

# DEMYSTIFYING A BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP: RISE AND FALL OF THE MEXICAN-CUBAN POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

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For several years, Mexican-Cuban relations were regarded as the “exception that confirmed the rule” in the interamerican stage. Immediately after the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and during the next three decades, Mexico’s position regarding Cuba would often stand alone in the Western Hemisphere. The bilateral relationship of the two Latin American countries was seen by most observers as one of authentic cordiality and friendship.

Many factors contributed to enhancing the idea of friendly ties between these two States. At the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, Mexico constantly minimized the notion that the Castro regime represented a threat to stability and security in the region, thus indirectly acknowledging the right of the new Cuban regime to exist. The position of Mexican delegations that participated in OAS meetings that discussed this issue in the early 1960s clearly exemplifies this argument.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Mexico became at one point the only Latin American country that maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba. Moreover, the fact that this stance was unique in the region and that it clearly opposed U.S. positions greatly contributed to strengthening the notion that Mexican-Cuban relations were more than cordial.

The aim of this essay is to explore the factors that account for this unique bilateral relationship. The main argument of this paper is that the exceptionality that characterized the bilateral relationship during the Cold War is better explained by analyzing what a Mexican scholar refers to as the “determinants of Mexican foreign policy.” During the Cold War these determinants played a significant role in the making of a Mexican-Cuban understanding. However, changes in the determinants of Mexican foreign policy associated with the end of the Cold War, a new Mexican economic model, and the democratic transition in the country, affected the very foundation of this understanding, making it imperative to find some other way in which this bilateral relationship could persist in an untroubled way.

## THE DETERMINANTS OF MEXICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MEXICAN-CUBAN POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

According to Carlos Rico, Mexican foreign policy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was determined by three factors: the economic development model pursued by the Mexican government at a given point in time, political factors within Mexican society, and conditions in the international arena.<sup>3</sup> Every now

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1. Editor’s Note: This essay was awarded First Prize in the ASCE Student Prize Competition for 2005 for undergraduate students.

2. Mexico’s strategy during the first years of the Castro regime (a time in which it was still debated whether the new regime was socialist) was to compare the Cuban Revolution of 1959 with the Mexican Revolution of 1910. That was exactly what the Mexican delegate stated at the 7<sup>th</sup> OAS Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs that was held in 1960. See “Discurso del Excelentísimo señor Manuel Tello, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de México,” in 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, *Statutes and Documents*, Washington DC, Panamerican Union, 1961, pp. 78-80.

and then, significant changes in any of these factors (or all) represent points of inflection in which an important shift in Mexican foreign policy might occur.

Post-World War II Mexican diplomacy can be broadly divided into three stages. The shift from one stage to another resulted in changes in one, two, or all of the determinants of Mexican foreign policy. The first stage began at the end of World War II and lasted approximately 30 years. This stage, which we will call the period of “international isolation,” coincided with the victory and radicalization of the Cuban Revolution. It was during these years that a bilateral political understanding between Mexico and Cuba took form.

The second stage began in the early 1970s and ended in the mid-1980s. This was the period known as the “rise of an active foreign policy.”<sup>4</sup> In spite of some significant changes in the main strategies of Mexican foreign policy during this period, the Mexican-Cuban understanding prevailed. Moreover, it was during these years, especially in the Echeverría and López Portillo administrations, that the bilateral relationship could actually be considered as truly cordial.

The third stage began in the mid-1980s and is closely related to the structural economic reform that began to take place in Mexico as a means to relieve the Mexican economy from the erratic policies that characterized previous administrations. It is during this stage that problems began to rise in terms of the Mexican-Cuban understanding. Some contradictions of the new Mexican diplomacy were successfully overlooked during the Salinas administration, but during Zedillo’s term, those contradictions began to erode little by little the traditional stability of the bilateral relationship. In the Fox administration, the new characteristics of Mexican foreign policy finally created an unbearable condition that resulted in a critical situation in May 2004 when Mexico and

Cuba nearly brought to an end their diplomatic relationship.

To sum up, shifts in the determinants of Mexican foreign policy throughout these years created the following scenario: once the Cuban Revolution radicalized and the Mexican government had to react, the economic, political and international conditions that Mexico faced during its isolationist phase (1946-1970) permitted the establishment of a bilateral political understanding between the two countries. The shifts in the foreign policy determinants in the 1970s, which in fact changed Mexican diplomacy significantly and gave rise to the second phase (1970 to mid-1980s), allowed the continuation and enhancement of the bilateral political understanding. However, by the mid-1980s, changes in the foreign policy determinants made it increasingly impossible for the Mexican-Cuban understanding to endure. In this new phase (mid-1980s to today), as the Mexican economy opened up, democracy slowly consolidated, and the world stage increasingly became a unipolar system in terms of political power—yet multipolar in terms of economic development—it became evident that the Mexican-Cuban political understanding could no longer exist in the same way it had existed during the Cold War. (See table 1.)

Which were exactly the determinants that account for the creation, maintenance, and eventual collapse of the bilateral understanding in each of the three phases of Mexican foreign policy?

## **THE ISOLATIONIST STAGE: THE CREATION OF THE BILATERAL UNDERSTANDING**

### **The International Determinant**

Of the three determinants of Mexican foreign policy, it was the international determinant that triggered the process that ended in the creation of a bilateral understanding. The victory of a nationalist revolution in the Caribbean that gradually leaned to socialism inevitably meant that the Cold War would be “fought” in the Western Hemisphere. Until that mo-

3. Carlos Rico, “Hacia la Globalización,” en Blanca Torres (coord.), *México y el mundo: historia de sus relaciones exteriores*, Vol. 8, México, Senado de la República, 2000, pp.14-15.

4. Mario Ojeda, *México: el surgimiento de una política exterior activa*, México, SEP, 1986, pp. 61-73.

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**Table 1. Stages of Mexican Diplomacy**

	<b>Stage 1 (International Isolation) 1946-1970</b>	<b>Stage 2 (Active Foreign Policy) 1970-1988</b>	<b>Stage 3 (Economic Openness and Pragmatic Diplomacy) 1988-2005</b>
<b>Economic Determinant</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Import substitution industrialization, “Desarrollo estabilizador”</li> <li>• Search for economic growth, promotion of national industry.</li> <li>• International competitiveness of Mexican industry and trade is not a priority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collapse of the import substitution model of development.</li> <li>• Echeverría: increase in public expenditure.</li> <li>• López Portillo: economy that relies greatly on oil exports.</li> <li>• De la Madrid: Debt crisis, beginning of economic opening.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of a free market economy: Mexico as a trading power, deregulation of the economy, privatization.</li> </ul>
<b>Mexican Political Situation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miguel Alemán: relative consensus over the national economic development strategy.</li> <li>• López Mateos: peasant and labor union unrest.</li> <li>• Díaz Ordaz: Clear dissatisfaction of important urban sectors. The regime begins to de-legitimatize.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Danger of regime de-legitimization that makes necessary for the government to regain the trust from important sectors of Mexican society.</li> <li>• Echeverría: Leftist tendencies.</li> <li>• De la Madrid: Rightist tendencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Mexican transition to democracy begins in the mid-1980s and speeds up in the 1990s.</li> </ul>
<b>Conditions in the International Arena</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete alignment to U.S. positions on vital issues.</li> <li>• East-West rivalry during the Cold War hampers a broader and more autonomous international action of small and mid-sized States.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of the “special relationship” with the U.S.</li> <li>• Détente (early 1970s)</li> <li>• Recovery of European and Japanese economies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of the Cold War.</li> <li>• Economic multipolarity.</li> <li>• United States: only power.</li> </ul>
<b>Characteristics of Mexican Foreign Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distrust of regional organizations such as OAS.</li> <li>• Relative international isolation.</li> <li>• Mexican international role focused basically on Interamerican issues (exception: disarmament)</li> <li>• Emphasis on international law and multilateralism.</li> <li>• Predictable diplomacy.</li> <li>• Relative autonomy from the United States.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rise of an “active foreign policy”</li> <li>• New strategies: diversification, search for allies, Third World leadership, ideological pluralism.</li> <li>• Relative autonomy from the U.S.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Late adoption of post Cold War international agenda (human rights, democracy)</li> <li>• Fox: legitimacy of regime based on its democratic credentials.</li> <li>• Inconsistency between the discourse of the new foreign policy and traditional principles: self-determination and non-intervention.</li> </ul>

ment, Mexican diplomacy managed to abstain from participating in Cold War issues. After all, the East-West dispute was something the superpowers had to take care of, and Mexico was not strong enough to display an autonomous position based on its power in the international arena. The country was more interested in achieving economic growth through a protectionist model of development. However, as the

Cold War moved less than 100 miles from both Mexican and American shores, Mexican authorities could no longer rely on their traditional policy of abstaining to discuss Cold War issues. Mexico was a significant actor in the interamerican stage, and the country neighbored both the United States and its newly-declared enemy: Cuba. Mexican authorities had to find a way to carry on the bilateral relation-

ship with Cuba without compromising vital U.S. interests, while matching Mexican economic goals and, most importantly, not affecting internal political stability.

### **Economic Determinants**

During the isolationist stage, the Mexican economy was very protectionist. The model of economic development that the regime implemented since the end of World War II aimed at import-substitution industrialization. Trade of goods that did not fulfill the requirements of this model was not a priority, nor was the competitiveness of Mexican exports. All economic effort focused on the creation of a national industry capable of satisfying domestic demand. Due to the proximity to the United States and its enormous market, everything that was needed in order to comply with the industrialization effort was found north of the Mexican border. Therefore, during this stage, Mexico did not have to search for other trading partners. And, had that been the case, the economies of Europe and Japan were neither strong nor close enough to provide the necessary input that the Mexican industrializing effort demanded.

### **Internal Political Conditions**

Although most of the time international issues are not perceived as important by Mexican public opinion, the Cuban case represented an exception to this rule. Political actors within Mexico reacted in many ways to the victory of the Cuban Revolution. Various sectors of the government and society openly expressed their views and expectations regarding the events in the nearby Caribbean island. And the views that were expressed often collided. On one hand, rightist groups representing the Catholic Church, some groups of the urban middle class, and the private sector, perceived the new Cuban regime as a communist threat to Mexican interests.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, some sectors of the official party (PRI), among them ex-president Lázaro Cárdenas himself, as well as various intellectuals and university students, viewed the political process in Cuba as some-

thing positive that should receive official Mexican support.<sup>6</sup> Rallies supporting each side were held at different points during the early 1960s, demonstrating the capability of each side to gather popular support. The government had to react to this situation if it wanted to avoid the erosion of political stability that such a turbulent social display would bring about.

### **The Establishment of the Political Understanding**

The way in which Mexican authorities solved this dilemma consisted in establishing a bilateral relationship with Cuba based on a tacit political understanding that showed the following characteristics: the prevalence of State-to-State relations based on mutual non-intervention; a certain autonomy from the positions of the United States; a deliberate effort by the Mexican government to balance the interests of the main social groups that mobilized in the 1960s in order to express their views and try to influence foreign policy making; and, most importantly, the capability of both sides to overcome potential conflicts that would inevitably emerge during the three decades that the understanding lasted.

The bilateral political understanding was not based on the Mexican defense of a socialist regime in the Caribbean *per se*. It was based on the recognition that the people of any country had the right to choose by themselves the type of regime that best suited their interests. The foundations of this position are found in Mexican diplomacy's traditional attachment to two principles of international law: self-determination and non-intervention. Throughout Mexican history, the country had been the target of various foreign invasions and external interventions. Aware of its vulnerable position in the world stage, Mexico found in the defense of these principles a useful tool to protect itself from excessive outside influence. Thus, as the Mexican authoritarian regime defended Cuba's right to adopt a different regime, it was defending its own right to exist without foreign intervention.

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5. Olga Pellicer, "La Revolución cubana en México," *Foro Internacional*, 8 (1968), pp. 365-370.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 371-375.

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The Castro regime favored inter-State relations with Mexico at all times. This, seen in the Latin American context of the 1960s and 1970s, was an exceptional approach. As a country with a revolutionary foreign policy, Cuba would support any revolutionary movement abroad that could undertake power and establish a regime that was compatible with that of the socialist island. This in fact happened in the case of various Latin American countries throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, there is no proof of any support of the Castro regime towards active leftist groups in Mexico during those years. This is quite striking, especially if one takes into account the fact that Mexico underwent one of its most turbulent social moments in 1968, a year of tremendous sociopolitical turmoil in which groups ideologically associated with the Cuban regime were very active and could have easily gotten support from Cuba if the Castro regime chose to do so. Apparently they did not.

The explanation of the Cuban strategy of favoring inter-State relations with Mexico and not supporting revolutionary movements within the country lies in what Jorge Domínguez has called the “rule of precedence.”<sup>7</sup> According to this view, the Castro regime would not support revolutionary movement in key countries with whom inter-State relations would somehow ensure the survival of the regime. Mexico was considered by the socialist regime as one of these key countries. The Mexican government, being the only OAS government that maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba after the approval of an OAS resolution in 1964 that asked member countries to break ties with the island, represented the only possible link Cuba had with the Western Hemisphere. Through Mexico, Cuba would be able to send and receive personnel and information associated with Cuban support for revolutions in Latin America. Additionally, Cuban intervention in Mexican internal affairs would not only jeopardize Mexican-Cuban relations: it would also instigate American apprehension that would eventually justify another U.S.-led

invasion of the island. Mexican stability has always been a priority to the United States and Cuban intrusion in Mexican affairs would be interpreted as a threat to U.S. interests as well.

Non-intervention became the language whereby Mexico and Cuba communicated their disposition and expectations about each other.<sup>8</sup> A non-interventionist language began to characterize the bilateral relationship and served to establish an understanding in which both sides committed themselves to avoid making any judgments of the other, while also abstaining to participate in the political process of the other State. This does not mean that there were not moments in which non-intervention was put to the test. As a matter of fact, there are authors who argue that Mexico was the country that less strictly respected such a tacit agreement.<sup>9</sup>

The Mexican-Cuban political understanding served, at different levels, a vital goal of both regimes: their survival. Through maintaining diplomatic relations with a revolutionary regime, the Mexican government was able to satisfy demands of leftist groups inside the country and took away from them the possibility of using the pro-Cuban discourse in order to gather popular support. The striking fact about this is that the government was able to do so while it also confronted, at some moments, a very well organized opposition to pro-Cuban stances. These groups represented interests of the private sector and, to a lesser extent, urban upper and middle classes as well as the Catholic Church. Therefore, by carefully balancing interests of opposing groups within the country, the Mexican government was able to prevent the possible erosion of the regime.

In terms of the bilateral understanding, Cuba’s survival was even more in peril than Mexico’s. Cuba could not afford to get rid of one of the most important bilateral relations it still had. State-to-State relations with any country that would serve Cuban interests was a priority, and maintaining diplomatic

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7. Jorge Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 113.

8. Ana Covarrubias, *Mexican-Cuban Relations 1959-1988*, Ph.D. Thesis, St. Antony’s College, Oxford University, 1994, p. 141.

9. Ana Covarrubias, “Cuba and Mexico: a Case for Mutual non Intervention,” *Cuban Studies*, 26 (1996), p. 133.

relations with Mexico and abstaining from participating in any revolutionary movement inside the country contributed to the survival of the socialist regime. Diplomatic relations with Mexico, an OAS member and, most importantly, the neighbor of the United States, weakened to some extent the U.S. position on the issue.

The fact that the survival of the Mexican regime was already guaranteed at the moment of the creation of the bilateral understanding, and that Castro's regime survival was not, may account for Mexico's tendency to respect the understanding to a lesser extent than its Caribbean counterpart.

The Mexican-Cuban political understanding materialized not only because the two countries involved were aware of its value. The United States' tacit consent was an important factor that explains the establishment and continuation of the bilateral agreement. Why would the superpower tolerate such a "rebellious" attitude from its southern neighbor? After all, Cuba was regarded by the United States as a serious threat to security in the Hemisphere. It would seem logical that a country that contradicted U.S. views on the subject would be regarded as a State that contributed to destabilization of the region. However, at many moments, U.S. reactions to Mexican positions regarding Cuba did not come close to what some observers expected. Moreover, after Mexico refused to comply with the 1964 OAS resolution that requested Member States to end diplomatic relations with Cuba, Thomas Mann, a U.S. Department of State official declared that "Mexico was the best friend of the United States."<sup>10</sup>

What at first sight might seem as a contradiction can be clearly explained if one takes into account the real priorities of the U.S. government during the Cold War. More than unanimous hemispheric support for U.S. Cuban policy, what really mattered to the U.S.

was stability in the region. At previous OAS meetings, Cuba had been almost totally isolated from the Americas. Getting rid of the one remaining diplomatic relation (the Mexican link) would not have made much difference. Instead, having Mexico as a "bridge" between Cuba and the rest of the continent would not only serve interests in Mexico and Cuba, but the United States would also benefit from this understanding for many reasons. First, there was continuous Mexican political stability, a priority for U.S. interests. Political stability in Mexico was a condition that the PRI governments had successfully achieved over the years and that by the 1960s had a significant relation with the establishment and continuation of the Mexican-Cuban understanding. Second, Mexican allegiance to vital U.S. interests related to Cold War issues had been already confirmed over the years. After World War II, a tacit agreement between the two countries seemed to materialize in which the U.S. recognized the Mexican need to dissent from certain U.S. policies on issues that were of vital interest to Mexico but not to the U.S. In exchange, Mexico would cooperate with the U.S. on issues that were important or vital for the U.S., but not for Mexico.<sup>11</sup> During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Mexico adhered to an OAS resolution that condemned Cuban consent to the establishment of Soviet missiles on the island. This action evidenced total alignment with U.S. positions on issues that that superpower considered as vital. Third, there is data that proves that Mexico was regarded by American authorities as a "listening post" between Cuba and the United States.<sup>12</sup> During the 1960s, U.S. intelligence agencies along with Mexican authorities at Mexico City's international airport, gathered information taken from passengers flying between Havana and Mexico City. Thus, U.S. tacit endorsement was a key element in the establishment and development of the Mexican-Cuban political understanding.

10. Olga Pellicer, *México y la Revolución cubana*, Mexico, Colmex, 1972, p. 56.

11. Mario Ojeda, *Alcances y límites de la política exterior mexicana*, Mexico, El Colegio de México, 2001, p. 121.

12. Carl Migdail, "Mexico, Cuba, and the United States: Myth Versus Reality," in Donna Rich Kaplowitz (ed.), *Cuba's Ties to a Changing World*, Boulder, Lynne Reiner, 1993, p. 207.

### THE ACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY STAGE: MAINTENANCE AND ENHANCEMENT OF THE POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

Between 1970 and 1988, Mexico displayed an international behavior that has been commonly regarded as an “active foreign policy.” During this stage, it became very clear that the Mexican-Cuban understanding did not just serve as a means to overcome a crisis in the early 1960s. The way in which Mexican-Cuban relations were carried out remained almost unaltered for the next two decades. Even though some of the main strategies of Mexican foreign policy changed significantly during this period, the nature of the bilateral relationship did not change much. As a matter of fact, during certain moments of this second stage, it can be affirmed that Mexican-Cuban relations were of a truly friendly nature.

There is an explanation for such a continuation of the bilateral political understanding. Even though the shift in the major determinants of Mexican foreign policy did significantly alter many traits of Mexico’s traditional diplomacy, they did not affect very much the basic foundation of the Mexican-Cuban understanding. Moreover, some of the shifts had a positive impact on the bilateral relationship, drawing the two countries even closer in some cases. What was the nature of those shifts? What were the elements of such changes that account for the improvement of the bilateral agreement during most of the second stage?

#### Changes in the International Arena

Internationally speaking, the early 1970s inaugurated a period of attenuation of the tensions that characterized the East-West conflict. This was evidenced by a gradual rapprochement between Washington and Beijing and the incorporation of the People’s Republic of China into the UN system. At the same time, the economies of Europe and Japan gradually registered positive growth rates, which meant that post-war economic recovery was a reality. For Mexico, this meant the possibility of establishing additional trading links in order to diversify its economy. This possibility became a necessity once the U.S. economy closed itself by imposing higher tariffs on imports. At first, the Mexican government thought it could rely

on the so-called “special relationship” that bound Mexico and the United States together. However, once it became evident that the U.S. would not negotiate any exemption to its newly-adopted trade policy, the Mexican government had to react accordingly. In the early 1970s, an international scenario of *détente* that attenuated East-West rivalry, the lack of U.S. interest in Latin American issues, and the real possibility of diversifying their economies, allowed small countries such as Mexico to benefit from a wider range of action in the international arena. The international determinants of Mexican foreign policy offered a wide variety of opportunities for improving Mexican-Cuban relations during the 1970s. International conditions during the next decade would significantly diminish Mexico’s opportunities to act independently. In the United States, the shift from the Carter administration to the Republican term of Reagan meant the return of a rigid discourse in the East-West rivalry.

#### New Approaches in Economic Policy

From an economic point of view, the import substitution model that had prevailed in Mexico for decades began to erode in the late 1960s. When president Echeverría took power in 1970, it was imperative to change the direction of the Mexican economy. However, during both Echeverría’s and López Portillo’s terms it was impossible to reach a national consensus on the model of development that the national economy should follow. The economic policy of the Echeverría administration was characterized by a significant increase in public expenditure aimed at the appeasement of the social dissatisfaction that had already emerged. As part of this strategy, the government began to look for alternative sources of income. A diversification strategy began to take form, but the results of such a tactic did not reach the government’s expectations.

López Portillo’s term focused on turning Mexico into a major oil exporter. Then-recent oil findings in the Gulf of Mexico and favorable conditions in the international oil market during the late 1970s made it possible for Mexico to increase its negotiating power in the international arena. However, the Mexican economy ended up depending considerably on oil

market prices, a condition that proved catastrophic once the international prices of oil fell drastically in the early 1980s. The next presidential term, that of Miguel de la Madrid, set the basis for the structural change that, in economic terms, would characterize the next two decades of Mexican economic policy. During these years, the Mexican economy began to open up, albeit timidly. The country negotiated its foreign debt, joined the GATT, and negotiated an important trade agreement with the United States. This newly-acquired conservative economic policy limited some of Mexico's chances to display an autonomous foreign policy. However, the country was still able to defend independent stances on certain issues, such as the Central American conflict.

### **Domestic Politics: The Need to Legitimize**

In terms of domestic politics, the Echeverría administration was characterized by the urgent need to regain legitimacy among a wide sector of Mexican society. The student riots of 1968 and their outcome had shown an evident inconsistency between the state of mind of an important group of the urban middle classes and an official discourse that often referred to a supposedly-achieved social justice. Echeverría's foreign policy was characterized as pluralist in ideological terms, in order to show compatibility with the ideological values of the Mexican left. This explains Mexican efforts to assume a leading role in the Third World movement, the increase of diplomatic contacts with many countries notwithstanding ideological differences, and an evident increase in tensions in Mexican-U.S. relations. In this sense, Mexico's active foreign policy served to give certain coherence to the revolutionary discourse of the regime and satisfied somewhat the Mexican left. During López Portillo's term, it was impossible for the regime to regain the trust of important sectors of the Mexican right, although some efforts were made in this regard. In contrast, the recently obtained international negotiating power, permitted an independent stance on many issues.

What were the consequences of these shifts on Mexican-Cuban relations? The establishment of an "active foreign policy" not only permitted the continuation of the bilateral understanding, it also enhanced it, becoming a significant factor in the complex network that legitimized the Mexican authoritarian regime.

### **The Enhancement of the Political Understanding**

U.S. lack of interest on Latin American issues allowed for the maintenance of good relations between Cuba and Mexico. The U.S.-Cuban rivalry seemed to diminish relatively during these years, due to the fact that more and more OAS countries began to re-establish diplomatic relations from 1970, a position that was openly supported by the Mexican delegation to that international organization. If Mexico wanted to obtain a real leadership role in the Third World movement, it had to maintain good relations with Cuba, for the island had been an active participant in that movement since the victory of the Revolution. Intelligence activities in Mexico City's international airport ceased during Echeverría's term as a gesture of Mexican willingness to regain Cuban trust. For years, such activities had irritated Cuban authorities.

The diversification strategy of Mexican economic policy also positively affected Mexican-Cuban relations. Although never significant, Mexican-Cuban economic relations increased during Echeverría's term. Some agreements were signed, such as the one that established a financial link between the Mexican and Cuban central banks, and treaties on Cultural and Educational Cooperation as well as on Scientific and Technological Cooperation. Mexico opened a commercial office in Havana in 1974 and commercial flights between Mexico City and Havana operated by a Mexican airline began that same year.<sup>13</sup> During the López Portillo administration, existing commercial treaties between the two countries were revised and updated. Others were signed. There are also reasons to think that during this term, Mexico lent Cuba significant resources off the record.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Ana Covarrubias, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 375.

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During the De la Madrid administration, Mexican-Cuban relations remained stable. However, the degree of closeness that had characterized the bilateral relationship in the previous two presidential terms decreased. The priority of Mexican diplomacy in those years was to contribute to a peaceful solution of the Central American conflict. Thus, for the Mexican government, everything that had to do with Mexican-Cuban relations had to take into account what happened in Central America. This called for the continuation of good relations with the island. Even though Cuba was not part of that conflictive region, it was a State that had important interests on the area. If Mexican diplomacy wanted to be successful in its role as an active participant in the Central American peace process, it had to keep Cuban interests in mind as well.

As a way to co-opt the independent left, Mexican authorities displayed what seemed to be a very close relationship with Cuba. That way, the progressive sector of the country could not use any pro-Cuban argument in order to gather popular support. That does not mean, however, that the bilateral relationship by itself explains the prevalence of stability of the authoritarian regime. The Mexican-Cuban understanding became only part of a much more intricate web of tacit accords and political strategies that ensured political stability within the country, thus contributing to a certain extent to the continuation of the PRI regime for several decades.

### **POST-COLD WAR MEXICAN DIPLOMACY: THE BREAKDOWN OF THE BILATERAL UNDERSTANDING**

Mexican foreign policy has undergone a major transformation since the early 1990s. Some traditional strategies of Mexican diplomacy began to be abandoned or overlooked, innovative approaches were undertaken, and new principles began to be defended by Mexico in the international arena. This circumstance has contributed to shape a foreign policy that most of the time seems unrecognizable. The shifts in Mexican foreign policy determinants that began to occur in the second half of the 1980s have radically transformed the country's diplomacy. These changes have also affected greatly the very foundation of the

Mexican-Cuban understanding, making it impossible for it to remain unaltered. Today, the bilateral political understanding has definitely vanished, and the need to find another strategy for Mexican-Cuban relations is imperative.

### **The Current International Arena**

The end of the Cold War meant the disappearance of one of the two contending superpowers. The opportunity for Mexican diplomacy to weigh its relationship with the United States against other countries has diminished greatly. The post-Cold War international system has been characterized by what Samuel Huntington refers to as a unipolar world in military terms (in which the U.S. is the only superpower) and a multipolar world from an economic point of view (North America, Europe, and Japan being the three main economies). This condition has forced Mexican diplomacy to change its international approach. Economically, the world began to regionalize, and the strategy that Mexico chose when faced with this reality was to become an active participant in the regionalizing process. Mexico wanted to be involved at the creation of one of the most important trading blocs: North America.

Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari proposed the creation of a free trade area between Mexico and the United States. The proposal was received with interest by American authorities; Canada soon joined the project. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was finally ratified in 1994 by the three countries. The success in the negotiation process of NAFTA and its implementation reflects the most important transformation of Mexican international behavior. With NAFTA, Mexico finally gave up its traditional stance of maintaining relative autonomy from the United States, at least in its discourse. NAFTA represents the institutionalization of Mexican-U.S. economic relations, a condition of great relevance if one takes into consideration the tortuous history of the bilateral relationship during almost two centuries of the two neighbors. Now Mexico and the United States are trading partners. They no longer are just neighbors predestined to share a complex border and to deal with the problems that arise from the evident asymmetry of this

proximity. In recent years, this has meant a gradual alignment to most American positions on international issues. This has not meant, however, the absence of some cases in which Mexican points of view differ from the ones defended by the U.S. When this happens, the bilateral relationship of the two partners is put to the test.

### **The Mexican Economic Model of Development**

In economic terms, Mexico began a real opening during the Salinas administration. The negotiation of NAFTA was only the regional symptom of a wider strategy of Mexican economic policy. In general terms, this strategy meant the conscious adoption of an open market model of economic development. Privatizations of State-owned enterprises, negotiation of trade agreements with other countries, and an effort to turn Mexico into an exporting power characterized this administration. Ernesto Zedillo's term represented a continuation of this model of economic opening. NAFTA was implemented and the first commercial conflicts under it arose. A free trade agreement was signed with the EU, marking a turning point in Mexican foreign policy due to Mexico's acceptance of the democratic clause.<sup>15</sup> Deregulation of the economy during this term continued to be pursued. Electoral democracy, which became a reality with the Fox administration, did not mean a significant change in the government's economic policy. The current Mexican president has shown an open commitment to free trade and market liberalization, thus reinforcing the economic liberalization process that began during the Salinas administration.

### **The Mexican Road to Democracy**

In terms of the domestic political conditions, Mexican transition to democracy began to take shape during this third phase, albeit slowly and belatedly. The process whereby the Mexican political system democratized was mainly a reaction by the government to internal and external pressures. The Mexican government during the Salinas and Zedillo administra-

tions was apparently more committed to economic than to political liberalization. Political liberalization in Mexico during the 1990s was an uneven and contradictory reaction to pressures coming from civil society, opposition parties, and national and international NGOs, and the increasing need by the government to portray a democratic profile.<sup>16</sup>

During the Salinas term, the government faced a legitimacy crisis never seen before in the history of PRI governments. In order to appease social dissatisfaction, the Mexican authorities began to make some concessions. The first opposition state governments were elected during this administration, and they were recognized by the federal government. State-funded institutions committed to the defense to democracy and human rights were created (the IFE, Electoral Federal Institute, and the CNDH, National Commission of Human Rights). However, criticisms of the lack of democracy in Mexico from abroad were still regarded as interventionist, even in the Zedillo term.

President Fox's administration seems to be more committed to democracy. After all, his electoral victory over the PRI forms the basis of the legitimacy of his presidency. Foreign policy during this presidential term has not varied much if we compare it with the diplomacy of the previous two administrations. However, there is one novelty in Mexican foreign policy nowadays: the defense of democracy and human rights. The insertion of these two new values in Mexican foreign policy might seem as a necessary way to "break with the past" and display a different foreign policy, one that does not have to contribute to the legitimization of an authoritarian regime. However, certain inconsistencies have arisen in trying to harmonize the new principles of Mexican foreign policy with some practices of traditional Mexican diplomacy that have not been wholly discarded. The breakdown of the Mexican-Cuban understand-

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15. Traditionally, Mexico had regarded conditionality of this kind as an intrusion of foreign countries in the internal affairs of a State.

16. Guadalupe González, "Las estrategias de política exterior de México en la era de la globalización," *Foro Internacional*, 41 (2001), p. 620.

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ing is one of the clearest examples of this contradictory situation.

### The Collapse of the Bilateral Political Understanding

When president Salinas took power in 1988, Mexico-Cuba relations were stable. Fidel Castro himself attended president Salinas' inauguration ceremony, thus helping to consolidate the authority of this newly elected president that had a serious lack of legitimacy. This gesture reflects the validity of the Mexican-Cuban understanding during the first years of this administration. Cuba continued to engage in State-to-State relations with Mexico even though the new government lacked electoral legitimacy and faced a much unified national opposition of leftist tendencies. However, the first episodes that served as a warning of the vulnerability of the bilateral understanding occurred during this period. In the midst of the NAFTA negotiations, the Mexican president met with Jorge Mas Canosa and Carlos Alberto Montaner, leaders of the Cuban community abroad. The Mexican government was concerned with the possibility that the influential Cuban-American community in south Florida would obstruct negotiation of the agreement. Although it was confirmed that these meetings took place during the summer of 1992, the topics that were discussed were never revealed by the parties. However, many observers and the media argued that the meetings must have taken place in order to guarantee Cuban-American support for NAFTA in exchange for a tougher Mexican position *vis-à-vis* Cuba on trade issues.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the simple fact that a Mexican president met with the Cuban exile community represented a ground-breaking event in the Mexican-Cuban bilateral relationship. Fortunately for the stability of the bilateral relations, the Cuban government did not condemn this action. In fact, some sources state that before the meetings took place, Mexico informed the Cuban government of the matter.<sup>18</sup> This incident cannot be regarded as a

test of non-intervention in the bilateral understanding since it seems that the Cuban government understood that the meetings served a Mexican primordial goal: the success of NAFTA.

Non-intervention would be put to the test during the Salinas administration in 1991, during a meeting of the G-3 (México, Colombia, and Venezuela). The presidents of the three countries invited Castro to the Mexican island of Cozumel so that he could give more details on the political and economic situation that Cuba was facing.<sup>19</sup> The fact that Mexico was involved in a discussion at which another country was asked to give explanations about its political situation, and the fact that the Mexican authorities later exposed publicly their points of view on the subject, reflects an important erosion of the rule of non-intervention that had characterized the bilateral understanding for years. In spite of these incidents, the bilateral relationship remained relatively stable during the Salinas administration. Mexico continued to defend Cuba on the grounds of non-intervention in cases such as the enactment by the U.S. of the Torricelli Bill of 1992 and Cuban participation in the first three Ibero-American summits. The stability of the bilateral relationship during this term was possible because of the absence of significant advances in terms of democratic consolidation in Mexico. Although the process through which the Mexican transition to democracy would develop began during the Salinas period, major developments would not occur until the following years. This allowed the bilateral understanding to endure, although based on foundations that each day became more fragile.

Serious problems in the bilateral relationship emerged during Ernesto Zedillo's term as president. As a signal of Cuban distrust towards the Mexican commitment to the bilateral understanding, Castro declared that Mexican children knew more about Walt Disney's characters than about Mexican histori-

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17. Ana Covarrubias, "La política mexicana hacia Cuba durante el sexenio de Salinas de Gortari," *Foro Internacional*, 34 (1994), pp. 670-674.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 670-674.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 668-669.

cal heroes.<sup>20</sup> During the 9<sup>th</sup> Ibero-American summit, held in Havana in 1999, president Zedillo gave a speech referring to the importance of democracy and human rights in Latin American countries. “There cannot be sovereign nations without free men and women; men and women who are able to make use of their essential liberties...,” stated the Mexican president.<sup>21</sup> These comments were interpreted as an evident criticism of the Cuban regime, and clearly reflected a detachment from the non-intervention rule of the bilateral understanding. At the same time, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs Rosario Green met with Elizardo Sánchez, leader of a Havana based pro-democracy organization. That meeting proved that the Mexican government would no longer maintain relations only with the Cuban government. The meetings of president Salinas and of Foreign Affairs Secretary Green with Cuban associations not officially related to the Castro regime demonstrated that another element of the Mexican-Cuban understanding—the prevalence of State-to-State relations—had started to disappear. The Mexican government began to take into consideration the points of view of other Cuban actors whose interests collided with those of the Castro regime.

Some elements of continuity of the bilateral understanding prevailed during Zedillo’s term. Mexican opposition to the U.S.-led embargo on Cuba did not vanish. The extraterritorial nature of the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 produced an almost unanimous reaction in Mexico. The country was, together with Canada and the EU, one of the international actors that publicly repudiated Helms-Burton. The government of Ernesto Zedillo did everything in its power to try to neutralize the effects of the Helms-Burton Act. Mexico condemned the Act at the United Nations and at the OAS. In addition, the Mexican government issued an “Antidote Act,” aimed at counter-

acting Helms-Burton’s damaging effects on Mexican trade and investments abroad. Mexican condemnation of this American extraterritorial law was based not on a defense of the Cuban government *per se*, but on Mexico’s traditional respect for international law and its newly acquired commitment to free trade.

Even though Mexico continued to condemn the U.S.-led embargo on Cuba, this sole attitude would prove insufficient when it came to finding a new way in which to carry out the bilateral relationship. The Mexican democratization process accelerated during the Zedillo administration. The official discourse became characterized by positive remarks on the protection of human rights and democracy. During Zedillo’s term, the government finally accepted foreign supervision of its internal political process, as evidenced in Mexico’s willingness to accept the jurisdiction of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights.

The language through which Mexico and Cuba were able to communicate their expectations began to fade away. New elements in Mexican foreign policy affected the bilateral relationship: the gradual insertion of new values within the nation and abroad (commitment to democracy and defense of human rights) and a closer economic relationship between Mexico and the U.S. complicated the maintenance of a bilateral relationship based on non-intervention and the prevalence of State-to-State relations. Conflicts arising in the bilateral relationship would be harder to solve. The Fox administration inherited a bilateral relationship whose stability was no longer guaranteed. The Mexico-Cuba understanding was already vanishing and it was up to the new government to choose a new way in which the bilateral relationship would be pursued. The way the Fox administration decided to modify Mexican-Cuban bilateral relations proved disastrous.

20. Rafael Velásquez Flores, “El proyecto de política exterior de Vicente Fox: ¿continuidad o cambio?,” in Rafael Velásquez Flores (coord.), *La política exterior de México bajo un régimen democrático ¿cambio o continuidad?*, Mexico, Plaza y Valdés, 2002, p. 31.

21. Ana Covarrubias, “La política mexicana hacia Cuba a principios de siglo: de la no intervención a la protección de los derechos humanos,” *Foro Internacional*, 63 (2003), p. 632.

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In late 2000, the newly elected Mexican government stated that it would seek to maintain a strong Mexican presence on the island and to support the Cuban democratization process.<sup>22</sup> The Mexican-Cuban relationship became the testing ground on which the Fox administration would display a “new” foreign policy based on the defense of human rights and democracy. During the first year of Fox’s term, no major conflicts between the two countries arose, but tension was evident. In April 2001, Mexico abstained from voting for a UN Human Rights Commission resolution that called for the supervision of human rights conditions on the island. The issue was widely discussed in Mexico. Congress, political parties and intellectuals stated their opinion on the matter. This demonstrated that foreign policy-making in Mexico had turned into a much more complex process due to the fact that there were now many actors involved. Even though Mexico abstained, the Cuban regime reacted negatively to this posture, alleging that Foreign Affairs Secretary Jorge Castañeda would have preferred to vote against Cuba but that a “courageous stance” from the Mexican Congress halted this desire. The visit that president Fox made to Cuba in early 2002 complicated even more the already tense relations. The Mexican president not only visited Castro, but he and Secretary Castañeda met with the Cuban dissidence at the Mexican embassy in Havana.

That same year, in March, President Castro unexpectedly left a UN-sponsored summit that took place in the Mexican city of Monterrey, alleging pressures from the Mexican government who, according to Castro, asked him to leave the event sooner than expected so he and U.S. president George Bush would not be present in the same venue at the same time. The Mexican government denied such allegations but Castro had proof, which he released once Mexico voted on April 2002 for a UN resolution condemning the human rights situation in Cuba.

In 2004, Mexican-Cuban relations were more distant than ever. Mexico’s vote regarding the annual UN resolution condemning the island’s human rights situation triggered the most serious conflict in the history of the bilateral relationship. Mexico voted for the resolution, as it did in the previous two years. Cuba, evidently, condemned the Mexican position. Cuba also caused President Fox’s government some embarrassment when it decided to deport Carlos Ahumada to Mexico. Ahumada, an entrepreneur involved in a political scandal in Mexico, had fled to Cuba where he was arrested by Cuban authorities. The Mexican government had asked the Cuban authorities for an extradition process, but Ahumada’s abrupt deportation caused some problems to the federal government. He was suspected to hold some information that would seriously damage Fox’s credibility. Some days later, during a speech given on May 1, Castro criticized Mexican diplomacy during the Fox administration referring to it as a “foreign policy that had burned to ashes.”<sup>23</sup>

The reaction of the Mexican government to this series of Cuban actions was severe. In a nationwide TV broadcast, Secretary of the Interior Santiago Creel and Foreign Affairs Secretary Ernesto Derbez announced that the Mexican government had asked its ambassador to Havana to leave the embassy and return to Mexico and that the Cuban ambassador to Mexico City was asked to do the same. Never before had Mexican-Cuban relations been so close to an actual halt. Mexican authorities alleged that they had taken this extreme decision due to the role Cuba played in the deportation of Carlos Ahumada, supposed Cuban interference in Mexican affairs, and the harsh pronouncements by Castro during his Labor Day speech.

May 2004 was a very harsh month, full of unpleasant recriminations from both sides and the display by Cuban authorities of videotape recordings in which a captive Ahumada vaguely suggested some kind of po-

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22. *Ibid.*, p. 637.

23. Fidel Castro, “Discurso pronunciado por el Presidente de la República de Cuba, Fidel Castro Ruz, en el acto por el Día Internacional de los Trabajadores,” May 1, 2004, at <http://www.granma.cu/documento/espanol04/005.html>.

litical scheme in which the Mexican federal government might be involved. The crisis was gradually overcome. A meeting in Cuba by the Foreign Affairs Ministers of both countries diminished the tension. Soon, the ambassadors from both countries returned to their posts. Everything seemed to be solved, although in an environment of awkwardness.

During this unfortunate incident, the Cuban government got involved as never before in the Mexican political process. This marked unmistakably the end of the bilateral understanding. Not only was non-intervention a language that both countries could no longer employ to communicate with each other, but non-intervention was not being observed by either country in their mutual relationship. State-to-State relations were not the only link that bound Cuba and Mexico together anymore. Cuban authorities, as declared by the Mexican government, were traveling to Mexico and were meeting members of the Mexican opposition and other groups of the society. Members of the Mexican government had had contact with the Cuban dissidence since the early 1990s.

Even though the May 2004 crisis was overcome, problems in the bilateral relationship will arise in the future. It will be harder to solve further conflicts if the two countries do not find a proper way to carry on their relations. Non-intervention is a language that Cuba is willing to keep employing with other countries. Democracy is not. In Mexico the exact opposite has happened. The new Mexican foreign policy is displaying a language that openly embraces democratic values, while non-intervention is gradually being left behind. There remain sources of conflict, such as the annual vote on the UN resolution on human rights in Cuba, which in the last three years has represented a very serious threat to stability in the bilateral relationship and that at the time of this writing is enhancing the tension between the two governments.

#### **CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A NEW ARRANGEMENT**

Mexico's democratic foreign policy is incompatible with the Mexico-Cuba understanding that emerged during the Cold War. The current Mexican president displays a diplomacy that openly embraces val-

ues that Cuba does not share with Mexico. President Fox tried to transform the bilateral relationship in order to show some coherence between the official discourse and the actual facts. Up to this point, the Mexican strategy seems logical and positive. However, this new approach did not take into account two considerations that have resulted prejudicial to the current Mexican government's image.

First, the Fox administration apparently did not anticipate such a strong domestic opposition to its new strategy towards Cuba. All political parties except for his own opposed vociferously the way in which Fox and his Foreign Affairs Secretaries have carried out the bilateral relationship. The Mexican policy towards Cuba also caused some popular discomfort. Mexico-Cuba relations turned out to be one more issue that contributed to weaken Fox's image as a competent statesman. The series of conflicts that have arisen in the bilateral relationship during the last few years represent one more ingredient in the environment of crisis and lack of national consensus that has characterized most of the current administration. Thus, Mexican-Cuban relations have served as a source of political polarization.

Secondly, with its new policy towards Cuba, Mexico opted to get rid of one diplomatic tool that helped to portray an autonomous position in the international arena. The country now agrees more than before with the United States on some issues concerning Cuba. Mexico openly supports democratization in the island, although not through the same means that the United States would prefer. The current Mexican government seems genuinely preoccupied with the human rights situation in the island and it votes in the UN accordingly. With this new approach, Cuba can easily suggest some kind of Mexican compliance with American policies. Whether this is true or not is not a subject of discussion in this paper. What really matters is that now Mexico has lost its Cuban wildcard, a very useful strategy that contributed to the display of an autonomous foreign policy and helped to maintain stability in the country. Apparently, continuous Mexican opposition to the embargo and to some American points of view on the way Cuba should democratize is not enough to

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display an independent Cuban policy in the eyes of certain political actors inside Mexico.

Mexico and Cuba must find a way to carry on stable and fulfilling bilateral relations. They must be able to solve the problems that arise every now and then. They were able to do so for about 30 years, but the current scenario suggests that they are not capable to solve conflicts that easily any longer. Mexico and Cuba can not afford to keep the unstable impasse that characterizes the current bilateral relationship. They are too close to each other to let that happen. If some full-size event affected Cuba, there would be

consequences for Mexico, and the opposite might also be true. It is not wise for Mexico to wait indefinitely for a Cuban transition to happen. When the Cold War ended most scholars thought that would mean the end of the Castro regime and now, 15 years later, they are still waiting. There is no certainty that Cuba will automatically democratize once Castro passes away. The challenge that both countries face for the near future is to build some sort of new understanding through which the two States can solve forthcoming problems, notwithstanding their different political regimes.