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**MEXICAN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS:
STABILITY AND STRENGTH IN AN UNCERTAIN ENVIRONMENT**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

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Abstract

While Mexican civil-military relations are evolving, due to the emergence of multi-party democracy and the growing counter-drug mission, the relations between civilian leadership and the military are mature and stable. Despite very limited civilian oversight of the military, the army and navy both acquit themselves well and are critical to the future of the Mexican state. This paper will demonstrate that while Mexico's civil-military relationship is perhaps not democratically healthy (for example, there is no civilian Ministry of Defense to oversee the army or the navy), the system works well within the context of Mexico's unique situation and the specific circumstances of Mexican democracy and society. In efforts to help Mexico build and maintain national strength and stability, the United States should not include civil-military reform among the priority agenda items.

Note on footnotes: notes on sources are all placed at the end of the paragraph; if the note is for explanatory or additional contextual material, the note is placed at the point in the paragraph where it is relevant.

MEXICAN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: STABILITY AND STRENGTH IN AN UNCERTAIN ENVIRONMENT

Mexico, at best, is an underdeveloped and underachieving country; at worst, Mexico is a near-failing state, despite a democratic system of government, a growing economy, and close links to the United States. Criminal ineptitude infects government functions from the local to the national level, and there is little optimism for improvement in the near term. Faced with corrupt national and local police, the recent presidents have turned in desperation to the armed forces to help neutralize the drug cartels and stabilize the country. Fortunately, Mexico's military is among the world's most professional and capable armed forces. The officers are well-trained and have historically shown no inclination to take over the government. Though the military did not ask for the mission, army and navy leaders have embraced new roles in combating Mexico's criminal networks. The Mexican Constitution prohibits the military from serving outside the borders of the nation without congressional approval, which makes the military primarily an internal security force. The Mexican armed forces have adapted well to the needs of the Mexican nation, and the army and navy are among the most respected institutions in the country.¹

This paper will show that while Mexican civil-military relations are evolving, due to the emergence of multi-party democracy and the growing counter-drug mission, the relations between civilian leadership and the military are mature and stable. Despite very limited civilian oversight of the military, the army and navy both acquit themselves well and are critical to the future of the Mexican state. This paper will demonstrate that while Mexico's civil-military relationship is perhaps not democratically healthy (for example, there is no civilian Ministry of Defense to oversee the army or the navy), the system works well within the context of Mexico's unique situation and the specific circumstances of Mexican democracy and society. In efforts to help Mexico build and maintain national strength and stability, the United States should not include civil-military reform among the priority agenda items. This paper will examine the history of

¹ Roderic A. Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage* (London: Praeger Security International, 2005), 16; Roderic A. Camp, "Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges," in Eric L. Olson, David A. Shirk, and Andrew Selee, eds., *Shared Responsibility: U.S.-Mexico Policy Options for Confronting Organized Crime* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars and the University of San Diego, 2010), 308.

civil-military relations in Mexico, guidance provided by the Mexican Constitution, the current relationship between the powerful and competent military and the civilian branches of government, potential challenges that may arise from the currently low level of civilian supervision of the military, and the outlook for the future. To understand civil-military relations in Mexico, one must first look to the nation's revolutionary past and the role of post-revolutionary leaders and the 1917 Constitution in shaping today's civil-military environment.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: 1876-1968

Mexico, like many Western Hemisphere states (and indeed, like the United States itself), is a product of its colonial and revolutionary experience. After Spanish colonial rule ended in 1821, Mexico was an unstable yet independent state until General Porfirio Diaz established a dictatorship in 1876, running the country with an iron fist until 1910. The 19th century was a century of conflict and chaos for Mexico, seeing it in wars against Texas in 1836, the United States in 1847, and France in 1862, and then engaging in a civil war between 1863 and 1867. It was not due simply to General Diaz' charisma and ruthlessness that he ruled for 34 years. The Mexican people needed stability, and Diaz' approach to governance offered economic reforms, infrastructure development, security, and peace, albeit with an authoritarian and corrupt regime that was ultimately Diaz' undoing. ²

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910, and during the next 19 years, nearly 10% of the Mexican population was killed. ³ Though the current Mexican Constitution was written in 1917, and the Revolution officially ended in 1920, there were sporadic uprisings and chaos that lasted until 1929. It was a daunting period for the Mexican nation, and Mexican society, culture, and politics are still affected by the Revolution. Not surprisingly, all Mexican presidents between 1920 and 1946 were former revolutionary military leaders (the only exception was a short-term, ineffective “puppet”), but these former generals were instrumental in

2 Jorge G. Castaneda, *Manana Forever?; Mexico and the Mexicans* (New York: Knopf, 2011), Chapter 1; Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Vintage, 2011), Ch 2, Part III.

3 For comparison, during the American Civil War, approximately 2% of the American population was killed.

establishing a military that was much less involved in political affairs.⁴

To understand the roots of Mexico's civil-military system, one must examine the efforts and initiatives of the first presidents. President (General) Alvaro Obregon (1920-1924) tried immediately to distance the army from politics, and appointed primarily civilians to key offices. President (General) Plutarco Calles (1924-1928) re-emphasized officer education through the Colegio Militar (Mexico's West Point, which had been closed during the Revolution) and introduced a professionalized promotion process that focused on training and examinations (whereas previously generals merely picked who in their commands should be promoted), and he frequently cashiered or transferred overly politicized officers. In 1923, 1927, and 1929, small elements of the military tried to overthrow the government, but all failed. This reinforced to the (former military) presidents that the main threat to Mexican stability came not from corrupt or incompetent civilians, but from the military itself. All subsequent reforms and changes must be seen in that light. A main lesson from the later years of the Revolution was to ensure that the military was de-politicized, or at least kept under the control of their civilian masters who ran the government.⁵

President (General) Lazaro Cardenas (1935-1940) was perhaps the most influential president in the shaping of today's civil-military relations. Cardenas had all officers take proficiency tests and removed incompetent officers from key jobs, regardless of political orientation. He emphasized (even more than Calles) professionalism and promoted capable and intelligent young officers, including some men from the lower classes and some who had started service in the enlisted ranks, a tradition that continues today. He gave the navy autonomy with its own Navy Department (his successor then gave the Navy a wholly independent Secretariat of the Navy). Most importantly, Cardenas worked tirelessly to professionalize the *civilians* in government by turning the National Revolutionary Party into an organization focused on training, accountability, loyalty, and discipline: a strong organization that could provide a counter-balance to the armed forces. Essentially, Cardenas created a professional civilian bureaucracy. In 1938, he further

⁴ Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 18.

⁵ Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 19-20; Riding, *Distant Neighbors*, Ch 3, part II; Jordi Diez and Ian Nicholls, "The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition" (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 7; George Grayson, *Mexico's Armed Forces: A Factbook* (Washington: CSIS Americas Program, 1999), 3.

transformed the ruling party's structure⁶ by establishing four “corporate sectors” within the party: labor, popular, agrarian, and military. Each of these “sectors” elected delegates to the party assembly, thus firmly placing the military within the government. Thus, while Cardenas was strengthening the civilian parts of the government to serve as a counterbalance to the military, he also worked to pacify and keep the military close to the center of government by *involving it in the governmental process*, another tradition that persists to this day. It is important to note that while Cardenas fully involved the military (as an organization) in the government, he outlawed extra-governmental political involvement by military personnel. Cardenas' successor, President (General) Manuel Camacho (1940-1946), is credited with the formal transition of the Mexican Presidency to civilian control.⁷

When Camacho took office in late 1940, he set about making changes of his own.⁸ He ordered the military to end its official political participation, and though military officers continued to be appointed to specific roles, the appointments were strictly controlled by the President. In 1946, Camacho selected Miguel Aleman, a lawyer with no previous military service, much less service as a general, as the next presidential candidate; the transition to a civilian Presidency was complete.⁹ Aleman appointed military men to key defense and security positions in the government, as presidents have done since 1946 to help gain the support of the military. And as one of his first acts (subsequent presidents have followed this example, too), Aleman publicly praised the military for being a beacon of strength and stability, thus flattering the generals and other senior officers. In 1952, Aleman selected his successor, but a group of military officers proposed a candidate of their own (not surprisingly, that candidate was an army general). Aleman rapidly ended the

6 First, he changed the name of the party to the Party of the Mexican Revolution, or PRM, which was then again changed in 1946 to the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI; the PRI was essentially the only party in Mexico until the early 1970s, had a majority in Congress in 1997, and held the Presidency until 2000. Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 22.

7 Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 22-23; Diez and Nicholls, “The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition”, 8-9; Grayson, *Mexico's Armed Forces: A Factbook*, 5.

8 Camacho, while serving as Cardenas' Secretary of National Defense, felt that Cardenas had gone too far in directly involving the military as one of the four “sectors”. Despite being a general, he feared over-politicization of the armed forces and preferred the military to remain in the role of advisor rather than participant. Camacho feared both over-involvement of the military in government and the potential for in-fighting within the military, as different groups of officers and men might support different factions within the party. His view was a more American view of military leaders as advisors to the President on military matters. Camacho was not a “battlefield general” - he was a “bureaucrat general,” leading from behind a desk - which likely made his support of civilian rule easier. Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 24.

9 Under the single party system, the PNR/PRM/PRI was dominant, and presidents essentially selected their successors until 1994. Diez and Nicholls, 8.

“political insurrection” by telling his National Defense Secretary to dismiss anyone who did not support Aleman's official candidate. The officers quietly backed down and it was the last time military officers tried to work outside the party structure. Civil-military relations were uneventful until the late 1960s, when Mexico, like much of the world, experienced significant internal unrest.¹⁰

The major post-World War II formative experience in civil-military affairs occurred in 1968, when the army crushed a student revolt in Mexico City.¹¹ Accounts of the events dealing with causality and decisional responsibility for the results vary, but between 30 and 300 student protesters were killed on 2 October 1968, when the army and police conducted a coordinated attack, featuring helicopters, armored cars, snipers, and plain-clothes secret police, against the approximately 10,000 students gathered in the Plaza de Tlateloco. While loyally supporting President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (1964-1970), the military saw itself as responding to a situation that had gotten out of hand due to indecisive and incompetent civilian leadership and law enforcement. President Diaz Ordaz took the majority of the blame, but the military was also heavily criticized. The military has never forgiven the civilians for the misuse of force in 1968. The army used the event as leverage to strengthen its position – it received new weapons and aircraft as “thanks” from the grateful legislature and President – and the army made sure the civilian politicians knew it did not like being used as a “weapon of last resort” when nothing but disaster could result.¹²

A major lesson for the military and civilian leadership was to get soldiers more involved in peacetime internal security affairs, in order to preempt the chaos of 1968. Indeed, since 1968 the army has been heavily involved in helping (or even supplanting, in some areas) the police with intelligence collection, against Communists, labor agitators, rebellious peasants, drug cartels, and other agents of unrest. After the disaster of 1968, civilian control of the military weakened, but the military commitment to discipline, professionalism, and serving the state remained strong. After 1968 (and again after the abortive anti-guerrilla

10 Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 24-26.

11 The student revolts occurred just before the start of the 1968 Summer Olympics, which were held in Mexico City, causing an even stronger desire to quickly end the unrest – mass protests near the Olympic venues would have been a major disgrace for Mexican authorities; mirroring common opinions in the West during the 1960's, government and military officials also claimed the students were linked to international Communists. Riding, Ch 3, part IV.

12 Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 28-30.

Chiapas campaign in 1994¹³), the army further isolated itself from the public and from the civilian leadership, yet remained loyal to the Mexican system of government. In fact, many analysts have suggested that the power transition in 2000 from the PRI to the opposition party PAN was made easier by the army's clear neutrality. Institutionally, it saw no reason to passionately defend the civilians responsible for the 1968 massacre and a host of other suspect decisions and policies.¹⁴

After the revolutionary experience and the defining role of the post-revolutionary presidents, the other important factor that shaped civil-military relations in Mexico today is the Constitution of 1917.

ROLE OF THE CONSTITUTION

Mexico has had a Constitution since 1824, but federal weakness and the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz rendered it irrelevant until the revolutionaries wrote the new Constitution in 1917. Up to that point, there was no constitutional tradition in Mexico, but the writers based the new document on the United States Constitution, and, despite its density and length (130 articles), it is a solid and well-respected document. It has been frequently amended, but the main articles have so far stood the test of time. Among the twenty Latin American countries, Mexico is one of the few that does not explicitly describe the roles and missions of the military in its constitution. It addresses several restrictions on the use of force, defines the duties of the legislature and Presidency in supporting the military, and names the President as the Commander of the Armed Forces. In many Latin American countries, the military is constitutionally obligated to essentially “stage a coup in the name of stability,” if the civilians falter. Mexico has no such clause, largely because of the legacy of the Diaz military regime and the Revolutionary context. The system specified by the 1917 Constitution is very similar to America's: executive-judiciary-legislative separation of powers and a two-house assembly. A primary difference (*not* described in the Constitution) lies in the political party structure during the first six decades of the 1917 Republic: *de facto* one-party rule. Under this system, the President

13 In Chiapas state in 1994, the army was sent to quell an uprising by a group called the Zapatistas. The army felt it was once again set up for failure (as in 1968) but also not allowed to do its job. The Mexican media and people were unhappy with the military's allegedly thuggish performance in Chiapas, while the military blamed the civilians for meddling and poor support. The events did, however, cause the army to institute many reforms and improvements. Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 37-39.

14 Riding, *Distant Neighbors*, Ch 3, part IV; Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 28-33; Grayson, *Mexico's Armed Forces: A Factbook*, 40.

was far stronger than in America. He effectively hand-picked his successor and all key executive branch positions, including generals and admirals, since almost the entire legislature and judiciary (supposedly “checks” on his power) were also members of his party.¹⁵

Several of the articles in the Mexican Constitution are useful to understanding the state of civil-military affairs and the role the Mexican military plays in society and politics. *Article 129* states that “during peacetime no military authority shall execute more powers than those directly related to military discipline.” This restriction should prevent the use of the military in internal political strife or civilian unrest. However, Article 129 has been overcome on multiple occasions by invoking *Article 29*, which is often cited as the justification for involving the military in civil affairs, especially when civilian law enforcement cannot adequately address a problem. It states, in part: “In the face of invasions, serious disturbance of public peace or any situation which puts society in great danger or conflict, the President...shall have the power to suspend in the whole country or in a specific location the rights and privileges which can slow down a quick and easy response to the situation.” Other constitutions have similar clauses, to be sure, but seldom have they been invoked so often in peacetime.¹⁶

Articles 55 specifies that active duty military personnel cannot serve in the Congress, and must have been off active duty for at least 90 days before an election. *Articles 73, 76, and 89* dictate the roles of the Congress and the President regarding the funding, supervising, and practical employment of the military. Article 73 states that Congress has the authority to organize and fund the armed forces: “provide for and maintain the Union's armed forces, which shall be integrated by the National Army, the National Navy, and the National Air Force as well as to regulate their organization and services.” Under Article 76, the Senate has the duty to, “ratify under the law the Presidential nominations of...colonels and all senior commanders of the Army, Navy, and Air Force,” and to, “authorize the President's orders under which troops are sent beyond the national borders.” Finally, under Article 89, the President (who must not be an active military officer, or must be off active duty for six months before an election) has duties which include, “appointing,

15 Howard J. Wiarda and Hilary Collins, “Constitutional Coups? Military Interventions in Latin America (A Report of the CSIS Americas Program)” (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011); *Constitution*.

16 *Constitution*.

with the approval of the Senate, colonels and other senior officers of the Army, Navy, and Air Force,” and the appointment of all other officers (the ranks below colonel are not subject to Senate ratification). Most importantly, the President is explicitly authorized and directed to command and, “dispose of the permanent armed forces, including the land army, the marine navy, and the air force for *internal security* and *exterior defense* of the Federation.” Article 89 has also been used to justify the use of the army and navy against drug cartels and other internal threats.¹⁷

Within the context of the Revolution and the Constitutional guidance and boundaries (or lack thereof) placed upon the various parts in the Mexican governmental system, one begins to see the shape of modern civil-military relations in Mexico.

CURRENT CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The civil-military relationship in Mexico can be characterized as a “grand bargain” between the President, Congress, and the military. In the bargain, the President serves as the Commander of the Armed Forces, while the military advises him and publicly follows his orders without question. The legislature funds the armed forces within national budgetary constraints, but traditionally asks few questions and simply provides funds to the armed forces with little specific guidance on how to spend the money. The military stays out of political affairs but gets to run its internal affairs without interference from either the President or the Congress. Constitutional requirements are respected (for example, the Senate has always “approved” senior officer appointments), but all three branches stay out of each other's business. This “grand bargain” worked smoothly between 1920 and 2000, while the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was in power. In the 1970s, opposition parties were finally legalized, though it took until 2000 before another party (National Action Party, PAN) won the Presidency. Meanwhile, the new parties gradually won seats on the Congress, resulting in Mexico finally becoming a true multi-party democracy, though this new reality has only existed for 11 years, and the system is evolving and developing many of its characteristics.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Constitution; Grayson, Mexico's Armed Forces: A Factbook*, 6-8.

¹⁸ Diez and Nicholls, “The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition”, 5; Camp, “Civil Military Relations: Charting a New

One major concern of the shift to multi-party rule concerns the role of the military, as the military was inextricably tied to the PRI since the Revolution. However, the armed forces have remained generally apolitical, despite the defeat of the PRI and an increased participation in internal security affairs. This stability is noteworthy and unique in Latin America, and has occurred for five main reasons: first, the Mexican officer corps is very professional and well-educated; second, the Mexican military has intentionally isolated itself from Mexican society, resulting in a general avoidance of the pervasive corruption in Mexico and a high level of respect from the people; third, the Mexican military remains formally involved in the civilian government, with two Cabinet-level posts (Secretary of National Defense and Secretary of the Navy) filled by the active chiefs of the two main services, thus providing the military a voice of participation in the President's inner-circle of decision making and governance; fourth, the navy, despite being only a third of the size of the army, has grown in professionalism, power, and influence, providing an effective check on the army; finally, Mexico's proximity to the United States has ensured a high level of external security, which has allowed the Mexican military to focus almost exclusively on internal affairs, and has allowed the military to grow using the United States armed forces as a role model (though until very recently, the interaction was mostly from afar, not due to close operations). The Mexican military's long period of loyalty to the government, coupled with these five factors, have resulted in a very stable civil-military situation.¹⁹

Since the Colegio Militar reopened in 1917, the Mexican army has placed high value on the professionalization, education, and institutional pride of its officer corps. This evolved and strengthened over the years, and included the opening of many more schools, including the National Defense College in 1981. It is generally accepted that the "relationship of the officer corps to the state" is the key to any civil-military relationship. In this area, Mexico has committed resources and effort, and has produced a very disciplined and dedicated officer corps. The officers are typically drawn from the middle class, producing a far less elite officer corps than what is seen in typical Latin American nations. The Chiapas campaign of 1994 caused the army to completely update its professional military education, adding extensive training in

Direction?"

19 Camp, "Civil Military Relations: Charting a New Direction?"; Roderic A. Camp, "Civil Military Relations: Charting a New Direction?" *CSIS Hemisphere Focus, Americas Program*. Volume XII, Issue 12 (Nov 2004).

public affairs, human rights, and other key “soft power” subjects. Though early Presidents had to purge the officer corps of politically-inclined officers, the past 80 years have seen the officer corps shaped into excellence by education and a superb peer accountability system.²⁰

Mexico rates third among all North and South American states in terms of people respecting the armed forces (behind only Canada and the United States). This is partly because it is professional and loyal, and has helped hold the country together through many challenges, and partly because the Mexican people do not really know much about their military, other than the fact that it is less corrupt and incompetent than many of the other institutions (it ranks only behind the clergy and schools in public trust among Mexican institutions).²¹ The isolation has allowed the officers to generally stay out of the traps of corruption and graft, though accusations of misconduct have increased as the army and navy have become more involved in internal security affairs.²²

Another advantage the Mexican civil-military system has had is frequent participation by the military in the machinery of government, starting from the days of the revolutionary Presidents. Though various Presidents have included the military in varying degrees, the generals and admirals have always had a way to participate in the decisions made at the highest levels. Today, the Secretary of the Army, an army general, and the Secretary of the Navy, a navy admiral, are key members of the President's National Security Cabinet. In budget and force structure fights, and discussions concerning the use of force, the generals and admirals have a seat at the table. Unlike most militaries, in which a civilian Minister of Defense (and his large Ministry bureaucracy) oversees and advocates for the uniformed forces, there is no such filter in Mexico. Though this could be criticized as a weakness of the Mexican system, it has historically given the military an

20 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 8.

See Part I, Chapter 1 for an excellent discussion of “Officership as a Profession”; David Ronfeldt, “The Modern Mexican Military: Implications for Mexico's Stability and Security (RAND Note)”, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1985), 7; Camp, “Civil Military Relations: Charting a New Direction?”; Grayson, *Mexico's Armed Forces: A Factbook*, 12-15; Camp, *Mexico's Military on the Democratic Stage*, 38.

21 The military is intellectually and socially isolated from almost all of Mexico, but the military is not *physically* isolated from the lower classes. Though the military remains an opaque enigma to most Mexicans, many rural farmers remain very reliant on the military for medical services, disaster relief, security, public works maintenance, and logistics support. Diez and Nicholls, “The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition”, 3.

22 Camp, “Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges”, 308; Camp, “Civil Military Relations: Charting a New Direction?”

opportunity to work *within* the system and not against or around the system.²³

Historically the army has had few checks on its power and decisions, but the recent emergence of an assertive and capable navy has provided an internal military check against army over-reach. Though the navy is only about one third of the size of the army, and has fewer regional command zones (and thus far fewer flag officers), the navy has modernized and professionalized more rapidly than the army, and has put an even higher premium on education. The navy has recently received a key role in the fight against the drug cartels; it has expanded its naval infantry (marine) capability; most importantly, perhaps, it has led the way in integration with the United States military. The navy conducts numerous joint exercises with the U.S. Navy and has liaison officers at U.S. Northern Command and Fleet Forces Command. The navy's admirals are overall very fluent in English and likely to have been partially trained and educated in the U.S. (the current third ranking officer in the navy is a Naval Command College graduate). All of these initiatives by the navy have helped both services - the army is finally coming to the realization that the navy's approach to the U.S. is likely more beneficial to Mexico than otherwise.²⁴

The final key element of Mexican civil-military strength is the close proximity to the United States. Mexico has a complex relationship with America. Multiple American incursions and frequent interference over the last 200 years have made the Mexicans somewhat suspect of America's motives, but with the reality of Mexico remaining mired in backwardness (while China, Brazil, and other formerly weak states are rising to great strength), Mexican leaders are making genuine efforts to grow the economic and military links with America, especially since the mid-1990s. The Mexican military has used the U.S. as a source of training and doctrine for years, and the government is finally accepting military funding assistance for the fight against the drug cartels (for many years, Mexico refused assistance for a variety of reasons, including pride, sovereignty, and wanting to avoid the “strings” that typically come with U.S. aid). While the Mexican military has always leveraged its close relationship with the U.S., it rarely publicly discussed it, and the U.S.

23 Camp, “Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges”; Ronfeldt, “The Modern Mexican Military: Implications for Mexico's Stability and Security (RAND Note)”, 3.

24 Camp, “Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges”, 311; Ronfeldt, “The Modern Mexican Military: Implications for Mexico's Stability and Security (RAND Note)”, 6.

respected the Mexicans' requests to keep the relationship low-key. Since 2001, however, the cooperation has been open and extensive. This close cooperation furthers efforts to professionalize and stabilize the Mexican military. In much the same way that the U.S. military's relationship with (and mentoring of) the Egyptian military is partially credited with helping that nation avoid massive bloodshed in the recent Arab Spring, the Mexican military can rely on the relationship with the U.S. military for support and inspiration.²⁵

While these five advantages and the revolutionary and constitutional history have pushed Mexico towards a stable civil-military system, there are clearly potential pitfalls that could occur.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

As this essay has shown, the Mexican civil-military system has evolved from a unique combination of institutional and historical factors. To an American observer, Mexico's system of civilian “semi-control” of the military might seem like a recipe for disaster. Some might fear that a major political crisis could lead to the military stepping forward to “stabilize the situation,” just as the armed forces have taken the lead against the drug cartels and the associated rise in violence. Four key areas could lead to problems in Mexican civil-military affairs. First, continued civilian ineptitude could lead to a popular demand for the army to take over and restore Mexican pride and stability. Second, the multi-party Congress is showing a renewed interest in supervising and overseeing the military, as required in the Constitution. If army and navy leaders rebel against this “intrusion”, the civil-military balance could break down. Third, the military could get corrupted by close involvement with the drug cartels – as has happened to law enforcement and many other elements of Mexican society. Finally, the growing army-navy-air force rivalry could undermine the civil-military balance, as generals and admirals form alliances with Congressmen and other parts of the government. This is done in such stable places as the U.S. with little detrimental effect – but the effect on a weaker state is uncertain. All four potential problems could be a threat to Mexican democracy.

As recent Mexican history has shown, the military does not see taking over the government as a valid option to solve the nation's problems. During major unrest in the 1920s, 1960s, and 1990s, the military

25 Camp, “Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges”, 313; Diez and Nicholls, “The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition”, 26; Grayson, *Mexico's Armed Forces: A Factbook*, 9.

refrained from taking over the state, seeing itself as simply a servant of the civilian President. To be sure, the economic downturn, coupled with the rising power of the drug cartels, has created a unique set of challenges. But Mexican institutions are mature enough to stay in control despite instability. In fact, the Mexican military is too small to actually take over the country – just over 200,000 in all three branches. While this is sufficient to support the internal defense mission, it is grossly inadequate to take over a country of 110 million people. The threat of U.S. involvement would also help prevent an actual coup – in fact, a much more likely scenario is elements of the U.S. military *helping* the Mexican military *support their civilian leaders* (with intelligence, logistics, and occasional direct action).

Increased congressional oversight could challenge the equilibrium of the civil-military system. Congress has already demanded more input into specific budget matters, the Senate has taken a closer interest in promotion reviews, and both houses have requested the the Secretaries of National Defense and the Navy to testify on roles and missions, human rights, and other issues. One of the main reasons the Mexican military stayed out of politics was that the politicians stayed out of military affairs. A multi-party democracy comes with both good news and bad news for the secretive military – the “bad news” is increased scrutiny (though of course this is good for the overall health of Mexican democracy), but the good news is that there are more checks and balances within Congress itself. The PRI (the conservative, pro-military party) recently moved back into the majority in Congress, and two of the other new parties are also former PRI factions. There are still plenty of military allies in Congress. And Congressmen know, as they know in the U.S. and other multi-party democracies, that they must run for election every few years and should avoid attacks on popular institutions like the military. The proliferation of parties should help transparency and a discussion of the role and future of the military - the armed forces should embrace this new political discourse.²⁶

A very real fear is that the military could fall prey to the pervasive corruption that has shattered the local, state, and, to a lesser extent, federal police. The amount of money involved in the drug cartel power

26 Camp, “Civil Military Relations: Charting a New Direction?”; Diez and Nicholls, “The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition”, 40.

struggles is massive, and underpaid soldiers or sailors might see benefits in allying with a drug cartel. The professional Mexican officer corps is the key to alleviating this situation. New commanders rotate into and out of the military zones every few years, preventing unhealthy long-term alliances with corrupt police or criminals. The officer education system stresses ethics and morals. The officer corps polices itself well, and the military has seen how the Mexican people have lost faith in their law enforcement organizations and do not want that same fate to happen to the military – the pride and honor of the military is at stake. Nevertheless, this concern about corruption is a valid concern that must be closely monitored by leaders at the highest levels in the army and navy. All branches of the government should closely scrutinize this situation.²⁷

Finally, it is possible that inter-service rivalries could undermine the civil-military balance, especially as the navy rises in strength and relevance and the air force seeks more autonomy. If one service starts gaining too much of the budget at the expense of another, or if other bureaucratic conflicts arise, the lack of a civilian Minister of Defense could be a problem. Mexico has never had a unified, civilian-led Ministry of Defense. Both the National Defense (army and air force) and Navy Secretaries are members of the Presidential cabinet, and one hopes they could resolve their differences at that level if needed. Ironically, the lack of a unified military department has perhaps helped prevent the military from unifying against the Congress or President. If there was a single general running the whole military, there could be potential for a unified stand against budget cuts or reforms. But creating a Ministry of Defense should be considered nonetheless.

It would help provide the oversight roles needed in a truly transparent democracy. It is important to note that such a Ministry would be difficult to create from scratch due to a dearth of civilian professionals that understand military requirements (there is no pool of think-tank analysts ready to step into key Defense Department roles, like in the United States). This would have to be a long-term, Mexican-led project – there

27 Henry Garcia-Valderrama, "Mexico's Military Malpractice: Business as Usual or About Face?" *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*. Vol 30, No 14. July 2010.

are advantages and disadvantages to unifying the military under a civilian master.²⁸

THE FUTURE OF MEXICAN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The growth of a true democracy, in which many parties and interests have a stake and a voice, is the biggest challenge facing Mexico today. The military will be a key source of strength in ensuring Mexico matures into a powerful and capable state. Civilians will be able to work out the new relationships between the parties, the branches of government, the people, and other non-state actors *under the umbrella of protection provided by the military*. As experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, it is difficult for state institutions to mature if there is no security. The war against the drug cartels poses a great threat to the Mexican state, but there are no other major internal threats, and there are no external threats to Mexican sovereignty. These are benefits many states do not have – this is a cause for optimism.

For the many reasons described in this paper, it is likely the Mexican civil-military relationship will remain strong. The United States should continue to support Mexico when it asks for help, especially in the areas of equipment, training, and funds. The U.S. should avoid imposing too much reform on the Mexican military, and instead encourage the continuance of the many good habits already established, such as innovative education and training, expanded ethical development, and overall professionalization. The Mexican military has shown unquestionable loyalty to the state, and regardless of the economy and other uncertainties, will likely continue to be a source of strength and stability well into the future.

28 Camp, “Civil Military Relations: Charting a New Direction?”; Diez and Nicholls, “The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition”, 41.

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