration, saying that he was selling out to the United States, endangering the foreign policy principles of sovereignty, non-intervention and the peaceful solution of controversies. In the United States, it was said that the friendship between the two presidents was rapidly deteriorating because Fox had not been sufficiently emphatic in his support for President Bush after September 11. This criticism continues in the United States, since Mexico was seen as a dissident in the Security Council when it supported a search for alternatives to military attack. The convergence with France worried many in the United States, and with that, it is said in the United States that the romance between the two presidents was on the point of breaking up.

The conflict with Irak tensed Mexico-U.S. relations since the support Washington was requesting was seen as a zero-sum game: if you are not with me, automatically, you are supporting international terrorism and Saddam Hussein. This polarization and diplomatic reductionism put Mexican diplomacy and President Fox himself in a tough spot since, domestically, members of Congress and the public are in-

creasingly against the attack. Poll results published October 31, 2002, in the Mexican daily *Reforma* point to a drop in public approval of President George Bush from 63 percent to 42 percent from September 7 to October 26. The same poll showed an increase from 49 percent to 56 percent in the number of Mexicans who believe that the Mexican government should remain neutral.

Both presidents are conditioned by domestic politics in a way that damages relations. Both countries' Congresses have nationalist deputies or representatives and senators who greatly distrust their neighbor. In the United States, there are also anti-immigrant political leaders whose positions are practically a declaration of war against Mexico, for example, when "Mexican hunters" are tolerated in Texas, New Mexico or Arizona border counties. In Mexico, many deputies and senators view the North American Free Trade Agreement with distrust and oppose President Bush's war discourse. To this should be added the fact that President Fox has committed himself to the goal of achieving an agreement to regularize the status of migratory workers in the United States, a debate that has been frozen in the U.S. capitol.

One of the issues that would tend to push both governments to an understanding on migration is the flow of citizens from both countries who reside in the other. It is estimated that

of the 8 million undocumented migrants in the United States, living in fear of being deported, three million are Mexican; 3 million Mexicans are documented workers there; there is an undetermined number of Mexican Americans (born in Mexico and who now hold U.S. citizenship), that some sources put at 5 million people; in addition to 5 or 10 million American citizens with rights in Mexico (everything from citizenship to property ownership). In other words, it is the largest Mexican community abroad and involves up to 20 percent of the country's total population. The situation is reciprocal: the largest number of U.S. citizens living abroad (1.3 million people) reside in Mexico. (Followed by Canada where 690,000 Americans live and Great Britain and Germany with a little over 200,000 Americans each.) The difference is that Americans do not reside illegally in Mexico, although they do require very complex consular and legal attention from both governments.

In Mexico-U.S. relations, security is a very complex issue. For example, the two countries have notable disagreements on certain international and hemispheric policies. Mexico showed that it is not an unconditional supporter of the United States in the UN Security Council, that it has its own voice and interests and that, depending on the case, it may agree or disagree with the superpower's positions. Mexico also has more agreements with countries like France and China in the council. This shows that geographical proximity and the increase in free trade are not synonymous with strategic agreements on everything. With regard to hemispheric security, the Mexican government questioned the September 7, 2001 Interamerican Mutual Assistance Treaty and today has

expressed a fundamental disagreement with its remaining in effect. This makes the difference with the U.S. position of building security agreements in the hemisphere to deal with possible conflicts via military or coercive means (for example trade embargoes) obvious. In the same fashion, in the hemisphere, the Colombian conflict is challenging stability and increasing the precariousness of the political situation in some Andean countries, which has begun to create dramatic conditions which could be the occasion for invoking interventionist security agreements. Mexico has also systematically opposed the trade embargo on Cuba.

Nevertheless, where agreement on security is very broad is in the bilateral relationship. Since September 11, the Mexican government has applied a great many measures that have helped the United States to have a secure southern border, mainly to prevent a possible terrorist commando from entering its territory through our country. In the same way, protective measures for strategic infrastructure, like oil platforms and electricity, the control of airports and Mexico's recognition of the vulnerability of its borders and their technological backwardness are aspects that make the security relations between the two countries closer.

The two governments have implemented a great number of cooperation agreements on security for more than 15 years. The fight against drug trafficking is based on many commitments to exchange information, extradite drug traffickers, train the Mexican military and police forces and broaden the coverage of cooperation agreements. In addition, information exchange about money laundering has been very successful, and, since Sep-

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tember 2001, drug traffickers' financial resources are being controlled. U.S. collaboration to detect money laundering in cases of corruption in Mexico has also been important.

During the Fox and Bush administrations, cooperation has been marked by three moments: President Bush's visit to Guanajuato in February 2001; President Fox's visit to Washington in early September 2001, just days before the terrorist attacks; and the agreements signed in March 2002 in Monterrey, centered on smart borders. The aim of the Monterrey agreements is to have an "efficient, safe" common border. To that end, commitments were made to exchange information about persons, transportation of goods, shipments and protection of border infrastructure. For example, in October 2002, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents came to Mexico to do security training in Mexico City's international airport.

A security matter that has increasingly involved the two governments is the cooperation to improve the effectiveness of Mexico's police forces and justice system. Backing for training and professionalization involves a great many agencies of the U.S. justice system, not only the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Another dimension of security is linked to the North American Free Trade Agreement's being in force as well as energy and environmental issues. A

great many commitments about these matters have been signed. In particular, for the United States, Mexico, in addition to being its neighbor at a time of grave international instability, is an oil-producing nation and one of its main suppliers. The issue of the reform of Mexican legislation on investment in the energy sector is considered a priority for both governments.

A large number of bi-national working groups are following up on all these issues and cooperation commitments. For that reason, the national security of both the United States and Mexico is based on a very active policy of cooperation that will not be halted because of the differences in the two governments' positions on international security.

Because of this, it is important to say that even though differences between Mexico and the United States on matters of hemispheric and international security continue to exist, cooperation will also continue to be intense with regard to the strictly binational relationship. Thus, when discussing security between the two countries, we must distinguish the level of security we are dealing with and the relationship that each case has to the domestic politics of each. Believing that differences of opinion in the Security Council can damage the relations of bi-national cooperation is to not understand the complexity of the relations between the two countries. **MM**