

MEXICO AND UN PEACEKEEPING FORCES: THE REASONS FOR RELUCTANCE

Jorge Chabat (CIDE)

Even when Mexico has been contributing financially for many years to the UN peacekeeping efforts, it has not participated sending troops. The reasons for this reluctance are several and are more related to domestic factors than to the international environment. However, during the recent years there has been some discussion inside the Mexican government and in some academic circles about this policy what allow us to expect that this position could be modified in the future. The reasons for reluctance can be classified as follows: a) historical tradition; b) low exposure to the international environment by the Mexican Army (contact hypothesis); c) high prestige and bureaucratic weight of the Army inside the Mexican government; d) Army's refusal to accept a foreign command; e) concern for the domestic impact of possible casualties. As we will see below, these reasons have been strong enough to impede the participation of Mexico in peacekeeping efforts until now, even when there are some factors that could favor this participation.

1. Historical tradition.

Mexican foreign policy has been based since the beginning of the Mexican Revolution (1915) on the principle on Non-Intervention¹, which basically refused any kind of interference on the domestic affairs of other State. Even when this principle can be interpreted in many different ways, it provided a general guide for Mexico's international policy that paved the way for a limited activism in international affairs until the arrival of Vicente Fox to Mexico's Presidency in 2000. Along with the principle of Non-Intervention there are two other principles that have influenced Mexican foreign policy: pacifism and ecumenism. These two principles were complementary to the Non-Intervention principle and had the same origin: Mexico's weakness. These ideological guides fitted perfectly with a closed economy that prevailed in Mexico until the mid-1980s and a closed political system that survived until the end of the XXth Century. Consequently, even when Mexico was a founding member of many international organizations like the UN and the OAS, it maintained a low profile until the arrival of Vicente Fox to the Presidency of Mexico. Until then, Mexico has been a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council only in two times: 1947 and 1980-82. Even when one of the reason for participation in peacekeeping forces is prestige, Mexican foreign policy was able to achieve prestige in other ways, basically by sustaining a symbolic independence from the United States. Also, the fact that Mexico suffered from military invasions during the XIXth Century generated an anti-war feeling that nurtured the pacifist tradition. At the same time, the symbolic independence from the US that Mexico showed after WWII allowed Mexican government to maintain the image of a

¹ This principle was established by President Carranza in 1915. "La Doctrina Carranza", Discurso pronunciado por el C. Venustiano Carranza, en Matamoros el 29 de noviembre de 1915. Memoria de la Secretaría de Gobernación. México, D.F., 1916, pp. 234-237.

country that was able to be friend of everybody, even during the Cold War. The maintenance of these principles in some part of the government, the most nationalistic one, has been the basis for a strong resistance to participate in UN peacekeeping operations, basically because they were seen as contradictory to the three principles mentioned above by intervening in other country and using force against the sovereignty of a friend country. Additionally, the perception by some Mexican sectors of the UN as a tool of the United States has contributed to this reluctance.

2. Low exposure to international environment.

Even when the principles mentioned above have still strong roots in the Mexican political elite, there is evidence that they are not generalized. Actually, the attitude toward the Mexican participation in UN peacekeeping forces is quite different in the Mexican Navy. In a report published in 2005, the Navy sees itself as participating in UN peacekeeping efforts in year 2025². The reason for the disagreement with the position of the Mexican Army may lie in the different exposure to the international environment that both institutions have. As it has been established by some of the academic literature³, the more contact a person has with foreigners, the more understanding can be developed. This hypothesis explains very well the differences between the Army and the Navy in this regard. However, the growing contact of Mexican military with the outside⁴, can have an important impact on Army's attitude regarding participation in UN peacekeeping forces.

The "contact" hypothesis can also explain why the Mexican population has changed its perception of the outside, especially the US, during the recent years, as can be seen in a recent poll developed by CIDE-Comexi⁵. That poll suggests that one important change in the perception of the US has been produced by the growing interaction of Mexican population with the outside.⁶

3. High prestige and Bureaucratic weight of the Army.

Contrary to what happened in many Latin American countries, the Mexican Army possess a high prestige among the Mexican population. This prestige is probably due to the fact that the Army has not participated in any coup d'Etat since the beginning of the XXth century and it has participated very actively in disaster relief operations all around the country. According to a recent poll, 79% of Mexicans

² México, Secretaría de Marina, *Armada de México: Compromiso y Seguridad*, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005.

³ Axelrod, R. *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books, 1984; Robert Putnam *Making Democracy Work*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983; Ferran Martínez i Coma, Ignacio Lago Peñas, "¿Qué piensan los mexicanos de los Estados Unidos?", (mimeo) CIDE, 2008.

⁴ Jesús Aranda, "Persiste tendencia a enviar militares mexicanos a adiestrarse en el exterior", *La Jornada*, October 15, 2004.

⁵ CIDE-Comexi, "México y el mundo 2006", <http://mexicoyelmundo.cide.edu>

⁶ Ferran Martínez i Coma, Ignacio Lago Peñas, "¿Qué piensan los mexicanos de los Estados Unidos?", (mimeo) CIDE, 2008

think that the Army is the most reliable institution.⁷ This fact and the use of the military for fighting drug trafficking during the Calderon Administration has given the Mexican Army an important bargaining power, what makes more difficult for the Mexican government to make decisions in the case of sending troops to UN peacekeeping forces, without the Army's consent.

4. Army's refusal to accept a foreign command.

The Mexican Army has not participated in many wars, in coordination with other armies. The only exception is WWII in which Mexico was part of the Allied coalition and sent some troops to the Pacific in 1944 and 1945. Consequently, there is no tradition of accepting any foreign command in a war. This argument has been expressed in several times by Army officers, in great part due to the possibility that a foreign command could be American.⁸ This refusal connects with one of the basis of Mexican nationalism: anti-US feelings and is clearly a strong ideological obstacle for Mexico's participation in UN peacekeeping forces.

5. Concern for domestic impact of possible casualties.

As it is easy to understand, the possibility of having casualties abroad is one factor that complicates military presence in any country in the world. This concern has been an important element that influenced the traditional Mexican reluctance to sending troops to other countries. It has some historical basis since Mexico's experience in foreign wars has been disastrous, with the exception of WWI when Mexico was on the winner side. But even in that war, Mexican government refused to send troops abroad until the very end of the conflict, and the troops sent were very reduced. This concern connects well with the Mexican pacifist tradition and is also related with the possibility that people can be recruited for the Army, something that happened in the Mexican Revolution. Also, given that sending troops to peacekeeping forces is still a polemic issue, it is quite evident that the existence of casualties in these missions would be used by the nationalistic sectors to criticise the Mexican government.

Conclusions.

As we have seen, the main obstacles for sending Mexican troops to UN peacekeeping forces are related to ideological factors that influence Mexico's political will. In other words, Mexico's reluctance to send troops to UN peacekeeping forces is not a matter of capabilities, which is the case of other

⁷ The poll was made by Consulta Mitofsky, by petition of "Mexico Unido contra la Delincuencia", Notimex, February 26, 2008.

⁸ The Fox's Minister of Defense, Ricardo Clemente Vega said in 2004 that Mexico would not accept sending troops to UN peacekeeping forces "under the command of the US", Jesús Aranda, "Persiste tendencia a enviar militares mexicanos a adiestrarse en el exterior", *La Jornada*, October 15, 2004.

countries, like Paraguay.⁹ In the case of Mexico, reluctance is related to the lack of domestic consensus. This lack of consensus exists inside the Mexican government but it is also present in some way in the Mexican population. According to the CIDE-Comexi poll, in the case of Mexico's participation in UN peacekeeping forces, 49% of the population favored that participation, and 43% was against that.¹⁰ Surprisingly, the poll also shows that leaders are even more reluctant than the population to Mexico's participation in peacekeeping operations: while 49% of the leaders were in favor, other 49% was against it.

Despite the ideological reasons for this reluctance, it is reasonable to expect some changes in the future. Even when Mexican foreign policy is still tied to the traditional principles, there has been a change in this regard since year 2000. Fox's foreign policy altered the traditional parameters of Mexico's engagement in foreign affairs, even when it did not dare to openly propose sending troops to UN peacekeeping forces. It was so despite the open support for it by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The two Fox's Foreign Ministers, Jorge Castañeda and Luis Ernesto Derbez, openly supported sending troops to UN peacekeeping missions, but President Fox opposed, probably because he did not want to have a conflict with the Army.¹¹ However, the growing contact of Mexican Army with the outside, and the redefinition of Mexican foreign policy that is taking place, will probably have an effect on this issue in the coming years. It is difficult to establish a date for that change. It will depend on changes in other issues. However, if Mexico wants to have a more active role in international affairs, as everything suggests, sending troops to peacekeeping missions will be an important ingredient of it.

⁹ John T. Fishel and Andrés Saenz, *Capacity Building for Peacekeeping. The case of Haiti*, Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005, p. 202.

¹⁰ CIDE-Comexi, "México y el mundo 2006", <http://mexicoymundo.cide.edu>

¹¹ José Luis Ruiz, "Descarta Fox enviar tropas en misiones de paz", *El Universal*, 13 de mayo de 2004.