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Political Asymmetries in the Era of Globalization



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The asymmetric security and defense relations between Mexico and the United States: the real David and Goliath

Gerardo Rodríguez Sánchez Lara⁴⁹

Introduction

Mexico's complex relation with the United States is what the International Relations theory would define as "structurally asymmetrical." In those terms it is explained why the existing economic and social gaps between the two countries will not be abridged in the short run, as well as why this existing inequality generates various ramifications throughout the region. The best example of this asymmetry is the 300,000 Mexicans that enter annually the United States by illegal means. This reality of US-Mexican relations is a direct consequence of asymmetries in purchasing power parity and the quality of life of the population in both countries. On the other hand, drug trafficking is constantly growing, a condition provoked by American consumption and the extraordinary profits obtained by the Mexican drug traffickers. In addition, the illegal smuggling of weapons from American territory into Mexico resulting from the oversupply and trouble-free acquisition of armaments in the United States taxes already poor border control conditions in Mexico.

Today, terrorism represents the most important threat to American national security. Consequently, Mexico faces an asymmetrical responsibility that demands complete sharing. For the first time since the end of the First World War, Mexico must to integrate this important menace into its own national security agenda. Considering its economic and institutional capability, Mexico has always made significant efforts to prevent attacks on American interests. In 1917 and again in 1941, Mexico entered World Wars together with its northern neighbor. During the Cold War, Mexico kept an international image of being a non-aligned nation. Nevertheless, consecutive Mexican governments carefully followed American agendas, stopping attempts by communist insurgencies trying to take root inside Mexican territory. Since the eighties, the Mexican army has been an active participant in the so-called "War on Drugs," declared by the United States.

Now, in the "Terrorism Era," Mexico has sent many signs of cooperation to Washington regarding the issue. The signing in 2005 of the Security and Prosperity Partnership with Canada and the United States (SPP)⁵⁰, the signing in

⁴⁹ He appreciates the collaboration of Anallie Monroy, Judith Cervantes, and Andrés Gaitán in the research process of this article.

⁵⁰ The Security and Prosperity Partnership was signed in 2005 by Presidents George W. Bush, Vicente Fox, and Prime Minister, Paul Martin. The purpose of this partnership is to increase

2002 of the intelligent borders agreement, denouncing non-visa agreements with third countries⁵¹, and sharing intelligence information on possible terrorists that could attempt to enter the United States through Mexico stand as proofs. However, American conservatives distanced themselves from Mexico following the tepid solidarity demonstrated by Mexico after the 9/11 attacks, in particular the refusal of president Fox to vote in favor of the Iraqi invasion at the UN Security Council and the so-called "lack of interest" of the Mexican government to stop illegal immigration to the United States.

As we can see, Mexico assumes the losing outcome of this asymmetrical relationship. The only benefit for Mexico in this asymmetrical military relation is that the hypothesis of a war involving the two countries has disappeared from the agenda of both countries. Unfortunately, the Mexican government has not been able to make its neighbor sensitive to the costs of this tremendous work and, therefore, it has not taken political advantage of Washington's important focus regarding the security area.

Mexico ought to insist on the fact that the best way to support homeland security for the United States, in terms of the illegal trafficking of people, would be reforming its migration system. It is also of high importance that the United States government becomes aware of the need to reduce the social and economic asymmetries of the region jointly, as was done by the European Union.

The asymmetry in numbers

Mexico faces a serious vulnerability to its national security system simply because of its geographical proximity to the United States. Some authors define this as the "structural asymmetric interdependence" of Mexico with the United States.⁵² In numerical terms, Mexico depends commercially on the United States as much as 90%, whereas the U.S. depends only 15% on Mexico. Mexican income from petroleum sales, remittances, tourism, and direct foreign investment are primarily from the United States.

As one can appreciate, this structural asymmetry grants Washington an important advantage in the diplomatic negotiations with its southern neighbor. For that reason, as Pierre Elliot Trudeau once said, "Mexico and Canada are like two small mice that sleep next to an elephant." Bringing this metaphor to our

the cooperation in security and defense issues, promote competitiveness, and promote quality of life in North America.

⁵¹ For example, in 2005 Mexico unilaterally cancelled a non-visa agreement with Brazil, Ecuador, and South Africa because of the growth of illegal detainees of this countries trying to cross to the United States.

⁵² Manuel García y Griego y M. Vereá Campos, "Colaboración sin concordancia: la migración en la nueva agenda bilateral México-Estados Unidos," in Rafael Fernández de Castro (ed.), Nueva Relación bilateral en la relación México-Estados Unidos, (México: FCE, 1998), pp. 107-134.

subject, Mexico and Canada fear more a unilateral reaction of the elephant towards terrorism than terrorism *per se*. In this sense, both mice are interested to convince the elephant that they take part in the solution rather than being part in the problem.

	United States	Mexico	Asymmetry Compared
Military expenditure	\$370.7 billion	6.043 billion	1630% (USA spends 16 times more than México) ⁵³
Military manpower	1,419,061	246,956	575% (USA has 6 times more military personnel than México) ⁵⁴
Military Exp. % GDP	3.3%	0.9%	366% (near 4 times bigger) ⁵⁵
GDP	13.18 trillion USD	728 billion USD	1810% (USA economy is 18 times bigger than México's economy) ⁵⁶
GDP per capita	44,180 USD	7,280 USD	607% (USA's GDP pp is 6 times bigger than México's one) ⁵⁷

National security antagonist perspectives

It would seem useless to compare such asymmetric strategies of national security as the ones of Mexico and the first military and economic power of the world. Nevertheless, this should be a permanent exercise in order to identify and understand the advantages for Mexico in terms of security and defense; and on the other hand, take note of the disadvantages of being the neighbor of a superpower, with all its implications for security and national sovereignty. Before starting the analysis of this part, it is important to review national security definitions from the differing perspectives of the United States and Mexico. North American authors use the term national security to talk indifferently about the security interests and concepts of Mexico and United States. However, Mexico has a more restrictive security notion; it refers to the protection and exercise of the national sovereignty as a legal, political attribute that involves territory, a maritime exclusive economic zone, and certain natural

⁵³ World Fact Book, Central Intelligence Agency, (on line: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>, consulted March 8 2006).

⁵⁴ Sergio Aguayo, Almanaque México-Estados Unidos, (Mexico: FCE, 2005), pp. 230-241.

⁵⁵ World Fact Book, op. cit.

⁵⁶ "The World in 2006," The Economist, (December 2005), p. 110.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

resources.⁵⁸ Mexico does not recognize the existence of its own political, economic, or military interests outside its frontiers, and does not consider itself affected directly by changes in international force balance.⁵⁹

The debate within United States national security circles has been historically influenced by political stability in Mexico. The United States has valued the importance of the Mexican strategy and the power of its state in terms of internal efficiency, not in terms of its ideology and international role. The greatest international victory of the post revolutionary Mexican state was to persuade the United States of its capability to maintain internal order and consensus.⁶⁰

The United States bases its national security strategy, on the contrary, on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of their values and national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Mexican goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity the protection of the government, the population, and the territory against external menaces.⁶¹

As we can observe, the national security definition of the United States has a more extensive meaning; it also implies protection, through a variety of means, of vital economic and political interests, the loss of which could threaten the fundamental values and vitality of the State.⁶² As former Mexican National Security Advisor Adolfo Aguilar Zinser said, U.S. literature talks about security without a precise definition, but has a wide concept that includes international action scopes that go beyond national frontiers and political attributes traditionally identified with the State.⁶³ In other words, it is very difficult for the United States to set aside its superpower banner and avoid defining its own national security strategy in terms of an overreaching international security strategy.

In terms of ideology, the national security of United States was related, during the Cold War, with the idea of defense, preservation and spread of capitalism and its values; and it is expressed as an East-West confrontation. In contrast, the ideology that sustains the Mexican concept of security is nationalism, including an interpretation of history and cultural, political, and social values. It is not

⁵⁸ Aguilar Zinser, *op.cit.*, pp. 296-297.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 298.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, The White House, (Washington: 2002), p. 1.

⁶² Amos Jordan, W. Taylor and M. Mazarr, *American National Security*, 5th ed., (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 3.

⁶³ Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, "La seguridad nacional de México vista por Estados Unidos," in Sergio Aguayo and B. Bagley (eds.), *En busca de la seguridad perdida. Aproximaciones a la seguridad nacional mexicana*, 2nd ed., (México: Siglo veintiuno editores, 2002), p. 296.

necessarily a concept in defense of capitalism and is certainly not defined in terms of East-West confrontation.⁶⁴

Mexico has not portrayed the United States as a military enemy, even though some manifestations of the presence of the United States in Mexico during the nineteenth century and early twentieth have had military characteristics.⁶⁵ The country did not take the foolish decision to think it possible defend itself by military means. Quite the opposite, Mexico defines a national security doctrine based on diplomatic strategies that consists of a set of principles based on international law. In this sense, Mexico has preferred multilateral forums of cooperation in order to eliminate the traditional hypothesis of so-called realist confrontations between states, choosing instead institutional cooperation.

It is also important to know that except for the Second World War, Mexico and the United States never established a military alliance. From the immense contrast that exists in their historical experiences, cultural antecedents, levels of economical development and their constructions of social and political integration, the two neighbors see their international context from very different points of view. Their security and risk notions are in more than one point distinct.

The United States argues that because of Mexico's obsessive historical analysis, they have not matured their conception of nationalism in favor of a modern international position, one representative of its size, natural sources, and geopolitical importance.⁶⁶ Because of this obsession, they argue, Mexico failed to take the advantage of its privileged place as a neighbor of the United States, and even maintains a hostile attitude.

For Mexico, it is difficult to define clearly its regional threat agenda regarding the United States. On the contrary, the United States defines in a unilateral way their most important regional threat, namely their southern border. In the Cold War, it was the political stability of Mexico and the containment of the communist spread. In the 1980's and 1990's it was the drug trafficking problem and in the post 9/11 era it is the possible relation between terrorism and uncontrolled illegal migration.

Nevertheless, not everything has been problematic in the definition of a regional agenda between Mexico and the United States. The North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is a significant step in the commercial integration process. It is important to recognize that NAFTA had a strong component of security. There was a clear vision and interest of the three countries (Canada, the United

⁶⁴ Aguilar Zinser, *op.cit.*, pp. 296-297.

⁶⁵ In 1847, Mexico lost more than a half of its territory in the war with the United States. The actual states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas were part of Mexico.

⁶⁶ Georges Fauriol, "México in superpower shadow," in Rodney W. Jones and S. A. Hildreth, *Emerging powers. Defense and security in the Third World*, (New York: 1986), referenced by Aguilar Zinser, *op. cit.*

States, and Mexico) for strengthening the regional economy of North America vis-à-vis the growth of other two regional economic blocks in Europe and Asia. In addition, the United States knew that strengthening free market economy mechanisms in Mexico would improve its international commercial competitiveness and prevent any attempt of return to a model of closed and protectionist economy. No doubt, that benefits the economic security of the United States.

This hypothesis of regional economic security stumbled and was fire tested during the Mexican financial crisis in December of 1994. I maintain that it was its fire test because it showed the economic interdependence between the two countries, a matter manifested through the urgency with which the United States helped Mexico to solve this crisis throughout a financial loan of 40 billion dollars. The government of William Clinton knew the negative impact that a deepening of the financial crisis in Mexico would have in the North American economy.

Certainly, Mexico did not constitute a threat for the United States in the last century. The only concern that the United States had regarding the security in Mexico were those of maintaining governance, assuring the access to petroleum and preserving the bilateral cooperation in the drug trafficking combat.

We must recognize that post NAFTA the number of bilateral exchanges and cooperation at all governmental levels was increased. This definitely redefined the concept of bilateral security, increased the teamwork on many border issues, and at last narrowed relations between Washington and Mexico City. From 1993 to 2000, the border patrol duplicated its size; mainly by the growing preoccupation about the drug traffic. On the other hand, the increase in American public interest for the high flow of undocumented workers and the frequent deaths of the migrants trying to enter the United States under dangerous circumstances caused changes in border security.

As the result of the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the United States has significantly modified their vision about the border that unites Mexico. Now, it does not only constitute a passage for illegal migrants that must be controlled or a channel where illegal merchandise or substances can be introduced. Now it is considered as an extremely dangerous cross where terrorist or weapons of mass destruction can be introduced. For that reason, the United States and Mexico have recognized the importance of establishing institutional mechanisms that create a collaborative framework in which both nations commit themselves to regulating the border security. Another subject that worries Mexico is the entailment of security with migration. The possibility to separate these two issues is now impossible. Security, migration, commerce, lifestyle along the border and the economic prosperity of the region are subjects better approached with all its edges and spaces of confluence, not to imagine isolated solutions that may not help to solve the problems.

Cooperation in security issues will not be easy for either of these countries. Nevertheless, all the vectors aim positively in the same direction. Mexico and the United States will continue facing shared national security threats that will have to be solved in a coordinated way. The United States will not quit insisting on their internal security agenda. Pressures to improve competitiveness and regional prosperity will continue. The migration phenomenon will not end and it is going remain a subject of security for both Mexico and the United States. The United States and Canada will continue living in the same house called North America and the house needs to be secured.

9/11 - Impact on Mexico

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Washington ordered the temporary closing of the terrestrial and aerial ports of entrance to the country. This caused serious disruptions in the life of thousands of Mexicans and Americans that crossed the border daily. Thousands of students, workers, carriers of assembly plants, homemakers who went shopping and tourists alike underwent the laborious situation of not being able to cross into their respective countries for several hours. In the same manner, directors of assembly plants, tourists, retailers, and Americans who travel daily to Mexico could not return immediately to their homes. After 9/11, North American people knew that their historical confidence in the protection offered by the sea and good neighbors was not enough against an enemy that "converts airplanes in missiles and containers load in arms transport."⁶⁷

According to a survey conducted a few weeks after the 9/11 by the American polling company Zogby, 72% of the interviewees thought that the best way to improve the border controls was to apply more strictly the immigration laws in order to prevent future terrorist attacks. Moreover, 77% of the interviewed people thought that the government was not doing enough to control the borders. On the other hand, border commerce, approximately 670 million dollars, fell 15% in the weeks shortly after 9/1. Electronics, textiles and chemical products, as well as Mexican factories that produce them underwent even greater stress. The economic impact of the emergency was tragic for American cities along the border. The days after the attacks in New York and Washington represented a serious problem of traffic in the sentry boxes, with the increase of five hours to the average crossing time. It is considered, for example, that in New Laredo, during September of 2001, crossings reduced by as much as 6,000,000 from the previous year. The hardest impact of this unilateral decision was absorbed by American businesses that live from the Mexican purchases. For example, San Diego declared an economic emergency because of the resulting recession

⁶⁷ Tom Ridge, "Dos patrias, una misión," in *Foreign Affairs en Español*, (April-June, 2004), p. 14.

following the 9/11's security measures taken along the border. Following the line of analysis of the problem of cross-border terrorist movement must recognize the incapacity of the authorities of both countries to contain drug trafficking and the entrance of undocumented people into the United States. Annually, tons of drugs and thousands of Mexican undocumented workers enter the United States. In this sense, the possibility clearly exists that a single terrorist can enter the United States through the Mexican border.

After the attacks, the Mexican government detained and interrogated hundreds of people of Middle Eastern and Central Asian descent and restricted their entrance. It also provided American authorities classified information about possible suspects who were in Mexican territory.

Other security threats provoked by Asymmetry

Border security

Mexico and the United States share one of the longest and most trafficked borders in the world (3000 Km²), to which some factors such as dense population and the vigorous economic and social interaction are added. It is a border where communities depend more upon each other than their own federal governments.

Border relations between Mexico and the United States have been characterized throughout their history by three different periods: cooperation, conflict, and agreed negligence. Still, during the cooperation periods, Mexico has been the one that has had to face the greater number of challenges, although there is no doubt that the relation with the United States has also represented a fan of opportunities for the country. Besides the conflict episodes, the border interaction experienced by both has functioned well most of the time due to existing dynamics found along the border region and particularly by the bonds that unite cross-border communities, which sometimes seem stronger than those that exist domestically in Mexico.

Before 9/11, Mexicans firmly believed in the globalization phenomenon. Economic integration would take to a greater number of open borders. This idea changed completely once the United States became the victim of Al Qaeda. From this moment forward, the vulnerability of the United States became clear and when it showed to be defenseless, U.S. priorities on the matter were modified. In the case of Mexico, it was evident that the aspiration of President Vicente Fox of an opened border between Mexico and the United States vanished and, on the contrary, the immediate result of the attacks was the hardening of the borders.

The United States preoccupation with terrorism led it to propose separate agreements with Canada and Mexico. Its objective was to make borders safe, intelligent, and open to commerce. As a result, in 2002 the Alliance for the Border was signed between Mexico and the United States. It included an action

plan that establishes specific objectives and organizes the tasks that would be developed. It contained 22 points divided in three sections: safe infrastructure, safe transit of people, and the safe flow of goods. Among the main reasons for which this agreement was promoted is the urgency to design better border security controls in order to prevent a terrorist attack. Another is to establish the border infrastructure necessary to facilitate the continuous economic integration of the North America region. The primary goal is to develop an efficient border for twenty-first century with the best technology and formulas for bilateral cooperation guaranteeing a more humane and modern administration of the border.

Migration

There is no doubt that migration has been a central element in the relation with the United States for a long time. The border and the huge existing economic disparities existing between both countries, make the United States a source of opportunities for many Mexicans that look for an advantage through legal or illegal means. Previously, the United States tried to control the entrance of illegal migrants by unilateral actions, figuring that through procedures developed only by the American authorities, the migratory phenomenon would diminish. Statistics, however, demonstrated the opposite is the case. In summary, advances in the migration issue have not been so significant, since the flow of people continues to be constant and the deaths of Mexicans have increased. Controls established by Mexican and American authorities to avoid the crossing of Mexicans, has simply forced these migrants to look for increasingly dangerous routes. Despite prevention campaigns and containment barriers, migration lives on.

Drug Trafficking

In the last fifteen years, the Mexican and American governments signed more bilateral agreements related to illegal narcotic trade than in any other decade. All of them appeared officially as agreements to cooperate and to make the fight against the drug trafficking more effective. At no other time in its history, has the Mexican government dedicated so many resources for destroying farming lands of marijuana, preventing traffic in cocaine from Colombia and for sanctioning drug dealers. Until the end of the sixties, drug trafficking was not a preminent subject in the bilateral relationship. Although in the previous decades the problem caused occasional frictions between the two governments, the differences never reached critical levels. However, at the end of that decade, reflecting a change in the internal dynamics of the United States, the northern superpower granted noticeable priority for the first time to this subject in its relations with Mexico. From that moment forward, the United States decided to control the drug traffic through a series of unilateral actions that sometimes represented an authentic violation of the sovereignty of Mexico.

Subsequent to 9/11, the United States began considering drug traffic originating from Mexico as a potential high-level national security threat. Organized criminal gangs, some of which are becoming extremely rich and powerful, have developed great abilities to evade the border controls of the United States (by air, sea, or earth). In a similar manner, drug dealers use sophisticated and diverse contraband forms to enter the United States without being detected. As a logical consequence, the possibility exists that Mexican smugglers introduce terrorists and WMDs by similar means as they import illegal substances.

Conclusions

It has never been easy for Mexico to maintain an independent foreign policy or national security strategy independent of the United States agenda. It is clear that looking for higher levels of cooperation could bring higher levels of independence and sovereignty. Mexico and United States should fortify their mutual experience and knowledge in order to build better cooperation mechanisms and national security coordination. Since 9/11, Mexico has quietly progressed in its strategy of integration with the United States cooperating closely on the issue of terrorism. Mexico faces the challenge of demonstrating to the United States how expensive it is for the country in terms of financial and human resources to maintain those cooperation levels and to see security as a shared responsibility for both countries.

As shown throughout this article, fears about another terrorist attack forced the United States to establish a stricter frame and better-structured cooperation with Mexico. Certainly, not all the subjects raised in the agenda have experienced such advances. In the case of border and drug trafficking issues, it is unquestionable that an institutional framework has been successfully established allowing both governments to collaborate in direct ways, obtaining positive results.

Finally, turning the page back to the biblical passage of David and Goliath, until both countries can resolve the structural-economic asymmetry so prevalent in North America, little David (Mexico) will continue to remain a source of menace to the national security of Goliath (United States).