

# Mexico and the UN Security Council

Roberta Lajous\*



Reuters/Chip East

Mexico occupied a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council from 2002 to 2003. The government of Vicente Fox has announced its candidacy for the years 2009 to 2010. This article is a reflection about our most recent participation, with a look at both its negative and positive sides.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE BETTER

It was a late decision that forced us to a precipitated campaign. On December 2, 2001,

the Fox administration's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge G. Castañeda announced our candidacy for an election that would take place in October 2002. Various countries had registered their interest in taking the seat reserved for Latin America and the Caribbean several years in advance; among them were the Dominican Republic, which had the advantage of almost four years of active, decided campaigning behind it. It had already gotten a series of diplomatic-note vote commitments from countries in the region, putting our friends and trade partners in a difficult situation when we began to ask for their support.

From the beginning, it was clear that we would not have the almost indispensable endorsement of our region for the seat that is decided by universal vote. For that reason, we soon had to

\* Member of Mexico's Foreign Service since 1979 and currently coordinator of international affairs of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

**Until now we have not contributed  
with civilian or military contingents for peacekeeping  
operations in the way that other countries  
of Latin America do.**

go out to the entire world to look for votes. All our embassies began an active campaign, though there are not that many of them compared to other countries with the same level of development. For that reason, it was necessary to name roving ambassadors, people who for various reasons had prior links to different regions of the world. Several missions went to Africa, where our diplomatic representation was the weakest. A delegation also went to the new countries of Europe and Asia which emerged at the end of the Cold War, and another to the South Pacific. All of them sought interviews at the highest political level. However, the campaign centered in New York, where the largest group of diplomats and security specialists in the world gather. There, we sought the good graces of the great powers and of each of the small countries, whose vote carries the same weight in the UN General Assembly where the election is held out during the annual session.

As expected, we did not win the election in the first round of voting. There had to be a second round, in which many countries were able to abandon the commitment they had made for the first. I remember the minutes that passed between the first and second vote as the longest of my professional career. However, we won. Nevertheless, along the way, we left scars that still plague us, even when we have sought

new candidacies. The Caribbeans have the feeling that the Mexican steamroller passed right over the rhetoric that says that the Caribbean is our third border. We promised Africa a rapprochement that still has not materialized.

When we entered the council, we had not updated our position on important topics affecting international security. For years we had been absent from many of the council's public debates, about which all UN members take a position. Perhaps the most noteworthy of our omissions was the Middle East.

After the episode that led to the resignation of Foreign Relations Minister Emilio O. Rabasa in 1974, Mexico made very few contributions to the issue. It fell to me to make our first speech before the council in this new period on this topic, not without first getting approval in writing from Tlatelolco of every single line I was going to say.<sup>2</sup> Foreign policy is always a team effort, and the more years of experience invested in designing a position, almost always, the better the result.

With regard to other issues that emerged in recent years, like the restructuring of the Balkan borders or the former Soviet Union, or the crisis of governability in Africa, Mexico had also neglected to develop its position. With the excuse that these issues do not affect our interests or that we do not have embassies in the region to in-

form us directly about what is going on there, we had kept our distance.

With the campaign to obtain the seat on the council and, simultaneously, the extra work load that this meant for Mexico's mission in New York and the preparation of the 2002 Monterrey Financing for Development Summit, very few human resources and little time were left over for preparing each issue on the council agenda. The team in charge of our participation had not yet established our general strategy when the crisis caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the very island of Manhattan happened. The UN was taken over not only by security agents who took control of our lives in the area adjacent to the headquarters on First Avenue, but also by the anti-terrorist agenda that from that moment on contaminated the entire organization. I still remember the elegant invitation that the Mexican mission sent out for the performance of Amalia Hernández's folklore ballet on September 11 as part of a campaign to win goodwill among New York's diplomatic community. It was cancelled, along with all the other activities we had planned, including a visit a few days later by Mexico's president to the UN.

The external events that impeded the mission's regular work for weeks and that absorbed us in dealing with the recently created Special Committee to fight against terrorism put an end to our preparations. The world changed with the attacks, and so did the UN agenda, especially the Security Council agenda. No one could have foreseen this sudden shift in the international community's concerns, but we reacted slowly in understanding its impact and in responding to the new circumstances in which we were entering the council.

On the other hand, given the uncertainty about whether we would enter into the Security Council or not, the public was not prepared for our doing so. For Mexico, taking on greater responsibility in the international sphere created a series of opportunities and advantages. However, the questioning of Mexico's position about the Iraq invasion and the terms under which Adolfo Aguilar Zinser later resigned as head of Mexico's permanent mission at the UN encouraged the traditional position that we should not go looking for trouble in somebody else's back yard. To my surprise, I found that even in 2005, when I returned to Mexico after finishing my mission in Cuba, amidst a convoluted series of opposing arguments, the public continued to have doubts about the advantages of participating in the council. While during the 2006 presidential campaign, two of the three main political parties, the National Action Party (PAN) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), coincided on the need for Mexico to play a more important role on the world stage, the issue of participating in the Security Council sparked no enthusiasm.

Internal political jockeying and personal rivalries were reflected in our participation in the Security Council. First was the sudden change of the head of the Mexican mission 10 days before taking our seat as president of the council for the first time in February 2002. Regardless of the reasons behind it or whether the decision was correct or not, it was not an appropriate move in terms of timing or manner. But that was only one of the factors that contributed to the improvisation of the entire exercise. Others were the lack of human and financial resources. Given the uncertainty of winning the seat, the min-

istry did not assign sufficient personnel beforehand, and the federal government did not plan for contributing financial resources so that our speeches could be accompanied with commitments of special funds to deal with the humanitarian crises resulting from armed conflicts. Even more serious, until today we have not contributed with civilian or military contingents for peacekeeping operations. No strategy has been designed by the federal government to really fill out Mexico's commitment to contribute to international security in the way that, for example, other countries of Latin America do. Even Central American countries contribute contingents to UN forces. South American contingents have even headed up actions, such as in the recent case of Haiti. Mexico's government has not prepared itself to systematically send abroad organized groups of doctors, nurses, police, Federal Electoral Institute officials, rescue teams or even armed contingents. If we are going to share in the international responsibility for putting an end to armed conflicts and contribute to the reconstruction of conflict areas, we have to take steps to give substance to our presence in the UN. If we aspire to consolidating prestige among the world's dozen largest economies, we have to make the corresponding contribution. The time has come to assume other costs beyond being the UN's tenth largest

When we entered the council,  
we had not updated our position on important  
topics affecting international security. The most noteworthy  
omission was the Middle East.

financial contributor. Hopefully, this time we will do it with the appropriate institutional coordination.

#### THE POSITIVE LEGACY

The positions Mexico took inside the council in its 2002-2003 period were correct and, at the end of the day, this contributed to our foreign policy's prestige. There were errors in implementation, but in the main, as the history of events confirms, we took the right positions. The most important issue faced in that two-year period, and undoubtedly a watershed in the activities of the Security Council, was the invasion of Iraq. Mexico's position was firm and consistent, always supportive of the UN and its inspection of supposed programs and arsenals of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In the Middle East conflict, particularly with regard to the Palestinian and Lebanese question, we managed to establish clear positions despite the difficulty of maintaining a balance without irritating the domestic Mexican communities with close ties to the region. In the broad spectrum of African issues, including the thorny question of the Western Sahara, we made an effective contribution to the maintenance of international law. It was perhaps regarding this issue, thanks to Mexico's important legal tradition in its international dealings,

**Mexico's participation in the council  
improved the level of our relations with many countries.  
We gave political substance to the relationship  
with France, for example.**

in which we made the most contributions, whether in different aspects of the fight against terrorism or in the consolidation of institutions like the International Criminal Court.

Our contributions were not short-lived, but rather the result of a long tradition of input into the codification of international law. They were always backed up by a good analysis that strengthened the defense of international legality. This has implied, of course, knowing and accepting the entire body of resolutions adopted by the council itself; therefore, it is important to participate in it and have an influence on the design of its resolutions, because they have a direct impact on existing international law. Our contribution to the quest for greater transparency in the council's work methods and the inclusion of thematic debates to try to establish criteria for UN activity in the areas of peace and security are no small matter either.

For those who continue to argue that Mexico should abstain from participating in the council because it might irritate the United States, I am sorry to inform them that all the great powers are perfectly aware of our foreign policy's track record. If a migratory accord was not arrived at with our neighbor during the administration of President Fox, it was for very different reasons, which are well worth analyzing, but it was not because of our po-

sitions in the council. Proof of this is that Chile, which accompanied us the entire time, particularly with regard to Iraq, signed a free trade agreement with Washington a few months after its participation in the council. In any case, what should be asked is if we want to have an independent foreign policy, not whether we are going to express it in the Security Council.

Mexico's participation in the council improved the level of our relations with many countries. We gave political substance to the relationship with France, for example. We made unprecedented strides toward closer relations with the countries in our region with whom we coincided the first year (Colombia) and the second year (Chile) in the council. Not only did we develop more intense relations with council members, both permanent and non-permanent, but also, as normally happens, we were lobbied by all the parties interested in different issues and conflicts. The majority of people unfamiliar with the UN do not know the kind of status a country acquires when it enters the council. There have even been cases of increases in the amounts of foreign aid from both the UN itself and the great powers that less developed countries that enter the council receive. I am not trying to say that that criterion applies to Mexico, but rather, just to illustrate one of the consequences that membership has and the

reason there is such sharp competition to occupy each of the 10 non-permanent seats. Interest in closed-door council session discussions is so great that there is always a group of reporters and delegates from friendly countries waiting outside for participants demanding information. The Mexican delegation had to set up a weekly meeting with the members of the Rio Group, which at that time was still functioning as a body for regional political negotiation, to share information in the light of our commitment to transparency and regional solidarity. In addition, very often, it was used to arrive at group positions, always including those of the two participants from the region, even in the public debates. But beyond our own region, from the previous time we participated in the council almost 20 years before, we were forced to deepen the African and Mid-East agendas, a prerequisite for diversifying our foreign relations. If we really want to stand out in the world as a medium-sized power, we must give continuity to the systematic, consistent participation in the Security Council's public debates that reflect our commitment to a universal state foreign policy.

Our incursion into the Security Council proved the professionalism of Mexico's Foreign Service. While the main responsibility fell on the shoulders of the personnel of the mission in New York, of the vice-ministry in charge of UN affairs and of the legal consultants, the positive results were the product of the work of a larger team, where the efforts of the most remote embassies took on new meaning and supported the New York mission. Thanks to electronic communications, it was possible to quickly read reports that only a few years ago traveled to the central offices exclusively by diplomatic pouch. The

Ministry of Foreign Relations' ability to direct and link up all the representations is critical if it wants to use all the experience accumulated in dozens of officials who may be in other parts of the world, but who are sensitive to certain issues that they can contribute to to the benefit of their colleagues in New York.

I must emphasize that in the 27 years I have been in the Foreign Service, I have noted that the new generations are increasingly better prepared and include specialists on the most diverse issues and regions of the world. However, I know that in New York, the potential of officials who have become delegates to the different bodies and commissions increases when they acquire knowledge and the unparalleled skills that our participation in the council and in multilateral bodies in general offers. I cannot refrain from mentioning with pride that our delegation had perhaps the highest and highest level of gender representation. Of the 15 countries participating in the council in 2002, I was the only woman with the rank of ambassador.

Another consequence of our participation in the council was that it strengthened our position during the discussion of the reform of the UN and in particular with regard to the reform of the council itself one year later. Undoubtedly, after 2003, the council's crisis of credibility and legitimacy due to the tragedy in Iraq intensified the pressure to incorporate new permanent members. For the first time, there seemed to be a real possibility that the so-called "Group of Four," made up of Germany, Brazil, India and Japan, would get a permanent seat on the council. Brazil's aspirations were argued based on a supposed regional representation because it is the largest country in Latin

If we want to stand out in the world  
as a medium-sized power, we must systematically participate  
in the Security Council's public debates that reflect  
our commitment to a universal state foreign policy.

America and the Caribbean. In addition, Brazil still argues that it has "commitment and experience" because it has participated in the council nine times between 1946 and 2006. Mexico has rejected this position, proposing the constructive alternative of creating semi-permanent seats through their immediate, consecutive re-election. This idea was written up in a proposed resolution that would have lacked legitimacy if Mexico had not recently participated in the council. We would never have been able to give substance to our counterproposal if we had stayed outside the council for more than 20 years. For now, the reform of the council seems to have been taken off the international agenda and the arguments of the "Group of Four" have still not convinced a sufficient number of countries to be successful. However, it is clear that the only way of moderating the aspirations of any country that wants to take upon itself the mantle of representing an entire region—in particular our region—is consistently participating.

#### CONCLUSION

Our participation in the Security Council in 2002 and 2003 was a good decision despite everything. It was only the third time we have done so since the UN's foundation in 1946. We will

be able to do it more professionally in 2009-2010 if we begin to plan and prepare immediately. We will have to start by reactivating our political relations with several of the members in our region and by breathing new life into the Rio Group or some other *ad hoc* mechanism. This would make it possible for the representation in the Security Council, far from being a bone of contention in the Latin American family, to be a factor for our countries growing closer together. Among the foreign policy priorities of the next administration is the definition of what we want to achieve with our participation in the Security Council and the strategies for doing so. We will have to be aware of the costs and commitments required beyond just the financial, to have a representation which is up to the place that Mexico aspires to occupy in the world. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I should tell the reader that in December 2000, I was appointed permanent alternate representative to the United Nations. I was responsible for coordinating our participation in the council until November 2002, when I was appointed ambassador to Cuba. Mexico participated as an observer in the closed-door council sessions, reserved to members, from November 2001 on. The opinions I express here are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The author is referring here to the Ministry of Foreign Relations, located in the Tlatelolco area, north of Mexico City's downtown. [Editor's Note.]