

Toward an Activist Foreign Policy: Mexico, Multilateralism And the Americas¹

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German Romero/Cuartoscuro

Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez, left, with Mexico's Luis Alfonso de Alba, the first president of the UN Human Rights Council.

In May, Mexico was elected to serve on the United Nations Human Rights Council, joining Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Uruguay to represent the Americas on the newest body in the UN system. Crowning Mexico's victory, 10 days later it was chosen to preside over the council during its first decisive year when rules will be drafted and precedents set. María del Refugio González, vice-minister for multilateral affairs and human rights of the Foreign Ministry, said with some justification that Mexico had "certain moral author-

ity" on human rights, qualifying it for membership. Yet it is also well known that there are gaps in Mexico's human rights compliance, some quite glaring and egregious. Police abuse, lack of due process guarantees and inadequate access to justice are among the problems cited in a recent Human Rights Watch report as well in Amnesty International's 2006 report. Yet the fact that Mexico was willing to join the council thereby submitting itself to the council's new peer review process testifies to the country's political maturity, commitment to improve human rights compliance and belief in the multilateral system. For that, Mexico is to be commended.

Mexico has historically played an important role in multilateral affairs. The so-called

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French-Mexican initiative in the 1980s signalled the beginning of international efforts to put a stop to conflict in Central America. Later, the involvement of Mexico in the Contadora Group for the peace processes in Central America and the subsequent signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992, ending the fighting in El Salvador, made it a leading international actor in the hemisphere. Moreover, Mexico's leadership in multilateral affairs through the United Nations in efforts such as the Law of the Sea, human rights, development and disarmament contributed to the establishment of the legal instruments that govern the international system today.

Since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992, the Mexico-United States relationship has been given, predictably, priority in the foreign policy realm. Closer trade relations, the large numbers of Mexicans living in the United States, the contentious migration issue, as well as the obvious geographical proximity of the two countries dictates that the U.S.-Mexican relationship will inevitably loom large for both countries. Nevertheless, at a time when there are geopolitical shifts throughout Latin America and increasing calls for United Nations reform, strong re-engagement and leadership by Mexico within Latin America is essential. Such re-engagement is in the interest of Mexico as well as the rest of the hemisphere.

MEXICO'S HISTORICAL ROLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Mexico's foreign policy is enshrined in its Constitution. Paragraph X of Article 89 lays out the principles of conduct:

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a) self-determination of nations; b) non-intervention; c) peaceful resolution of disputes; d) the proscription of the threat or the use of force in international relations; e) the legal equality of states; f) international cooperation for development; and g) the struggle for international peace and security.

These principles, particularly that of non-intervention, should not be seen in a minimalist way as pertains to Mexican foreign policy. Quite to the contrary. As demonstrated by Mexico's involvement, particularly in Central America and in economic matters in the 1980s, non-interference does not mean indifference or inaction —especially when working multilaterally.

What brought together Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela to the island of Contadora in 1983 was a desire to end conflicts in neighboring Central America, conflicts in which Washington was heavily involved. What made Contadora and Mexican peace efforts in Central America remarkable was that these were strictly Latin American initiatives during a period when tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union were being played out on Latin American soil. This time, Latin America, working closely with the United Nations, took the initiative to find a regional solution to a regional problem.

It was in Mexico's interest to address the fighting taking place on the Central American isthmus given the spill-over effects of the conflict on Mexico's border. Nevertheless, in today's globalized world, spill-over effects are not only defined by geographic proximity. Political instability, conflict, environmental damage and disease in our hemisphere, and even in another far away corner of the world, undoubtedly have the potential to impact people everywhere.

MEXICO AND LATIN AMERICA

Mexico is a country of contrasts. It is a member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development with Latin America's second largest economy —surpassed only by Brazil— and the highest per capita income in the region. As is often cited, approximately 80 percent of Mexico's trade is with the United States, with which it shares a 3,141 kilometer-long border. At the same time, however, approximately 50 percent of the population lives in poverty. The 2000 elections were seen as part of the country's long democratic transition. In terms of the political and economic challenges it faces, Mexico is more in line with its Latin American neighbors, with whom it shares strong historical and cultural ties.

An example of the challenges facing Latin America and the Caribbean is Haiti. On the western side of the island of Hispaniola, 65 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Haitians have been beset by political turmoil and the worst social and economic indicators in the hemisphere. The highest incidence of HIV/AIDS outside of Sub-Saharan Africa (5 percent)

is found in Haiti. Half the population has no access to clean drinking water and only 28 percent have access to decent sanitary facilities.

In 2004, the international community took collective action to provide yet another chance for Haiti. In many respects, the peacekeeping operation that began, the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (Minustah), became a test case for Latin America. Brazil provided the force commander and 1,200 troops. The first mission head was Chilean and the new one is from Guatemala. When donors and other interested states met recently to meet the new authorities and to renew their commitment to accompany Haiti throughout its difficult transition, the gathering was held not in Washington or Ottawa but in Brasilia. A failure in Haiti would, therefore, be not just a failure for the United Nations. It would represent a failure for the eight million Haitians and—as the first Latin American-led peacekeeping operation—for the entire region.

Following its Constitution, Mexico has not contributed troops to Minustah or to other United Nations peacekeeping operations. The Mexican ambassador in Haiti, however, played an active and extremely positive role, providing leadership within the international community in Port-au-Prince, particularly as the situation unraveled in 2003 and early 2004. While the debate about military participation in peacekeeping continues (the country has contributed civilians in many areas, particularly persons with electoral expertise), Mexico has not been absent from the international realm. It played an important role as a non-permanent member of the Security Council during the debates on Iraq in 2003. The

March 2002 Financing for Development Conference hosted by Mexico in Monterrey presented an important opportunity to address development issues of concern to middle-income countries. Unfortunately, the unsatisfactory development of the Doha trade round and the events of September 11 combined to ensure that the Monterrey process did not fulfill its potential.

Mexico also played a major facilitating role in early 2000 as a member of the group of facilitating countries between the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). It was also the main facilitator in 2004 between the government of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Although neither of these efforts led to a peace settlement, Mexico's participation confirmed the importance of international community engagement in a negotiated solution to this 40-year old conflict.

And despite its continuing reluctance to send troops abroad, the Mexican armed forces—trained in important areas such as civil protection—have come to the aid of countries in crisis after major natural disasters. The Mexican armed forces have traveled all over the globe to assist places like Central America following Hurricane

Mitch in 1998 and Hurricane Stan in 2005; Haiti on two occasions after flooding in June 2004 and after Hurricane Jeanne in October 2004; after the earthquake in Iran in December 2003; and in the United States after Hurricane Katrina in September 2005.

THE CASE FOR MEXICAN LEADERSHIP

Divisions within Latin America are growing and populations are increasingly dissatisfied with democracy and economic policy. It is precisely at times like we are experiencing today when greater leadership is required. For well-known reasons, Washington's foreign policy priorities are to a large extent not found in this hemisphere. Nevertheless, a stable and prosperous Latin America and Caribbean is in the interest of Mexico's neighbor to the North, making Mexican engagement even more desirable. Currently, Latin America and the Caribbean are facing important challenges with new disputes breaking out and unity seemingly at an all-time low. At the same time, it is evident that chances of success are greatly enhanced by working together.

This is not to say that Latin America can be seen as a monolithic whole. That there are major differences in the region is shown by the open discord at the last Summit of the Americas in Argentina and the frequent inability of the Organization of American States to take bold steps. Nevertheless, there are historical, cultural and linguistic ties that bind and could form the foundation for greater unity. It is equally evident that Mexico is uniquely placed to serve as bridge and interpreter among states which are currently at odds.

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What is important to note is that Mexico's important contributions to the international system and peace in the hemisphere—in the 1980s in Central America and more recently in places like Colombia—were made multilaterally, in close coordination with the United Nations.

UNITED NATIONS REFORM: TOWARD GREATER ENGAGEMENT

Mexico is a founding member of the United Nations. To a large extent, Mexican foreign policy has demonstrated its firm commitment to the UN and to the principle of multilateralism. And as the United Nations attempts to reform itself in order to more adequately respond to today's challenges, Mexico has played its part as a member of the Group of Friends for United Nations Reform—a grouping that encompasses Algeria, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Germany, Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Singapore, Spain and Sweden.

What has surfaced in debates on UN reform is that many Latin American countries perceive the United Nations as solely focused on the so-called “failed states” and as a mechanism for rich and powerful countries to carry out their foreign policy. Middle-income Latin American countries are left to be spectators on the sidelines. Latin American leaders are focused on what international financial institutions can do to help their countries develop and would like development issues to be higher on the UN agenda. The experience in Latin America has shown that democracy does not thrive in places where there are high levels of poverty and inequality. It is well known that Latin

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America is the richest region in the developing world and also the most unequal. Dissatisfaction with political parties and governments throughout the region underlines the importance of prioritizing the economic well-being of all citizens.

Issues that dominate the international agenda, such as terrorism, are not as high on the agenda of most Latin American countries. Yet issues like terrorism affect all of us and no member state can feel safe without the adequate participation of all parts of the international community. Mexico's call for a replacement of the Inter-American Treaty on Reciprocal Assistance (the Rio Treaty) was an attempt to revamp a Cold War-era defense pact in order to take into account the new threats and challenges facing the international community—the lack of economic development, the unequal distribution of income, transnational organized crime and drugs, breaks in democratic rule and the violation of humanitarian law, the destruction of the environment and natural disasters. Collective action in these and other areas is a necessity.

Nevertheless, there is a legitimate call for a reorientation of UN priorities in order to encompass Latin America's needs and aspirations. Such a reorientation is in the interest of the United

Nations and in the interest of Latin America.

Greater engagement in the international arena by Mexico would benefit Latin America and Mexico, as well as the overall international system. Many have cited a “crisis of confidence” in the United Nations; nevertheless, those who have witnessed the work of the secretariat in New York as it interacts with the representatives of member states are continually reminded that the United Nations is only the sum of its members.

As the threat of bird flu demonstrates, in this globally interconnected world, what happens in one part of the world, let alone in the Western Hemisphere, affects all of us. Haiti, a country with the lowest indicators in the entire hemisphere, is a case in point. The United Nations can serve as a forum to deal with global issues, such as migration, public health, international commerce. And although some of these matters can best be addressed bilaterally, the United Nations undoubtedly provides a platform where the positions of 191 member states can be voiced. For example, on December 16, 2005, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/169 on the Protection of Migrants. Mexico actively promoted this resolution, and although the immigration matter is being dealt with bilaterally with the United States, the United Nations has provided an adequate platform for an issue that affects large portions of the developing and the industrialized world.

It would appear that a strengthening of ties with the Latin American region would be in line with the desires of the Mexican people. A 2004 poll carried out by the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) and the

Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (Comexi) indicates that when Mexicans were asked who Mexico should pay more attention to, 44 percent put Latin America in first place. Europe came in second with 25 percent.

Strengthened participation by Mexico in the international arena will require a rebuilding of partnerships with the rest of Latin America. The fora for such partnerships already exist, and there is no need to create new institutions, but it is necessary to strengthen them.

Existing mechanisms —the Rio Group (of which Mexico was a founding member after the merger of the Contadora Group and the Support Group that had met previously to analyze and propose solutions to the conflicts in Central America), the GRULAC at the United Nations and the Organization of American States— provide a

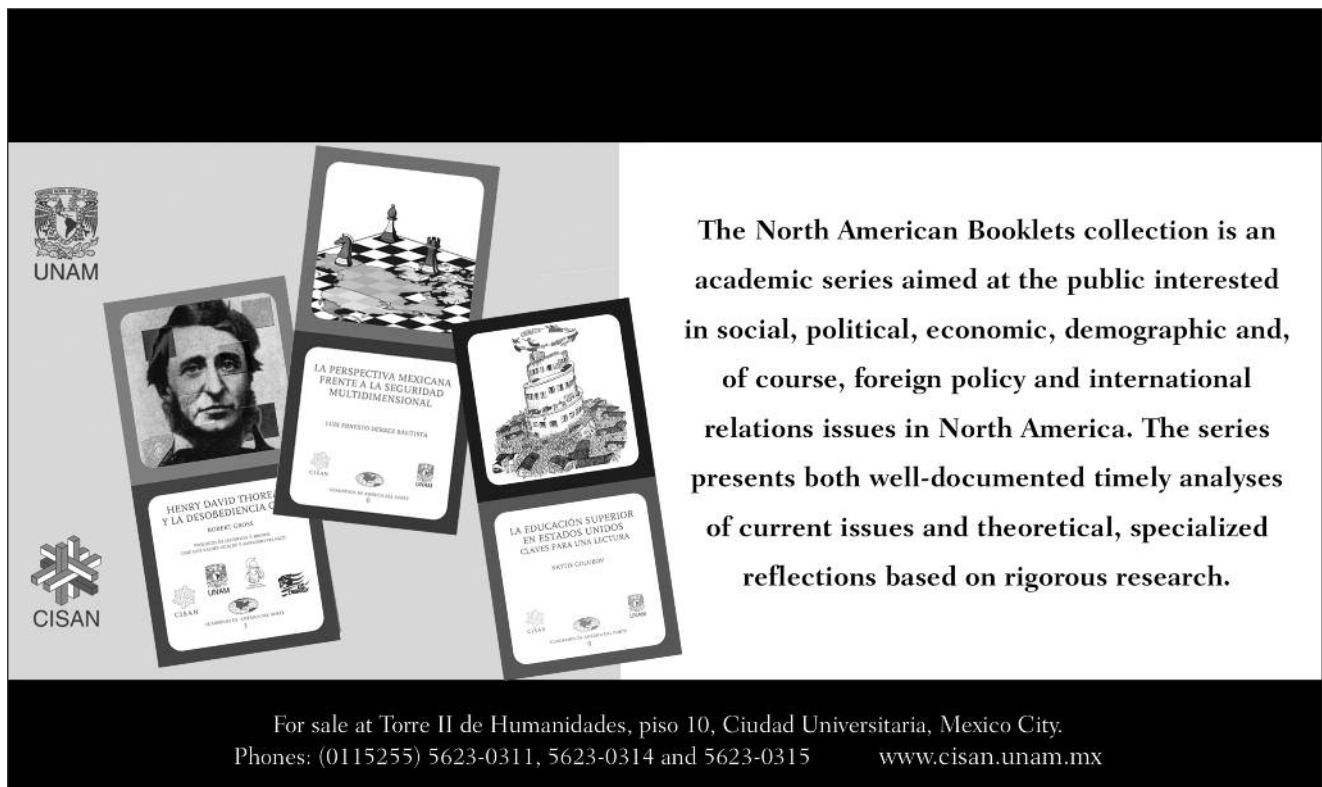
start, but these groupings should also be recast and rejuvenated in order to actively promote the interests of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in a rapidly changing world.

Regional leadership by Mexico will be essential, particularly as it seeks to deepen its relationship with the United States. Mexico could undoubtedly serve as a credible interlocutor with the region, especially in places where it has traditionally held sway, such as Central America. This will also require strengthening the relationship with other middle-income powers such as Brazil, China, India and Russia, where common interests and challenges can also be found. Like a Wall Street portfolio, the diversification of foreign policy interests is wise for any investor, be it in international financial markets or the international system.

As the report of the secretary-general for the World Summit of 2005 states: “Humanity will not enjoy security without development, it will not enjoy development without security, and it will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.” If there is one group of countries in the world that has historically experienced this reality, it is those of Latin America, including Mexico. In establishing an international agenda, Mexican leadership is essential. Mexican leadership on the UN Human Rights Council is an auspicious new beginning. ■■

NOTES

¹ The views presented in this article are the author's and do not represent the views of the United Nations.



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