Resistance from Within: Why Mexico’s Attempt to Advance an Active Foreign Policy Failed

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Abstract

After becoming the first opposition candidate to win since 1910, President Vicente Fox kindled expectations at both national and international levels. He claimed he would enhance significantly the scope of the Mexico’s foreign policy and engage the country in international politics in a way more befitting of its newly acquired democratic status. Nevertheless, little consideration was given to the fact that for many decades foreign policy in Mexico had been deployed to create an area screened-off from domestic politics where conflicting factions were brought together and a policy consensus worked out. That consensus was sufficiently ample for the authoritarian elite, given its foreign policy goals and principles. It would, however, fail to suffice for any political leader willing to step outside the box of tradition. Fox did just that. In consequence, widespread reactions of disapproval from key political actors and the media led the president to settle for a more modest international agenda in 2002. This article explores the key processes that triggered so much internal resistance to Fox’s foreign policy designs. I argue that these processes underpin what continues to be the essentially autarchic nature and scope of the Mexican foreign policy tradition. Such an autarchic approach is glorified in Mexican political rhetoric, yet has led to many lost opportunities for Mexico. Most importantly, I stress that the Mexican foreign policy tradition discourages and forecloses the kind of engagement in the international arena that seeks to share in rather than to free-ride the collective efforts of the international community to procure security and peace. So despite its new democratic status, Mexico remains more of a spectator than an actor on the international stage.

Mexico confirmed its status as a democratic nation in 2000 after carrying out a peaceful, clean, and fair electoral process won by an opposition presidential candidate. This momentous event was widely celebrated in Mexico and many other countries. Letters from dignitaries around the world flooded the presidential residence not only congratulating Vicente Fox for his electoral triumph, but also wishing the country a bright new start in its firmly chosen democratic path. Fox became something of a flavor of the month statesman in the international community and even the recently elected United States President George W. Bush showed an unusual affability toward his Mexican counterpart. All this suggested that democracy had significantly enhanced the country’s horizons to expand and deepen its relations with the international community. Indeed, something close to a vigorously active role on the international scene seemed warranted, given the country’s enormous need for foreign investment and opportunities for trade. A segment of Mexican society also hoped to see Mexican authorities speaking a new language in the international arena, quite different from the usual mantra-like repetition of the “nonintervention in internal affairs of other states” and the “people’s right to self-determination”—which was still being embarrassingly invoked in 1999 to condemn the NATO bombing of Serbia.

At the beginning of the millennium Mexico renewed its traditional commitment to multilateralism, sought an active role in international affairs (which led it to occupy a seat on the United Nations Security Council), and embraced the twin fun-
damental concerns of the international community: democracy and human rights. This nearly paradigmatic shift in Mexican foreign policy was stopped dead in mid-flow at the end of 2002. A significantly less ambitious foreign policy has been adopted since that year. Nevertheless, considerable progress was made from 2000 to 2003 attesting that democracy did make a difference to the country’s foreign affairs. According to Pamela Starr, although Mexico’s bilateral relations with the United States did not reach the scope and intensity that Fox and his Foreign Affairs Minister Jorge Castañeda hoped for, there “remains a substructure of bilateral institutions that encourage pragmatic cooperation in an increasing number of issues.” This substructure, claims Starr, has been able to mitigate the “growing list of bilateral disputes that reflect the complexity of the relationship and the multiplication of foreign policy voices in democratic Mexico” (Starr, 2004, p. 7). Those voices have indeed multiplied. President Fox’s refusal to keep a tight reign on foreign policy like his predecessors has encouraged both cabinet secretaries and state governors to actively participate in the international scene (R. Xilotl, ambassador and regional delegate of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores [Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs] in Puebla, Mexico, personal communication, October 22, 2004). Also, the foreign policy voices of foreigners seeking to engage Mexican institutions like the federal legislature and judiciary have multiplied, since these institutions have become significantly more permeable to foreign contact than in the past. The point is attested to by the exponential growth experienced by Mexican lobby firms and by the establishment of an increasing number of international lobby firms in Mexico (J. Portales, lobbyist working for PSG Consultores, S.C., Mexico, personal communication, December 4, 2004). Beyond the United States–Mexico bilateral relation, the annual chronologies of the foreign affairs ministry reflect Fox’s intention to diversify Mexico’s relations with the world, especially with countries in Europe and South East Asia (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2004).

In spite of the above trends, I argue here that Mexico is inadequately prepared and still slightly reluctant to embrace the openness that democracy has brought about. I will identify three important areas of resistance to openness that can go some way toward understanding why Fox ran out of steam in his attempt to perform an active role in the international arena. The argument is comprised of three basic subarguments:

1. Mexico fared pretty badly in its attempt as an independent nation to engage in the first globalization drive starting from the 1830s and ending in 1914 with the First World War.

2. From the 1920s onward, Mexico initiated a long and profound journey into autarchy from which it has only recently emerged. Before its new-found democratic calling, Mexico assumed foreign policy values and principles that were most appropriate for a country that performed the role of a self-righteous observer of the world and not the role of a nation willing to share in the burdens of cooperation for international peace and security, and the risks and moral qualms that entails.

3. Having been in exile for so long, it is somewhat difficult for Mexicans—the political elite and society—to conceive of themselves as actively shaping the
world: to take sides along a view of how the world ought to be shaped and
to face the consequences of doing so. It may be a strategy essential to Mexico's
national security not to hold any view at all. However, this may well suggest
that Mexicans believe there exists some overarching and morally congruent
view of the world on the basis of which every conflict can be neatly adjudicated.
Of all the spheres that are the object of moral reflection, the sphere of
international relations is the one that is least likely to provide firm grounds
for making moral sense of its developments. But if Mexicans insist upon
doing just that, it is likely to be due to their long autarchic exile.

Mexico has not been in a condition of political, economic, and cultural openness
like the present one since the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. As Díaz was removed
from office, so Mexico removed itself from the world. The Revolution heralded the
beginning of a gradual process of isolation. The main objective of this was to heal
the country from the effects of exposure to global economic cycles, pressure from
powerful global business interests, and international intrigue, the most offensive
instance of which was the orchestration of the coup d'état against the first democratically elected Mexican president, Francisco I. Madero, from the premises of the American embassy (Katz, 1981). The long autarchic withdrawal's golden age spanned from 1954 to 1982, when nearly nothing foreign was allowed in, with the exception of public debt and tourists. During this time, a perspective was forged that allowed the Mexican nation ample margin to impose its own stringent conditions upon how its relation with the world was conceived. That relation was based upon Mexico's commitment to pacifism and to respecting the peoples' right to self-determination, among other fundamental principles.

Unlike Cuba, whose autarchy was very much imposed from the outside, the
Mexican style of autarchy was freely self-assumed. Little more than oil and cheap
labor were exported and mainly intermediate and capital goods were imported
while consumer goods were produced internally. The Mexican people treasured
the ensuing freedom from external interference within their borders. They also
felt rather proud of the way their government championed the causes of the
"underdogs" on the international stage. This bestowed enormous symbolic gratifi-
cation to the Mexican public. It also gave Mexico's grossly authoritarian leaders a
generally undeserved international prestige that, up to the late 1970s, effectively
deflected external criticism of human rights abuses and systematic electoral fraud.
The peoples whose right to self-determination the Mexican government ardently
defended more often than not repaid Mexico in kind. Consequently, scant inter-
national criticism was directed at Mexico's behavior toward its own citizens, even
after 2,000 students demonstrating at Tlatelolco, Mexico City, were killed by the
Mexican army just a few weeks before the 1968 Olympics were held in the city.
The contrast with international outrage at the similar Tiananmen Square incident
in Beijing, 1989, is marked.

In spite of its oddities and perverse effects, there is something fascinating about
the foreign policy of the autarchic era. On one hand, little of foreign origin inter-
fered with domestic politics and economy, which conveyed, strongly and sharply,
a sense of genuine self-determination. On the other, the Mexican public felt its
authoritarian leaders were redeeming their domestic lacks by endorsing and
defending noble causes in the international arena. At least in the sphere of foreign policy, there seemed to be some correspondence between the actions and approaches of the government and the wishes of the society. Mexicans never faced any moral qualm on the international front: everything Mexico stood for seemed heroic, from its stern defense of the Spanish Republic and the Cuban Revolution to its active support to the Chilean and Nicaraguan socialist experiments.

It is precisely this “heroic” foreign policy that the people in democratic Mexico seem to miss the most. However, one reason underlying this perceived nature of the foreign policy of the autarchic era can be related to the way in which the government apparently picked and chose items for the country’s international agenda. If to date, many Mexicans believe that its democratic leaders should continue picking and choosing morally palatable causes to defend in the international arena (and attempting to appear heroic in the process), it is likely that the transition to democracy will do little to consistently improve the country’s relations with the international community. Perhaps what the nation needs is a transition out of its autarchic public culture and into a new public culture of openness. Without the latter transition, the democratic process will only express the majority’s preference for autarchic foreign policies, masquerading as an updated and largely misplaced version of some international Greek-drama-cum-soap-opera. So far, this preference has been precisely the case. At least three clear instances of autarchic inertia can be identified, which I describe throughout the following sections.

**Limited Multilateralism**

One of the strands of Fox’s foreign policy during the first two years of his administration was to renew the country’s traditional adherence to multilateralism. That policy also involved an allegiance to the promotion of democracy and a defense of human rights. The new focus of Mexico’s foreign policy nevertheless coincided with a key shift in the understanding and practice of multilateralism by the international community. As in the past, multilateralism is being deployed to limit American propensities toward unilateral intervention. What differs from the past is that the international community can very well assume the tasks of peacekeeping and peace enforcement that the United States would otherwise have taken up unilaterally. If the United States is effectively prevented, through multilateral requirements and procedures, from carrying out on its own a given operation, that does not necessarily mean that the operation will be aborted. It could well mean that it is carried out collectively by the international community itself.

Multilateralism does not preclude military intervention. It merely seeks to preclude the United States from intervening on its own and may well allow collective intervention, the scope of which, according to Michael Doyle, was significantly enhanced in the 1990s. As an instance of this, Doyle points out that “[i]n 1999 there were seventeen peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations while at any year in the past the UN maintained no more than two or three truce supervisions or observations at the same time” (Doyle, 2002, p. 69). Doyle estimates that the cost of the 1999 operations equaled half the costs of all United Nations (UN) operations from 1947 to that year. This is clearly not the kind of multilateralism that, following Starr, Mexican leaders traditionally supported as it “promised to limit the
freedom of action of the United States” (Starr, 2004, p. 2). Now that it includes supporting and even sharing in the burdens of defending human rights around the world through collective intervention, adherence to multilateralism hardly coheres with the core principles of Mexico’s previous foreign policy: pacifism and respect for the peoples’ right to self-determination. It is therefore unsurprising that Fox ended up toning down the emphasis on multilateralism in his post-2002 foreign policy (Starr, 2004, p. 7).

What is surprising is that Mexican public opinion seems to be in favor of multilateralism as the findings of the 2004 Global Views survey suggest. Of those interviewed, 79% agreed with the proposition that “the UN Security Council should have the right to authorize the use of military force to prevent human rights violations and genocide” (CIDE-COMEXI, 2004, p. 24). Sixty-three percent agreed that “it should have the right to authorize the use of military force to restore by force a democratic government that has been overthrown” (CIDE-COMEXI, 2004, p. 23). Moreover, “when asked if Mexico should participate in a UN peacekeeping force or leave this type of activity to other countries,” 48% of the interviewees replied that Mexico should participate. With the more controversial proposition “that when dealing with international problems Mexico should be willing to make decisions within the United Nations, even if this means that Mexico will sometimes have to go along a decision that it would not have preferred,” only 44% agreed (CIDE-COMEXI, 2004, p. 22). The findings of this survey do suggest that a public culture of openness is not entirely unforgiving. A clearly majoritarian preference for multilateralism that could be used to reshape Mexican foreign policy is not absolutely out of the question. However, while the possibility that an important area of autarchic inertia might be losing its grip exists, these results have emerged at too late a stage to be able to reinvigorate Fox’s commitment to multilateralism, even though two years on it is clear that public sympathy for something like his original policy appears to be growing. So, while the possibility might exist for the future, for the present, there seems to be much evidence that the autarchic inertia in Mexican foreign policy has held (and continues to hold) the upper hand.

**Defensive Economic Nationalism**

Mexicans have consistently expressed their reservations toward the privatization of the oil and electricity industries currently under the control of the state. Fox’s bill proposing the privatization of those industries did not even make it to the lower chamber floor. Nevertheless, it still gave rise to considerable debate between leading figures of the main political parties in the media, which did not drum up much support for getting the bill to the floor. The poor performance of the candidates of the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional, the President’s party) in the intermediate elections of 2003 merely confirmed that the electorate had no interest in the privatization of those industries. This reflects the fears Mexicans still harbor regarding the prospect of private ownership and especially foreign ownership of the last portion of the economy under state control.

Such fears appear to be fairly entrenched. They fail to dissipate with information on either the corruption that pervades the management of the oil and electricity industries or with information related to the insufficiency of the growth of
those industries in relation to future needs. If stopping the privatization of those industries will severely limit economic growth in the future, as some specialists claim, then the insistence of Mexico’s society on imposing the terms in which it expects to relate to the world will only make the country more vulnerable. If the goal at issue is national sovereignty, it is difficult to see how a weak economy can contribute to achieve it. It is one thing to impose conditions on the world when a country has very little interest in attracting foreign investment. It is quite another to attempt to impose such conditions when, at the same time, the country seeks to increase foreign investment and greatly needs to succeed in doing so. If Mexico’s economic goals have changed, it seems prudent that its perspective concerning how to relate to the world should be expected to follow suit. Quite frankly, it makes no sense at all to let an autarchic past preempt the choices available regarding these vital privatization issues, especially at a time when democracy has opened the opportunity for public discussion and decision on precisely this kind of question. Nevertheless, it again seems to be the case that the present climate in Mexico still weighs too heavily on the side of autarchic inertia regarding the privatization of the oil and electricity industries.

**Administrative Failure**

Democracy requires a political openness that has to function against a backdrop of globalization. The process of globalization has enabled the worldwide activity of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to advance issues that concern local associations and that can multiply the voices and claims that democratic institutions have to listen and respond to. This entails both opportunities and risks, depending on the administrative capacity of a state. It entails opportunities for a democratic government, since the responsiveness of a government to the multiplicity of claims posed by international NGOs may well permit it to multiply contacts and mobilize support beyond its own borders in its favor. Nevertheless, it also entails risks if that government is unable to cope with the demands that the conjoined action of international and local NGOs press upon it. If such conjoined action over a variety of issues leads to an overload of the political process, then the government will have to face the discontent of members of both the local and the international civil society.

Democratic Mexico has opened the door to the activity of international NGOs in a way that seems to be a clear departure from its previous tactics toward them which, in the early 1990s, ranged from open hostility through subtle coercion to resistance and disregard (Hogenboom, 1996). Notwithstanding this attempt to build a new kind of government–NGO dynamic, there is much evidence to show that the Mexican government has been unable to duly respond to their demands. Several relevant instances of administrative failure are described by Norman and Contreras Hernandez regarding the area of animal protection. In response to the pressure of local and international NGOs, the government issued a number of laws and regulations, some of which resemble in their scope and comprehensiveness those applied in Western countries. Nevertheless, the implementation of those laws and regulations has been seriously compromised and obstructed by the insufficient
allocation of the human and financial resources to enforce their observance (Norman & Contreras Hernandez, 2005).

The authoritarian regime of the past legally limited the formation of independent associations in order to ultimately limit the number and nature of demands it had to respond to. Its legacy was therefore to pass on to its successor feeble institutions that possess a limited capacity to respond to the demands of the stronger NGOs associated with the new democratic openness that is supposed to promote an environment where their formation is unlimited and uncontrolled. This is not so much an area of autarchic resistance as an atrophy inherited from the autarchic era. But if Mexico wishes to face up to the challenges of its present condition of openness, it really needs to focus on increasing the administrative capacity of its institutions. There are states for autarchy and states for openness. The former can afford to be forever inefficient. The latter always need to continuously increase their administrative capacity to successfully face the challenges of increasingly complex and specialized demands. In this area, as in the area of multilateral foreign policy, while there seems to be initial signs that changes in accordance with the newly fledged democratic drive are occurring, the government is struggling to keep up. The administrative failure it is experiencing is therefore another area where autarchic inertia is clearly evident.

Conclusions

Foreign policy played a crucial role in legitimating Mexico’s authoritarian regime. On the international scene, authoritarian leaders played out commitments and allegiances they were not willing to sustain in the domestic sphere. Authoritarian leaders could simultaneously advocate the cause of guerilla leaders or socialist politicians of other countries and show no tolerance whatsoever toward any form of leftist dissent in the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, by advocating in the international arena causes that were forbidden in the national one the authoritarian regime conferred to itself a halo of pluralism, which informally allowed, and to some extent, vindicated, whoever held leftist convictions. This metaphysic pluralism did not, of course, entail the left’s practical freedom to organize trade unions or any other legal form of association independent from the state that could enable them to organize peasants or the urban poor. In spite of these practical limitations, the authoritarian regime was able to ensure a loyal leftist opposition, while the latter could count on not having to face the full and open hostility of the state, like some of its counterparts in other Latin American states.

This was a peculiar modus vivendi arrangement that was based on using foreign policy to supplement the limited pluralism that prevailed at the national level. In this modus vivendi the anti-American and leftist protestations of the government on the international scene signaled to the left that it would not be openly repressed as long as it abstained from openly challenging the status quo. As a consequence, two crucial goals were achieved. On the one hand, the loyal left survived, enjoying some opportunities of expression at cultural outlets and at the university circuit. On the other, the government successfully gained international allies from the left side of the political spectrum.
Any attempt to reconstruct foreign policy from democratic premises must start from calling into question the functions that the authoritarian regime assigned to it. There is currently no need to play out in the international fora commitments and allegiances that are not meant to be sustained at the domestic sphere. Rather what seems necessary is that foreign policy reflect the specific commitments and allegiances to the society at large of the government of the day. Foreign policy must show its true partisan colors. It will take a long time to define something that could be called “the foreign policy of the Mexican state.” For that, a consensus needs to be reached and some margin for trial and error is necessary for it to work out. What is no longer acceptable is to assume that foreign policy must be that particular area where the left gets its kicks from. Those days are over, as the left faces no constraints to further its cause domestically.

I have argued here that the conflicts surrounding the foreign policy of the current administration reflect a longing on the part of Mexican society for heroic performance of its leaders at the international stage. From the examination of the authoritarian functions of foreign policy I have offered, a longing for heroic performance ultimately means a longing for manipulation. There has to be an alternative to that.

Instead of limited multilateralism there is the possibility to adhere to the institutional system of global governance that the international community has set up. There is also the possibility of embracing the ideal of worldwide protection of human rights and that of promoting and facilitating democracy throughout the world. Clearly, these are essentially contestable ideals. But at their lowest, their pursuit means not letting thugs-in-power violate the human rights of their citizens and supporting pro-democratic coalitions in the establishment of free and fair electoral procedures that fully safeguard their political rights.

This is the way in which the UN proposes to ensure global security and, as I have stressed, it has sought to do so through collective intervention. Actively supporting such endeavors can pose serious moral qualms. But standing by the side and just observing, because of some commitment to pacifism and nonintervention, how thugs help themselves to genocide, also poses moral qualms. In the face of this dilemma Mexico must choose what role it wishes to play. If it chooses an active role in favor of human rights and democracy it will be for the first time shaping the world in accordance to an essentially contestable set of values. It will make friends in the international arena but also enemies. It will have satisfactions and moral qualms. In any case, what needs to be clarified is that uncontestable foreign policy principles and moral distress-free foreign policy choices are a chimera. Only a perverse longing for manipulation can lead one to believe that such principles and values exist.

Instead of defensive economic nationalism, there is the option of considering the mechanisms available for effectively insulating political institutions from the undue pressure of powerful business interests. More capable, reliable, and accountable political institutions may be the way forward to dissipate the fears of powerful foreign business interests making their desires felt. However, to date the bulk of Mexican society remains distrustful of a free and integrated market economy, and its commitment to it is only half-hearted. In this area, autarchic inertia will only start losing its grip if the performance of the Mexican economy improves sub-
stantially. Perhaps the Mexican people need more assurance that significant steps will be taken to make Mexican political institutions more capable, reliable, and accountable, to seriously contemplate the possibility of privatizing the oil and electricity industries, and to fully embrace a free market economy.

I have argued in this article that Mexico emerged from its long exile into autarchy: with a foreign policy tradition that prevents it from engaging coherently in the international sphere; with fears that stop it from fully participating in a global economy; and with crippled institutions that cannot cope with the challenges of the age of transnational politics. With this argument I have tried to counter two received views. First, that Mexico’s foreign policy tradition has served the national interest well and earned the country considerable respect around the world. And second, that state ownership of strategic industries is essential to ensuring national sovereignty. I hope to have shown, first, that Mexico’s foreign policy tradition has been merely a subterfuge for not sharing in the burdens of global security with the international community, and second, that its main goal was to supplement the limited pluralism that prevailed at the national level under the authoritarian regime. To counter the received view on state ownership of strategic industries, I pointed out that, if the future consequence of not privatizing those industries is a weaker economy, then state ownership of strategic industries is more likely to undermine than to strengthen national sovereignty. More importantly, I have suggested that the sense of genuine self-determination operated by the withdrawal in autarchy came at a very high price: little control over authoritarian leaders and limited pluralism. Conversely, it can be argued that a more plausible sense of self-determination is forthcoming without state ownership of strategic industries if political institutions are properly insulated from both national and foreign powerful business interests.

The main purpose of this article has been to show how economic nationalism combined with authoritarianism seriously limited the possibilities of the Fox administration to advance an active foreign policy. Therefore, the main implication of this article is that Mexico’s society may not be fully choosing its foreign policy, but merely affirming the foreign policy principles and values it was socialized into by the authoritarian regime. If there were reasons for that society to pull its electoral weight in favor of an opposition presidential candidate, there might be reasons too for it to critically revise foreign policy tradition and economic nationalism. I hope some of the ideas I have submitted here serve that purpose.

Note

1 I would like to thank Emma Norman for her crucial input in the definition of the structure of this article and for the innumerable times she patiently read the manuscript.

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