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**THE THAW:
HOW MEXICO & THE UNITED STATES
THAWED THEIR COLD PEACE
AND WHAT COMES NEXT**

by

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Introduction

Mexico's historical experience of political and economic subordination to foreign powers, foreign interventions, and political and territorial fragility led to an enduring national consensus regarding the need to protect Mexican sovereignty and territorial integrity from foreign intervention in a manner that is often difficult for the United States to understand. It also led to a national consensus strongly oriented toward centralization of political authority, resistance to foreign influence, a defensive military posture, and resistance to intervention in other states' internal affairs, all of which have shaped Mexico's relationship with the United States. Mexico's Perfect Dictatorship¹--so-called because of the success of its ruling *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) at creating and maintaining an 'illiberal' one-party state, which hid behind the façade of a benevolent state ostensibly dedicated to furthering the progressive ideals of the Mexican Revolution--privileged 'stability' and economic growth over political openness and freedom. Mexico's overall policy of disengagement from the United States represented an attempt to make a decisive break with past national subordination. Its posture vis-à-vis the United States was to maintain a Cold Peace--so-called because it constituted a sustained state of political and military distancing between two powers.² Over time, though, the Perfect Dictatorship's system of economic prosperity without political freedom morphed into one of economic decline with political repression. Fortunately, at a decisive moment, the United States nudged Mexico toward integration with the liberal international economic order. Mexico has since changed radically, becoming a more democratic, open society. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States and Mexico have steadily, yet unevenly, increased bilateral engagement on the economic, political, and security fronts. Yet military cooperation remains the least developed area of the bilateral security relationship. Although both the establishment of

USNORTHCOM and the Merida Initiative have had a positive impact on the bilateral security relationship, it is time for the U.S. policymakers to consider ways to deepen and institutionalize the bilateral relationship.

Contexts of the U.S.-Mexican relationship: from the Conquest to the Perfect Dictatorship

Mexico's history is replete with instances of both subordination to foreign powers and military interventions in its internal affairs by foreign powers. This has been made worse by the Mexican state's historical tendency toward political fragility and territorial fragmentation. These factors have led to Mexico's typically complex and intense relationships with foreign powers.

For most of its history, subordination has characterized Mexico's relationship with European powers and with the United States, which has been a source of great anxiety on the part of the Mexican people. These anxieties have deep historical roots, beginning with the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century and the subsequent destruction of the indigenous 'Mexican' civilizations. Spanish colonial domination left an enduring mark on the Mexican national culture that would develop. The Spanish conquerors avidly pursued a campaign of destruction against the indigenous languages, religions, and customs, violently imposing their own ways onto the native population. Throughout their nearly three century-long colonial domination of Mexico, the Spanish remained almost exclusively focused on resource extraction and the maintenance of a trans-Atlantic mercantilist order with their colonies. They would show little interest in the development of their territorial possessions or of their subjects.

Interventions have also featured prominently in Mexico's relationship with European powers and with the United States. The first European intervention into Mesoamerica was by the Spanish, as noted above. Mexico itself can be understood as the result of the consequent centuries-long ferment of indigenous and Spanish cultures. After nearly three centuries under

Spanish rule, the people who had become the Mexicans began to fight for independence in 1810. Although few of the original freedom fighters survived the conflict, Mexico eventually won its independence in 1821. Even though legally independent, Mexico remained a weak state.

It was during this long period of institutional weakness that Mexico would suffer yet another trauma at the hands of a foreign power, this time at the hands of its northern neighbor. In 1835, the Mexican state of Texas, which had been colonized by increasing numbers of English-speaking settlers in the preceding decade, began to fight to secede from Mexico, declaring independence in 1836 and embarking on a nearly decade-long campaign to enter the United States. In 1845, the United States formally annexed Texas. Shortly thereafter, in 1847, the United States and Mexico went to war over the issue, resulting in a disastrous defeat for Mexico and the cession of almost half of its territory to the United States.³

Many Mexican writers would ponder the significance of the great military defeat of 1847. Particularly troubling to the Mexican political elites was the almost complete lack of resistance put up by the Mexican people in the face of advancing U.S. military forces. The elites' conclusion, which was later to become a central preoccupation of Mexican political culture, was that "in Mexico there is not nor has there ever been able to be a nationalist spirit because there is no Mexican nation."⁴ That defeat, however, also led to the beginnings of an "awakened national consciousness in the Mexican people."⁵ This awakening national consciousness was further strengthened in the face of the French Intervention of 1861–1863, which inspired fierce nationalist resistance to foreign occupation of Mexico.

Fragility has also been an enduring characteristic of the Mexican state. This fragility has manifested itself politically and territorially. The frequent changes in Mexico's form of government and its national political leadership attest to the Mexican's state's political fragility.

At the root of this political fragility lay the underdeveloped economic structures, fragmented political culture, and weak political institutions bequeathed to Mexico by its colonial masters. Exacerbating Mexico's political fragility were two extraordinarily long periods of domestic political conflict, followed by long periods of state consolidation. Both periods, in turn, were followed by superficially stable, long-lasting dictatorships.

The first period of domestic political conflict, the Wars of Independence, from 1810–1821, was followed by an extraordinarily long period of political turmoil and territorial fragmentation. In the forty years following its formal independence, “Mexico had at least fifty separate presidencies ... thirty-five of these ill-starred regimes were led by army officers”⁶ who had won the office through a military coup. It was during this period that Mexico ceded significant amounts of its northern territory to the United States and came very close to losing control over its remaining territory. Following this period of political and territorial fragility came the Porfiriato, a period of essentially uninterrupted rule by Porfirio Diaz-Mori, from 1876–1910. Diaz believed that he gave Mexico “the precious gift of political stability, which he saw as indispensable for economic growth.”⁷ While his “team of modernizing technocrats ... proceeded to lay the foundations of a modern economy,” in nearly every other respect, Diaz “demolished the apparatus of government and concentrated all the subdivided power into his own hands.”⁸

Indeed, Diaz' program of forced modernization resulted in a somewhat more modern Mexican society, but progress came at an enormous human cost. The assiduous cultivation of foreign investment in the Mexican economy meant that, “during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, U.S. economic presence in Mexico grew rapidly, with the [United States] becoming Mexico's main foreign investor by 1910.”⁹ The Diaz regime's extensive concessions to foreign investors essentially permitted them to operate “as

states within a state,”¹⁰ further angering the Mexican population. As a result, anti-Americanism began to become “a wide-spread phenomenon, with the territorial loss [of 1847] looming large in the [Mexican] collective memory.”¹¹ The economic and political stability Mexico enjoyed during this period proved to be quite fragile, as would be seen during the Mexican Revolution.

Mexico’s second highly disruptive internal political conflict, the Revolution (1910–1920), was followed by a relatively shorter period of political turbulence, lasting about ten years. In all, approximately 2 million Mexicans would die during the Revolution.¹² This period saw the last significant U.S. military interventions in Mexico, first, with the administration of U.S. President Taft being implicated in the 1913 assassination of Francisco Madero, then-leader of the Mexican Revolution, in a coup.¹³ Initially, the United States “deployed tens of thousands of troops to the border in an effort to stem the flow of arms, impose order, and enforce neutrality laws.”¹⁴ Yet soon enough, the new administration of U.S. President Wilson changed the U.S. policy of ‘non-recognition’ of the revolutionary government and staged a counter-intervention; first, by arming opponents of the coup and then, in 1914, by deploying U.S. Marines to Veracruz, which effectively tipped the conflict against the coup’s forces.¹⁵ Finally, in 1916, the United States deployed a force of 10,000 soldiers on a cross-border raid into Mexico to punish Pancho Villa for attacks on U.S. citizens in New Mexico.¹⁶

As has been demonstrated, Mexico historically has had a complex and intense relationship with foreign powers. Up to and through the time of the Revolution, the Mexican experience was one of political and economic subordination, foreign interventions, and political fragility. The result of this lived experience was an enduring national consensus regarding the need to protect Mexican sovereignty and territorial integrity from any type of foreign intervention at all costs. It also led to a national political and strategic culture strongly oriented

toward centralization of political authority, resistance to foreign influence in any sector of Mexican society, a defensive military posture, and resistance to intervention in other states' internal affairs. All of these considerations would continue to exert a strong influence on Mexico's relationship with the United States throughout the twentieth century.

Evolution of the U.S.-Mexican relationship: the Perfect Dictatorship and Beyond¹⁷

Although no state can ever truly cast off its past and start anew, in many ways, the post-revolutionary Mexican state represented an unusually decisive break from its predecessors. The new state would attempt to mitigate the problems of national political and economic subordination, foreign interventions, and political fragility which so characterized the pre-revolutionary Mexican experience. The emerging Mexican elites, still acutely conscious of the approximately 2 million Mexicans who died during the course of the Revolution, would strive to impose order on the post-revolutionary Mexican society. What emerged from the period of post-revolutionary state consolidation during the 1920s was a broad-based political system, in which "power was ruthlessly centralized"¹⁸ in a monarchical-type president who controlled all the levers of power, to include appointment of governors and control of the legislature and judiciary. The president also exercised direct control over the armed forces, which were utilized primarily for national defense and remained well-subordinated to political leadership.¹⁹ The period of uninterrupted one-party rule by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), from 1934–2000, would later come to be called the Perfect Dictatorship, primarily because of the PRI's great success at creating and maintaining an 'illiberal' one-party state.^{19A} Though every sector of Mexican society was co-opted under its authoritarian rule, the Perfect Dictatorship's façade was that of a benevolent state, ostensibly dedicated to carrying on the progressive ideals of the Mexican Revolution.

The historical memory of U.S. interventions into Mexican domestic affairs throughout the Revolution played an important role in the reconfiguration of the Mexican state's political and strategic cultures "during the period when the post-revolutionary regime began its consolidation."²⁰ The belief that the United States' meddling had unnecessarily prolonged the Revolution would have enduring consequences for the bilateral relationship. During the initial decades of the Perfect Dictatorship, "Mexico came to define itself in rhetorical opposition to the United States."²¹ As a result, the Perfect Dictatorship adopted nationalism as its overall ideology, symbolically and actually blending the Mexican state with the ruling PRI whenever possible. In short, the Perfect Dictatorship assumed an isolationist stance vis-à-vis the United States, focusing on consolidating its power within the post-revolutionary Mexican state.

Domestically, the Perfect Dictatorship's opposition to the United States led to policies placing heavy emphasis on "a corporate state, social reform, and nationalism."²² Under the corporate state construct, various social sectors, including agriculture, labor, and the military, were mobilized and organized, but were functionally separated inside the ruling PRI party. According to Skidmore, this "led to the creation of separate (and competing) sectors within the official party,"²³ thus hindering the formation of any horizontal coalition that might threaten the system. The guiding principle was "to eliminate class conflict, reduce partisanship, and bolster the power of centralized authority."²⁴ According to Skidmore, the Perfect Dictatorship's two most important political achievements were "civilian control over the military and more than half a century of political stability."²⁵ This stability endured because the Perfect Dictatorship mastered the art of "institutionalizing political conflict and allowing for regular political renewal."²⁶ In effect, it allowed a controlled opening for new political actors, while simultaneously rendering them incapable of threatening the overall stability of the system.

Yet at the same time a shadow economy operated, within which, a policy of co-opting smuggling operations and skimming their profits was adopted by the Perfect Dictatorship. While it is true that a strong undercurrent of illegality--characterized by southward-bound arms trafficking and northward-bound human and substance trafficking--has always been present in the U.S.-Mexican economic relationship; the sprawling, decades-long violence of the Revolution and its aftermath, coupled with imposition of Prohibition in the United States, served only to intensify smuggling, transforming it into a highly lucrative enterprise.²⁷ After the repeal of Prohibition in the United States, "this infrastructure simply adapted to other opportunities,"²⁸ such as drug trafficking. That all of this was going on during the process of Mexican state formation and consolidation gave the PRI a strong incentive to accommodate smuggling operators, so long as they posed no threat to the stability of the system. Just as it had co-opted the other sectors of the Mexican state, as noted above, the Perfect Dictatorship also co-opted the smuggling sector, adapting or molding the growth of key portions of state infrastructure in order to accommodate it.²⁹ Put less favorably, the PRI played a complicit role in smuggling, functioning essentially as both referee and market enforcer among the operators.³⁰

In the formal (open) economy, a policy of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) was adopted. Its twin goals were employing industrialization as a way to gain political leverage over organized labor and gaining economic independence from the more advanced manufacturing economies.³¹ The weaknesses of the ISI model adopted by Mexico soon began to show: "production processes continued to require substantial imports of capital goods; higher production costs were passed on to consumers in protected markets; and near-monopoly discouraged investment in technology. Once established under state protectionism and sheltered by tariff walls, highly subsidized and inefficient local firms were unable to compete in the

international market.”³² Auguring the decline of the decades-long regime of economic protectionism, “U.S. border towns [began to function] as unofficial warehouses and shopping centers for consumer durables, ranging from household appliances to automobiles, waiting to be smuggled into Mexico.”³³

A prominent U.S. Latin American policy analyst argues that “during the Cold War, given Mexico’s relative stability and its façade of a functional democratic system, the United States was content to leave Mexico alone, despite the fact that its ‘democracy’ consisted of a single party ruling the country in a semi-authoritarian fashion.”³⁴ This would remain true so long as the Perfect Dictatorship remained able to satisfy one of the United States’ core security interests: the preservation of stability along the U.S.-Mexican border. Meeting this U.S. core interest gave the Perfect Dictatorship the political space to assert its independence from U.S. Latin American regional policy by diplomatically supporting Cuba’s Castro regime, Nicaragua’s Sandinista revolution, and leftist revolutionary groups in El Salvador.

The period stretching from the late 1960s into the early 1980s, however, saw increasing political and economic challenges to the Perfect Dictatorship. The ill-concealed student massacres of 1968 and 1971 and the regime’s tragically inept response to the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 fundamentally called into question the Perfect Dictatorship’s political competence. An oil-fueled binge of populist public spending and its accompanying rampant inflation also set Mexico on a perilous economic path until, in 1982, “falling oil prices and rising interest rates caused [Mexico’s] public finances to collapse like a house of cards.”³⁵ The resultant devaluation, debt default, and bank nationalization of 1982 fundamentally called into question the Perfect Dictatorship’s economic competence.³⁶ In order to head off a total economic collapse, “the [United States], the International Monetary Fund, and the commercial banks rushed a

‘rescue’ loan package to Mexico.”³⁷ The bailout’s conditions, however, entailed fundamental reforms to the Mexican economy. In short, the Perfect Dictatorship would have to dismantle its outdated model of economic protectionism and begin to integrate into the international economic system. This signaled the beginning of the end of the Perfect Dictatorship.

From 1982 to 2000, Mexico was led by a succession of three economically liberal technocrat-presidents who had never held elected office--Miguel de la Madrid-Hurtado, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Ernesto Zedillo-Ponce de Leon--who methodically made structural adjustments to the Mexican state which had the net effect of opening Mexico’s economic and political spheres. In the economic sphere, according to Skidmore, “there were two main pillars of [their] program. One was to reduce and recast the economic role of the state. This was to be done through continued cuts in public spending and through a program of ‘privatization’ of state-owned companies. The second pillar was economic liberalization and ‘opening up’ of the economy.”³⁸ Although Mexico had gradually been increasing its economic engagement with the United States, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 was a watershed event, marking a decisive shift in Mexico’s national economic orientation, from inward to outward-looking. In short, NAFTA “entailed a total repudiation of the protectionist strategies of import-substituting industrialization, and it discarded the national tradition of keeping a suspicious distance” from the United States, fundamentally reordering the bilateral relationship.³⁹ Moreover, NAFTA offered the PRI’s economically liberal technocrat-presidents “an opportunity to institutionalize [these] economic reforms [politically], insulating them from the historic vagaries of presidential succession by inscribing them in an international treaty.”⁴⁰

Increasing bilateral trade liberalization during the 1980s and 1990s also had a profound impact on the nature of Mexico's shadow economy. As a result of trade liberalization, many of the smuggling markets were either drastically reconfigured or vanished altogether. However, the gradual nature of these changes gave the smuggling markets time to adapt to the changing U.S.-Mexican economic space.⁴¹ Trade liberalization also had the effect of channelizing smuggling markets into ever-shrinking spaces of economic illegality, "hypercompetitive illegal markets."⁴² This meant that the ever-present southward-bound arms trafficking and northward-bound human and drug trafficking, always the historical norm, increasingly came to represent smugglers' main profit centers. Critically, the erosion of the PRI's power within the Mexican state meant that its state and local political appointees were no longer able to function as referees and market enforcers among smuggling operators, which "contributed to the Mexican cartel wars of the 1990s and to the ongoing cartel war of today."⁴³

In the political sphere, in a move that in retrospect seems almost self-sacrificial, the Perfect Dictatorship began to open up Mexico's political system to competition. In the face of "[intensifying] social inequality and popular pressures,"⁴⁴ the Perfect Dictatorship made tentative moves to decouple the PRI from the Mexican state. Crucially, an independent and powerful Supreme Court, an independent Central Bank, and an independent Federal Electoral Institute and Electoral Tribunal were established.⁴⁵ According to Skidmore, "key attributes of the Mexican political system--its restricted competition, its control of working-class movements, its autonomy from private interests, and its tactical flexibility--help explain"⁴⁶ how Mexico managed a peaceful transition to a multiparty system. The PRI's political and economic agendas, according to Reid, essentially "amounted to a voluntary abdication of authoritarianism."⁴⁷

It is also possible, though, to view Mexico's late-twentieth century reforms as an attempt to provide a radical new solution to the problematic of their nation's historical experience--political and economic subordination, foreign interventions, and political fragility--by finding a way to protect Mexican sovereignty and territorial integrity from foreign intervention through profound integration into the U.S.-led international order. This represents a fascinating break from what have been commonly identified as enduring elements of Mexican national political and strategic culture--centralization of political authority, resistance to foreign influence and intervention, and a defensive military posture. What is certain is that both the peaceful alternation of control of the Mexican presidency between the PRI and the *Partido de Accion Nacional* (PAN), which occurred in both 2000 and 2012, and the peaceful, multiparty competition for power in the Mexican Congress, state governorships, and state legislatures bear witness to a fundamentally transformed Mexican political architecture. Reid is correct when he assesses that task facing Mexico is "to create a more dynamic economy by demolishing the remaining vestiges of the corporate state and to help to fashion more effective democratic institutions."⁴⁸ The accelerating pace of political and institutional reform under current President Enrique Peña-Nieto (of the PRI party) seems to ratify his assessment.

As demonstrated above, the policies of the Perfect Dictatorship represented both a continuation of, and a break from, those of the Porfiriato. The regime's practice of privileging 'stability' and economic growth over political openness and freedom was a thread of continuity. The twin policies of economic and political disengagement from the United States represented an attempt to make a decisive break with past national subordination. During the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the Perfect Dictatorship's system of economic prosperity without political freedom morphed into one of economic decline with political repression. In 1982, at a decisive

moment, the United States, in conjunction with the International Monetary Fund, skillfully employed its economic leverage in the form of a financial bailout in order to nudge Mexico toward full integration into the international economic order. U.S. leverage notwithstanding, “Mexico’s opening to democracy is one of the few major developments in [its] modern history that was *not* shaped by invasion or intervention by the United States” (emphasis in original).^{48A} Key Mexican elites and the Mexican street embraced this opportunity to change and began to move Mexico in the direction of becoming “a much more democratic, pluralist, and open society.”⁴⁹ Crandall states that “Mexico’s democratic ‘maturation’ encouraged [the United States] to engage its southern neighbor more closely and more seriously throughout most of the post-Cold War era.”⁵⁰ Indeed, it is evident that the United States and Mexico have steadily, yet unevenly, increased bilateral engagement on the economic, political, and security fronts. On the economic front, Mexico, the United States, and Canada have enjoyed robust, ever-deepening engagement since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. On the political front, Mexico and the United States have made little progress toward deepening and thickening the bilateral relationship due to the intermestic nature of many of unresolved issues, such as migration / labor mobility, smuggling, weapons, and illegal drugs. On the security front, Mexico and the United States have only recently, and quite tentatively, begun to build a bilateral military relationship. This neglected, yet critical, relationship deserves sustained attention and to it we now turn.

Evolution of the U.S.-Mexican Military Relationship: from the Cold Peace to the Thaw

“There are few institutions as important and as little-studied as the Mexican armed forces. One could say that their historical relevance is inversely proportional to the number of pages that have been written about their history!”⁵¹

Bitter memories of Mexico's political and economic subordination to foreign powers, domestic social chaos due to internal strife and warlordism, and the political fragility of the Mexican state are almost coded into the institutional DNA of the Mexican armed forces--and remain an ongoing institutional concern. According to Camp, the post-revolutionary Mexican leadership consistently "sought a way to reestablish permanent order and peace without further resort to violence."⁵² Further, since the Revolution of 1910, the Mexican armed forces has had "little ground for adventurism or arms races ... [mainly because] Mexico has a northern neighbor it can do little about and southern neighbors it need do little about."⁵³ In short, Mexican isolationism owed as much to geopolitical good timing as to geographical good fortune. Consequently, the Perfect Dictatorship was able to assume an essentially isolationist posture from the 1930s, which allowed it to maintain a singular focus on the consolidation of its power within the post-revolutionary Mexican state. This state of affairs vis-à-vis the United States will be termed a 'Cold Peace,' i.e., a sustained state of political and military distancing between two powers. In what follows, this analysis highlights how post-revolutionary Mexico's military relationship with the United States was able to evolve from the Perfect Dictatorship's Cold Peace to the state which presently characterizes it, hereafter referred to as 'the Thaw.'

From 1924–1946, Mexico was led by a succession of three revolutionary generals--Plutarco Elias Calles (de jure president from 1924–1928 and de facto president from 1928–1934), Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, and Manuel Ávila-Camacho--who methodically made structural adjustments to the Mexican state which had the net effect of establishing what would later be called the Perfect Dictatorship. Collectively, they institutionalized the practice--followed by all their successors--of exercising direct, personal control over the Mexican armed forces. It is somewhat ironic then that:

“the military’s withdrawal and the imposition of civilian supremacy ... [is] directly attributable to military, not civilian presidents. [However,] these men, unlike most of their peers elsewhere in the world, came from revolutionary forces [and] ... shared roots with civilian leaders and maintained a civilian rather than an institutionalized, professionalized military mentality. Because many of them had fought against the Porfiriato’s militarism ... they had a natural aversion to instituting a new form of established militarism.”⁵⁴

Although these first general-presidents were responsible for “[accelerating] the professionalization of the [armed forces], purging incompetent officers, and retiring more of the old guard,” they were also responsible for co-opting the Mexican armed forces through their incorporation “as one of the four sectors of the PRI.”⁵⁵ Most importantly, “their desire to produce a post-revolutionary leadership that was revolutionary in orientation but civilian in composition, established the principle of civilian supremacy in civil-military relations ... which seeped firmly into the mindset of the next generation of Mexicans.”⁵⁶ Although the post-revolutionary Mexican armed forces “always had fewer soldiers per capita than other countries of comparable size in Latin America,”⁵⁷ the Perfect Dictatorship’s success in taming them is attested by the decline of “the percentage of military officers holding high political posts ... from 40 to 64 percent in the 1914–1924 decade to 5 to 15 percent after 1946.”⁵⁸ Further, Cardenas’ division of the Secretariat of National Defense into the Secretariat of National Defense (army and air force) and the Secretariat of the Navy from 1939–1940 introduced a structural change promoted inter-service rivalry, profoundly reducing the military’s overall power.⁵⁹ While the Mexican armed forces occupied “a respected and influential place within the regime,”⁶⁰ they had been politically neutralized at the national level.⁶¹ Both the evolution of the civil-military relationship in the twentieth-century Mexican state and the resulting long-term subordination of the armed forces to civilian authority are, thus, quite unlike other major Latin American states.

The Perfect Dictatorship's military posture was to maintain a Cold Peace vis-à-vis the United States and, in general, to abjure any notion of Mexico becoming a military power projection nation. Consistent with this Cold Peace posture, Mexico was, until the Merida Initiative, "the only Latin American country continually to shun participation in the U.S. mutual security pacts with their arms assistance and training provisions."⁶² The principle of non-intervention in the affairs of other states has generally guided all post-revolutionary Mexican foreign and military policy. (In fact, the Perfect Dictatorship's rigid adherence to this principle made Mexico the notable exception to the general trend of the military establishments of the larger nations of Latin America consistently supporting United Nations peacekeeping missions.⁶³) With one exception, this principle was universally respected in the post-revolutionary Mexican state--an exception that, in this case, proved the rule. Due to the loss of two Mexican oil tankers--casualties of the Nazi campaign of submarine warfare--Mexican President (General) Manuel Avila-Camacho led Mexico into World War II (WWII) on the side of the Allies. Squadron 201 of the Mexican Air Force, Mexico's primary contribution to the war effort, deployed to the Philippines and participated in Allied bombardment of Japanese occupation forces in the Philippines and Formosa. It would be the only combat deployment of military forces outside Mexico in the post-revolutionary era.⁶⁴ The Mexican armed forces' other formal operations during the Perfect Dictatorship included strike-busting in the 1950s and 1960s,⁶⁵ the 'Dirty Wars' against leftist guerillas in Morelos in the 1940s and 1950s,⁶⁶ in Chihuahua in 1965, and in the Sierra Madre del Sur region from 1967–1974,⁶⁷ and the brief campaigns against the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* in Chiapas in 1994 and the *Ejercito Popular Revolucionario* in Guerrero in 1996.

Rath provides an important critique by showing how the Perfect Dictatorship actively sponsored the narrative of an infrequently-used Mexican armed forces whose cause was always just in order to promote a narrative of regime superiority vis-à-vis other Latin American regimes. He goes on to demonstrate that, at the state and local levels and at least until the early 1980s, the post-revolutionary Mexican armed forces--and, specifically, the Mexican army--maintained a "residual autonomy [that] was not inimical to the [Perfect Dictatorship] but a fundamental part and condition of it."⁶⁸ Put bluntly, the Perfect Dictatorship relied on highly local, discreet violence channeled through the Mexican army in order to consolidate its rule.⁶⁹ This included "elements of the military, with the knowledge and consent of the higher command, [participating] in paramilitary groups similar to those found throughout Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s."⁷⁰ Both soldiers deploying as a police force and officers meddling in state and local politics from their barracks formed part of a larger "panoply of 'violence workers' on whom the PRI relied to consolidate itself."⁷¹ Although, according to Rath, "the river of national politics appeared to run smoothly ... underneath were churning currents of local conflict [and] military and paramilitary violence."⁷² While it is true that post-revolutionary Mexico suffered no military coup because the Mexican armed forces remained well-subordinated to national civilian political leadership and because the Mexican armed forces were seldom 'deployed' in domestic military actions, it is important to remember that this stability was the result of the Perfect Dictatorship having "already woven the thread of military force subtly into the fabric of the regime [at the state and local levels], rendering such overt militarization unnecessary."⁷³ (Equally important to remember is that the first three presidents of the Perfect Dictatorship were themselves generals in the Mexican armed forces!) This historical memory of the Perfect Dictatorship's discreetly oppressive use of the Mexican armed forces against the Mexican

people--not of their noble heroism in WWII--forms the backdrop against which their current employment is judged by the Mexican people. It further helps to explain the general sense of suspicion seen in the Mexican public vis-à-vis the Mexican armed forces' operations against violent transnational criminal organizations.

The Cold Peace first began to thaw in the mid-1980s, with the tentative beginnings of bilateral military cooperation between the United States and the Mexico. However, "the Mexican [armed forces] steadfastly rejected any relationship"⁷⁴ with the U.S. Southern Command, which managed the U.S. military relationship with the rest of Latin America. Importantly, though, President Salinas' offer in 1990 "to send [Mexican] troops as part of a multilateral force under United Nations command after Iraq invaded Kuwait"⁷⁵ rhetorically harked back to Mexico's contribution of forces to the Allied cause in WWII and provided the first evidence of an end to Mexico's inward-looking military posture. This change was further evidenced in 1996 when Mexico began "sending troops abroad for humanitarian missions."⁷⁶ Additionally, the Mexican state increased its efforts at security sector reform in the 1990s, during which the Mexican state "purged, reorganized, and reinforced elements of the federal and state police establishments and modernized training and equipment in the growing Mexican armed forces."⁷⁷ Yet significantly, Donelo notes that "for constitutional and political reasons, Mexico historically has spent a lower percentage of its gross domestic product on the military than other countries facing similar challenges."⁷⁸ Thus, while the United States provided Mexico with almost \$265 million in military aid during the 1990s,⁷⁹ Mexico spent a mere 0.5 percent of its annual GDP on military expenditures during the same period--about \$22 billion in total--one of the lowest rates in the world.⁸⁰ According to the CIA World Fact Book, although Mexico increased its annual military spending to 0.59 percent of GDP in 2012, it still ranked 124th out of 132 nations listed!⁸¹

It was only with the ascension of the Presidents Vicente Fox-Quesada and Felipe Calderon-Hinojosa (both of the opposition PAN party) to the Mexican presidency in 2000 and 2006, respectively, that the Cold Peace truly began to thaw. For the first time since the Revolution, the United States and Mexico would take steps to build a meaningful bilateral military relationship. The first move toward deepening the institutional framework for that relationship came in 2002, when the United States established US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), a new Combatant Command whose responsibilities included managing the U.S. military relationship with Mexico. Before its creation, “senior Mexican military leaders dealt directly with their titular U.S. defense establishment counterparts;”⁸² afterwards, USNORTHCOM mediated the bilateral military relationship. Although the institutional leadership of the Mexican armed forces reportedly viewed the unilateral change as both a snub and an ominous militarization of the U.S.-Mexican relationship, President Felipe Calderon nonetheless ordered the Mexican armed forces to cooperate with their new counterparts to implement his strategy of “greater cooperation with Mexico’s neighbors (meaning the United States) on matters of mutual interest.”⁸³ Calderon viewed violent transnational criminal organizations as posing a grave threat to the Mexican state’s sovereignty and political stability and envisioned a strategy of coordinated U.S.-Mexican action against them, one which “placed both the Mexican and U.S. militaries ... in the position of focusing on a common threat.”⁸⁴ This represented a decisive shift in Mexican strategic thought. For the first time since the Revolution, Mexican leadership did not see the United States as the greatest threat to Mexico’s sovereignty and political stability.⁸⁵

Shortly thereafter, in 2007, the United States and Mexico announced the Merida Initiative, a package of U.S. security assistance to Mexico and Central America, which was

“developed in response to the [Mexican] government’s unprecedented request for increased U.S. support and involvement in helping Mexico combat drug trafficking and organized crime.”⁸⁶ Although the initial emphasis of the Mexico portion of the Merida Initiative was on training and equipping Mexican counterdrug forces, “as part of the Merida Initiative’s emphasis on shared responsibility, the Mexican government pledged to tackle crime and corruption and the U.S. government pledged to address drug demand and the illicit trafficking of firearms and bulk currency to Mexico.”⁸⁷ Bow regards the original Merida Initiative as incomplete in terms of “developing a blueprint for more effective, long-term cooperation” because of the “substantial political and diplomatic obstacles...[that] prevented frontline officials from formulating a more sophisticated strategy that might have taken advantage of what [was known] about security sector reform in general and about Mexico’s challenges in particular.”⁸⁸ Moreover, since the U.S. Department of State was primarily responsible for the design of the Merida Initiative, the U.S. Department of Defense was largely relegated to “overseeing the procurement and delivery of Merida equipment for Mexican security forces.”⁸⁹ For all the above reasons, the Merida Initiative did not include “an active U.S. military presence in Mexico [or vice versa], largely due to Mexican concerns about national sovereignty stemming from past conflicts with the United States.”⁹⁰ However, the single greatest problem with the original Merida Initiative was its inclination toward the less-than-successful “basic war-on-drugs approach that the [United States] had relied upon since the 1970s.”⁹¹

Importantly, though, for the first time since the Revolution, the Mexican government had “put sovereignty concerns aside to allow extensive U.S. involvement in [its] domestic security efforts. The two governments increased cooperation through the establishment of a multi-level working group structure to design and implement bilateral security efforts that included annual

cabinet-level meetings.”⁹² In effect, this formalized the Thaw in the security relationship and, critically, put in place a flexible and modular political framework through which to increase bilateral security cooperation. There remain legitimate concerns that strengthening the Mexican armed forces and involving them in more domestic missions could potentially destabilize the civil-military relationship within the Mexican state. After extensive research, however, Camp found that “despite institutional autonomy, a lack of reform, and an increase in civilian missions, the Mexican armed forces remain subordinate to civilian political authorities. [Further, there is] little evidence to support the common notion that they are a significant threat to civilian supremacy in general or to the democratic process in particular.”⁹³

Upon its extension in 2010, the Merida Initiative was expanded to place “more emphasis on addressing the weak institutions and underlying societal problems that have allowed the drug trade to flourish in Mexico.”⁹⁴ Whereas the original Merida Initiative had “focused almost entirely on providing the Mexican military with the means to make war on drug-trafficking organizations, the new version would shift attention and resources away from military hardware toward strengthening the Mexican state through political and legal reform and toward combating the ‘root causes’ of organized crime through economic development and local community-building efforts.”⁹⁵ Because of the Merida Initiative, “[U.S.] military and police aid to Mexico, while on the decline, is still the second highest in [Latin America], at \$154 million in 2013.”⁹⁶ In spite of PRI-presidential candidate Enrique Peña-Nieto’s campaign rhetoric in 2012 regarding changing the focus of Mexico’s security posture away from violent confrontation of transnational criminal organizations and toward the creation of a more stable and secure domestic environment in Mexico, since assuming the Mexican presidency his administration has essentially left the Merida Initiative framework intact. Mexico’s current military stance vis-à-vis the United States

has been one of increasing military engagement and cooperation, with the Mexican armed forces beginning to participate in military personnel exchanges, training events, and operational exercises with their U.S. counterparts.⁹⁷ In effect, this has ratified the Thaw in the security relationship, meaning that there is now a multipartisan consensus in Mexico regarding the desirability of its external orientation, engagement, and security cooperation with the United States. The commander of USNORTHCOM testified to the extent of the Thaw in the U.S.-Mexican military relationship in a U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, stating that bilateral military interactions and engagements increased 500 percent over the 2011–2014 timeframe, with 151 engagements in fiscal year 2013 alone.⁹⁸

As this analysis has demonstrated, institutional memories of Mexico's political and economic subordination to foreign powers, of domestic social chaos due to internal strife and warlordism, and of the political and geographic fragility of the Mexican state, all helped the Perfect Dictatorship to settle into a Cold Peace vis-à-vis the United States during the twentieth century. During this time, the Perfect Dictatorship made use of every instrument of power at its disposal--including employment of the Mexican armed forces against the Mexican people--in order to consolidate its power within the post-revolutionary Mexican state. Ironically, though, the Perfect Dictatorship succeeded in neutralizing the Mexican armed forces as a political actor at the national level--unlike almost every other major Latin American state. The reasons for this are threefold: First, politically ambitious military officers were gradually--and decisively--ushered off the political stage by the politically wily General-Presidents of the early Perfect Dictatorship. Second, the structural changes made to the Mexican armed forces by those same General-Presidents promoted inter-service rivalry, reducing the military's overall power. Third, Mexico's isolationist posture served to justify a lower percentage of military spending than

would be expected for a country of its size, which had the effect of starving the Mexican armed forces. While admittedly Mexico has made massive structural changes to its economic and political systems since the mid-1980s, security sector reform has lagged far behind and only began in earnest in the early 2000s. Fortuitously, USNORTHCOM's establishment helped to create an institutional framework through which to mediate the U.S.-Mexican military relationship. USNORTHCOM also helped to decouple the political and the military bilateral relationships and, importantly, to stabilize, routinize, and professionalize the military relationship and fostered increased military contact and cooperation. Shortly thereafter, the Merida Initiative was initiated, which put in place a flexible, modular political framework through which to increase security cooperation. It is opportune now to consider what additional policies, if any, the United States should pursue to deepen its security cooperation with Mexico.

Implications for U.S. Policy and Recommendations

Most policy-making takes place with an already-established historical narrative in the background. The present work attempts to establish a historical narrative in order to think more clearly about its implications vis-à-vis policy-making. In short, this perspective asserts that if the historical narrative is wrong, policies will inevitably be misconceived. The key elements of the Mexican historical narrative presented here are as follows: First, the Perfect Dictatorship's practice of privileging of 'stability' and economic growth over political openness and freedom was, in part, a response to historical political and economic subordination to foreign powers, domestic social chaos due to internal strife and warlordism, and the political and territorial fragility of the Mexican state. In particular, Mexican policies of economic, political, and security disengagement from the United States represented an attempt to make a decisive break with past national subordination. In short, the Perfect Dictatorship's Cold Peace posture allowed it to

maintain a singular focus on the consolidation and maintenance of its power within the post-revolutionary Mexican state, an integral part of which was the employment of highly local, discreet violence channeled through the Mexican army and paramilitary forces. Furthermore, a strong undercurrent of illegality, characterized by southward-bound arms trafficking and northward-bound human and substance trafficking, has always been present in the U.S.-Mexican economic relationship and was tolerated, and perhaps fostered, by the Perfect Dictatorship. However, in the late twentieth century, Mexico changed course and embarked on a project to become a more democratic, pluralist, and open society. The progressive reform of the Mexican economy and the unification of the U.S.-Mexican economic space, culminating in the full implementation of NAFTA, represented the leading edge of this project; but nearly every institution in Mexican society is undergoing fundamental reform. The Thaw in the bilateral security relationship is underway and reflects a multipartisan consensus in Mexico regarding its new external orientation, engagement, and security cooperation with the United States. However, reform of the Mexican security sector and bilateral security and military cooperation have lagged significantly behind economic reforms.

The above narrative has implications for the direction of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Mexico. It helps to clarify for policymakers that Mexico's current problems are intimately connected with the ongoing, profound reforms of nearly every sector of Mexican state--including the decoupling of the government from the illicit economy. In brief, the social issues Mexico is facing should be viewed as part of a state-building and reform process, not of state failure. The transition from a corporatist, semi-socialist, near-totalitarian state to a democratic, capitalist, open society is well underway, but policy-makers must remember that the transition only began in the late 1980s. To a certain extent, the rebooted Merida Initiative acknowledges this with its emphasis on

strengthening the Mexican state through various political and legal reforms. Because “the United States’ relationship with Mexico has become one of increasing importance and interdependence,”⁹⁹ the United States should offer the Mexican government its strongest support as Mexico progresses down the pathway to greater reform.

Additionally, just as the Mexican armed forces played an integral role in the maintenance of the Perfect Dictatorship, their reform and modernization--and that of the entire Mexican security sector--will also be integral to the overall reform of the Mexican state. It is in the U.S. interest to ensure that Mexican security sector reform is successful and enduring. To this end, as a matter of policy, the United States should encourage Mexico to aspire to membership in the Partnership for Peace program of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Given Mexico’s already extensive integration into the North Atlantic economic community, including both NAFTA and a free trade agreement with the European Union,¹⁰⁰ integration into the North Atlantic security community is a logical next step. As Sands argues, Mexico would benefit enormously, “in part because the now-established process of negotiating an Individual Partnership Action Plan ... would allow Mexico to proceed at its own pace along a proven path to security sector reform and modernization.”¹⁰¹ This process has worked well to assist states as diverse as Spain, former Warsaw Pact states, former Yugoslav republics, and former Soviet Socialist republics to reform their security sectors. Furthermore, integration into NATO would put to rest Mexican anxieties about the need to protect Mexican sovereignty and territorial integrity from foreign intervention by ensuring that its economic space and security space coincide. Integration with a wider NATO audience should also help dampen residual Mexican fears about reliance, or dominance, from a single power--the United States. The author is convinced that now is the time for the United States to take its growing security relationship with

Mexico to the next level by inviting Mexico to begin the process of joining the North Atlantic security community.

A Preliminary Note on Further Research

The author plans to continue this research at a later date by delving into the particulars of U.S.-Mexican bilateral security cooperation at the agency and military service component levels. The existing literature is heavily focused on border agencies and land-based military forces, while scant attention paid to the maritime, air, and cyber domains.

During this research effort, several gaps in the literature were encountered. After an extended search, the author has identified the following gaps in the existing literature:

- More research is needed on the history of airpower on the U.S. border. Airpower has played a key role in U.S. border security since the dawn of military aviation. Surprisingly, though, no single article or monograph was encountered during this research that treats this chapter of U.S. airpower history as a unified whole. A comprehensive historical account of how the U.S. Army, the U.S. Army Air Corps, the U.S. Border Patrol, and, later, the U.S. Air Force have employed airpower on the United States' borders is needed. Also helpful would be a comprehensive history of airpower's role in the Mexican armed forces. Although airpower has long been employed by the Mexican armed forces, there is no single account of its development and employment.
- Equally helpful would be a comprehensive history of U.S. airpower engagement throughout Latin America. The writer has found that the existing literature is quite fragmentary, usually embedded in military histories of specific conflicts or periods.
- Another useful contribution to the literature would be a comprehensive historical survey of the evolution of the defense establishments of Latin American nations, to include the national command structures, interservice relationships, and geographic partition of forces and missions.

- Additionally, much has been written about Latin American *Caudillismo* and the paths for transition to liberal democratic rule, but little has been written about the concomitant bureaucratic and organizational evolution of those countries' defense establishments. In short, how have Latin American militaries evolved over the past 30 years, both in terms of capabilities and organizational structures? Also helpful would be a comprehensive application of Harold Trinkunas' model of the evolution of the relationship between each Latin American nation's regime leverage and regime capacity vis-à-vis its armed forces.

- Additionally lacking is any investigation into the utility of airpower against criminal organizations and bandits, as opposed to against rebels, insurgents, terrorists, and guerrillas. Much has been written about the effective employment of airpower against rebel, insurgent, terrorist, and guerrilla campaigns, yet almost nothing has been written with regard to its employment against criminal organizations or bandits. While there are obvious similarities, there are also obvious differences. The closest theoretical model available seems to be the employment of airpower against piracy, but there are clear differences between maritime, littoral, or riverine operations against piracy and terrestrial operations against bandits and criminal organizations.

(Notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

¹. The writer uses the term Perfect Dictatorship to refer to the period of uninterrupted one-party rule in Mexico by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), from ca. 1934–2000, referring specifically to the PRI's practice of conflating itself as a political party with the Mexican state.

². Here defined as a sustained state of political and military distancing between two powers.

³. Skidmore, 51-52.

⁴. Lira and Staples, 443. (Translated by author.)

⁵. Serrano-Ortega and Zoraida-Vazquez, 437. (Translated by author.)

⁶. Skidmore, 50.

⁷. Ibid., 54.

⁸. Reid, 70.

⁹. Santa-Cruz, 1.

¹⁰. Reid, 74.

- ¹¹. Santa-Cruz, 1.
- ¹². Hodges and Gandy, 6.
- ¹³. Reid, 72.
- ¹⁴. Andreas, 294.
- ¹⁵. Crandall, 217.
- ¹⁶. Ibid., 217.
- ¹⁷. The present narrative finds its basis in a liberal globalist reading of Mexican history and views its trajectory toward an open society, free market economics, and deep integration into the international system as a cause for optimism. Alternately, Hodges and Gandy offer a leftist reading of Mexican history and see its current trajectory as a tragedy. Although this writer finds their narrative interesting as an intellectual counterpoint, it will neither be substantively engaged nor refuted in the course of this essay.
- ¹⁸. Reid, 73.
- ¹⁹. Ibid., 73.
- ^{19A}. See Zakaria for a discussion of ‘illiberal democracy’ and see Levitsky and Way for a discussion of ‘competitive authoritarianism.’ Both of these concepts are applicable to Mexico during the period under discussion.
- ²⁰. Santa-Cruz, 4.
- ²¹. Reid, 74.
- ²². Ibid., 74.
- ²³. Skidmore, 61.
- ²⁴. Ibid., 375.
- ²⁵. Ibid., 62.
- ²⁶. Reid, 73.
- ²⁷. Andreas, 294.
- ²⁸. Ibid., 295.
- ²⁹. Valdes-Castellanos, 72-83.
- ³⁰. Kan, 4.
- ³¹. Skidmore, 353-354.
- ³². Ibid., 354.
- ³³. Andreas, 295.
- ³⁴. Crandall, 215.
- ³⁵. Reid, 201.
- ³⁶. Ibid., 201.
- ³⁷. Skidmore, 69.
- ³⁸. Ibid., 70.
- ³⁹. Ibid., 72.
- ⁴⁰. Ibid., 74.
- ⁴¹. Andreas, 296.
- ⁴². Kan, 13-17.
- ⁴³. Ibid., 4.
- ⁴⁴. Skidmore, 71.
- ⁴⁵. Reid, 206.
- ⁴⁶. Skidmore, 71.
- ⁴⁷. Reid, 206.
- ⁴⁸. Ibid., 211.

- ^{48A}. Preston and Dillon, xii.
- ⁴⁹. Reid, 211.
- ⁵⁰. Crandall, 215.
- ⁵¹. Plasencia-de la Parra, abstract. (Translated by author.)
- ⁵². Camp, 5.
- ⁵³. Black, 54.
- ⁵⁴. Camp, 40.
- ⁵⁵. Fitch, 11.
- ⁵⁶. Camp, 40.
- ⁵⁷. Rath, 170; see also Guevara-Moyano, 15-16.
- ⁵⁸. Fitch, 11.
- ⁵⁹. Camp, 21.
- ⁶⁰. Fitch, 11.
- ⁶¹. Mexico has historically been able to exercise what could be characterized as high regime leverage over the Mexican armed forces, ensuring continued civilian control of the military. (See Trinkunas, 13-20.) More research is needed to characterize the evolution of Mexican political regime capacity vis-à-vis its armed forces during the past century.
- ⁶². Black, 54.
- ⁶³. United Nations Peacekeeping Website, "Troop and Police Contributors."
- ⁶⁴. Richmond, 297-300; Vega-Rivera (all).
- ⁶⁵. Camp, 27.
- ⁶⁶. Hodges and Gandy, 7.
- ⁶⁷. Rath, 6.
- ⁶⁸. Ibid., 114.
- ⁶⁹. Ibid., 143.
- ⁷⁰. Camp, 32.
- ⁷¹. Rath, 171.
- ⁷². Ibid., 115.
- ⁷³. Ibid., 143.
- ⁷⁴. Camp, 268.
- ⁷⁵. Ibid., 269.
- ⁷⁶. Ibid., 270.
- ⁷⁷. Turbiville, 32.
- ⁷⁸. Danelo, 20.
- ⁷⁹. Camp, 268.
- ⁸⁰. World Bank Open Data Website, "Military Expenditure (% GDP)" & "GDP (current US\$)."
- ⁸¹. CIA World Fact Book Website, "Mexico."
- ⁸². Downie, 8.
- ⁸³. Ibid., 9.
- ⁸⁴. Ibid., 10.
- ⁸⁵. The preceding material regarding USNORTHCOM's impact on the U.S.-Mexican military relationship has been adapted from the author's March 2014 review of Richard D. Downie's "Critical Strategic Decisions in Mexico: the Future of U.S./Mexican Defense Relations."
- ⁸⁶. Seelke and Finklea, 6.
- ⁸⁷. Ibid., 6.
- ⁸⁸. Bow, 79.

- ⁸⁹. Seelke and Finklea, 28.
- ⁹⁰. Ibid., 28.
- ⁹¹. Bow, 79.
- ⁹². Seelke and Finklea, 7.
- ⁹³. Camp, abstract. See also pp. 245-276.
- ⁹⁴. Ibid., ii. The revised Merida initiative currently “focuses on (1) disrupting organized criminal groups, (2) institutionalizing the rule of law, (3) creating a 21st century border, and (4) building strong and resilient communities” (Seelke and Finklea, ii).
- ⁹⁵. Bow, 77.
- ⁹⁶. Isacson et al., 19.
- ⁹⁷. Miles (all).
- ⁹⁸. Senate, *Department Of Defense Authorization of Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2015 and the Future Years Defense Program*, 30.
- ⁹⁹. Crandall, 213.
- ¹⁰⁰. European Commission Website, “Mexico.”
- ¹⁰¹. Sands.



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