

The Blind Man and the Elephant

Reporting on the Mexican Military

by Kate Doyle | May 2004

This article continues the Archivos Abiertos series of monthly reports on U.S.-Mexico relations produced by the Americas Program in collaboration with the National Security Archive in Washington, DC and its Mexico Project. As Mexico Project director Kate Doyle explains: “The main objective of the project is to challenge the myths of foreign policy--on both sides of the border.” To that end, Doyle combs nearly four decades of U.S. and Mexican archives to uncover new evidence and bring to light the hidden histories behind the bilateral relationship. The results, presented in this monthly series, offer the unprecedented opportunity to separate the rhetoric from the reality, and provide a foundation for rebuilding binational diplomacy on the basis of shared interests, transparency, and citizen involvement. The original documentation, as well as previous articles, may be found at www.nsarchive.org/mexico. Your comments are welcome at americas@irc-online.org.

Trying to report intelligently on the Mexican military is like trying to see in the dark—it’s all shadowy outlines and no details. The army is famously secretive, opaque, and hostile to public scrutiny. Just ask the people who write about it.

“The army has never provided information to outsiders on its own initiative,” explains Raul Benítez Manuat, a scholar for the Center for Research on North America at UNAM and visiting professor at the National Defense University in Washington, who has written extensively about the Mexican armed forces. “Its policy is to have no contact with the press or academia.”

James Smith, former correspondent in Mexico for the *Los Angeles Times*, now foreign editor of the *Boston Globe*, laughs when he recalls that even officials in the Secretariat of Defense (SEDENA) press office refused to give their names when they spoke to him. Another Mexico correspondent for a major U.S. newspaper has equally frustrating tales to tell: “We have never gotten any useful information out of our contacts with the military.”

The correspondent describes spending months faxing and calling SEDENA in an effort to get Secretary of Defense Ricardo Vega García to sit down for a personal interview. After months of silence, General Vega suddenly agreed to meet. When he was introduced to the reporter, Vega told him stonily: “The only reason I am talking to you is that my President ordered me to do so.”

Remarkably, Vicente Fox’s presidency appears to have had little direct effect on the Mexican armed forces. While other aspects of Mexican society and government became subject to fierce public debate in the wake of the political transition, the military remained apart, silent and unengaged.

That may be changing. The Federal Law for Information Access, which came into effect in 2002, required the Secretariat of Defense—along with all federal agencies—to make information about its functions, organization and staffing voluntarily open to the public. SEDENA is also obliged for the first time to respond to individual citizen requests for information.

Roderic Ai Camp, professor of political science at Claremont McKenna University in California, and the author of one of the few authoritative studies on the Mexican armed forces, *Generals in the Palacio: The Military in Modern Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), describes a “dramatic change” in the military’s attitudes toward openness. In a telephone interview, Camp said he has used the law over 30 times to obtain data such as the names of current military zone commanders and a list of the members of a graduating class at the National Defense College—information, he pointed out, that would have been virtually impossible to get just two years ago.

“This in turn is going to have an impact on what I would call the culture of the military,” Camp said. “As junior officers are exposed to this new openness and it is



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considered the norm by the institution, they will be more willing to talk to outsiders in the future.”

U.S. declassified documents provide another rich source of information about Mexico’s armed forces; embassy, CIA and Pentagon officials routinely gather intelligence about the military and send it to Washington for analysis. Although American officials face their own difficulties trying to obtain solid data about the armed forces, their reports add significantly to the information available in Mexico.

The following document provides an example of reporting found in U.S. records. The document is an intelligence assessment of the military produced in 1993-94 by the U.S. Army Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center, called *Army Country Profile-Mexico*.

The Pentagon’s “Army Country Profile” was a routine annual report on militaries around the world produced with intelligence gathered by defense attachés, embassy officers, the CIA stations and the National Security Agency. It was designed to keep security planners in Washington informed about the fundamental characteristics of foreign armed forces: their mission, troops, tactics, training, weapons, equipment, and intelligence capabilities, among many other aspects.

The U.S. government released the secret 150-page document to the National Security Archive with many deletions. Nevertheless, the declassified excerpts published here contain a wealth of information about the Mexican army impossible to obtain directly from SEDENA, and offer an unusual glimpse inside what is still the country’s most secretive institution.

The Enemy Within: Old Weapons, Poor Training and Corruption

The intelligence assessment highlights U.S. concerns about the military. Part I, “Ground Forces”—published in April 1993—profiles the strengths and fighting capabilities of the army at a time when its most recent serious engagement was still the Guerrero counterinsurgency of the 1970s. Writing before the Chiapas uprising would permanently alter the world’s image of “stability” in Mexico, American security planners were focused on the army’s limited capacity to fight internal unrest, and the government’s failure to spend the money necessary to modernize its armed forces.

Summary

[...] The leading problems that continue to hamper the Mexican military are obsolete and heterogeneous equipment, lack of logistical control and technical maintenance, over-centralization, corruption, and inadequate training.

The Army is capable of maintaining public order, but this capability depends on how widespread civil unrest becomes. The military would not be able to control a broad-based antigovernment movement, but such an uprising is unlikely to happen in the near future.

Mexican authorities are extremely sensitive to its military associating with any foreign armed forces. Relations between US and Mexican military officers are correct, but formal. Under the current Secretary of National Defense, General Antonio Riviello Bazan, more lines of communication have been established and opportunities for exchange between the two militaries have broadened. However, relations will probably continue to expand at a slow pace because of historical antecedents, contentious bilateral immigration, and drug enforcement-related issues.

Mission and Doctrine of the Armed Forces

The report notes that Mexico has enjoyed considerable stability but would be unprepared for major threat.

A Mexican military defense against an equal-size military force with modern weapons is not possible. Under the protection of the United States (US), and with weaker militaries to the south, Mexico has historically enjoyed the benefits of a de facto military alliance without obligations. As a result, the Mexican Armed Forces have organized and equipped primarily for internal defense. The mission of the armed forces includes the security and support of the administration, control against civil unrest, and suppression of drug trafficking.

Mexico continues to remain remarkably free of immediate security concerns from within or beyond its borders. The lack of short-term threats is particularly unique given Mexico’s proximity to the sustained instability in Central America and its own significant economic difficulties. However, domestic instability could increase dramatically if the economy fails to improve despite the government’s current civic and military modernization efforts. [...]

Undertrained but well-suited for counterinsurgency

Although disciplined, the armed forces of Mexico are under-trained and antiquated. Modernization and reorganization programs are currently underway to alleviate these deficiencies, but progress will be slow because the Mexican Government has traditionally kept its armed forces organizationally divided, rendering them too weak to pose a political challenge. [...]

The organization, equipment, and training of the army are well suited for conducting counterinsurgency operations. The Mexican Army is capable of suppressing a regional insurgency, as demonstrated by its successful counterinsurgency campaign in Guerrero State in 1974. [...] Only a massive, nationwide insurrection would challenge the army's ability to maintain order.

"Outdated" military equipment

The report notes that Mexico lacks modern equipment and parts and would be unable to integrate sophisticated weaponry:

Although Mexico is economically well developed by Third World standards, it retains much outdated and heterogeneous military equipment. Commanders from all services frequently complain of spare-parts shortages, under-qualified maintenance technicians, and lack of quality equipment.

Based on the poor condition of current Mexican weapons and equipment, it can be concluded that competent employment of any newly acquired sophisticated equipment would be highly unlikely—the Mexican military does not have a budget of sufficient size or adequate training and logistical support structures required. Although improving, this problem is not expected to be remedied in the near future.

Recent Operational Experience

In a heavily deleted section the report notes recent experience in the antinarcotics operations, with some successes but an overall inability to control trafficking:

The most significant military activity in recent years has taken place in the counter-drug arena. The army was called upon to suppress election-related civil unrest in Michoacan State in April 1990. Elements of the Airborne Brigade have provided security for some major law enforcement actions, including the arrest of a corrupt union leader and a major drug trafficking kingpin. [...]

Although the Mexican military has shown an ability to conduct successful counter-drug operations, the efforts have not been enough to significantly restrict or stop the transshipment of drugs through Mexico. [Large section deleted.]

Disposition concentrated in Southeast Mexico

The report notes the military build-up in the southeast but does not mention the threat of an indigenous uprising—only months before the Zapatista uprising.

Over the past 12 years, the Mexican Secretariats of National Defense and the Navy have significantly increased military capability, particularly in south-eastern Mexico. The buildup is part of an overall military expansion and modernization program and is also in response to perceived security threats along the borders with Guatemala and Belize. The threats include Guatemalan insurgent activity, Guatemalan army incursions, trafficking in arms and drugs, and threats to oil producing facilities. The armed forces have nearly doubled the number of combat units and aircraft assigned to south-eastern Mexico while reorganizing commands, constructing new facilities and adding new capabilities such as a radar system and special operations units.

Specialized Training

Officers and soldiers of units with specialized missions receive appropriate training. The Group of 100 (the army's principal antiterrorist unit) and the GAFE (Special Forces Airmobile Group) train for their special operations. The personnel of the Airborne Brigade receive a gruelling 11-week jump school. Units selected for Task Force Marte undergo a month of intensive training for counter-drugs before deploying.

There is no military intelligence branch; consequently, individuals from other branches attend intelligence training. There is no military intelligence school in Mexico, so officers often train in foreign schools. [...]

Corruption

Corruption exists in the army—as in all branches of the Mexican Armed Forces—and it affects all ranks. Corruption is most notable with units participating in counter-drug operations, because drug traffickers are often able to entice some military personnel to cooperate in return for various forms of compensation.

“Overcentralized” Command and Control

Command and control suffers from over-centralization and a rigid command structure. Even the most minute decisions, such as requisitions for spare parts or approval of officer leave forms, must be signed at the national level. This slows routine decision-making to a crawl, although the Secretary will bypass the chain of command and communicate directly with zone commanders on important issues. Most of the Mexican Army is dispersed as garrison units controlled by military zone headquarters, with no tactical organization above battalion level. This zonal system does provide flexibility, as units can be transferred from one zone to another with little disruption. Efforts to professionalize the officer corps, coupled with operational experience in the drug war, are gradually improving the army’s command and control capability.

Mexican Intelligence Capabilities “marginal”

Mexico’s intelligence collection and analysis were considered rudimentary, although the Sec. of Government receives high marks:

The army’s intelligence capabilities are marginal and geared mainly to collecting on domestic political groups and, more recently, on drug trafficking activity. Resources devoted to non-domestic targets are limited to surveillance of various foreign embassies and diplomats, particularly the United States and Cuba. The Secretariat of Government, responsible for internal security, runs the General Directorate of Investigations and National Security (DGISN), probably Mexico’s most efficient intelligence organization. The DGISN is well organized and uses its limited resources efficiently in collecting routine, short-term intelligence. [Deleted]

The army’s system of intelligence collection and analysis is rudimentary. Military zone commanders utilize an information platoon to collect intelligence in their area. Partidas (groups of information platoons) stationed in isolated areas and the rural defense corps also collect information. Raw intelligence is passed directly to the S-2 (intelligence) section of the National Defense Staff in Mexico City for analysis. [Deleted]

Analysis After the EZLN Uprising

Part II of the *Army Country Profile-Mexico*, written in August 1994, analyzes Mexican intelligence and security

services, according to the document’s preface and table of contents. Although only a handful of pages have been declassified and released to the National Security Archive, they contain information about U.S. intelligence operations in Mexico, the capabilities of Mexican intelligence agencies, and Washington’s evaluation of the effects of the Zapatista uprising on the country’s prospects for stability.

The declassification of Part II of this report is evidence that even sensitive information about the Mexican military can be made public and discussed openly without harming Mexico’s national security or the future of the armed forces. Perhaps the report could even serve as a model for the Secretariat of Defense—and provoke a re-evaluation of SEDENA’s internal policy toward the right of Mexican citizens to information about their armed forces.

“Favorable environment” for U.S. Counterintelligence

The report cited good prospects for U.S. intelligence gathering in Mexico, due to the corruptibility of sources and laxness of Mexican intelligence.

The Mexican environment is relatively favorable for the conduct of intelligence operations by the US Armed Forces. Bribery and other forms of corruption are widespread throughout Mexico, giving foreign intelligence services numerous opportunities to recruit sources. The ability of Mexican intelligence services to counter HUMINT [human intelligence gathering] operations is probably only moderate. Mexican intelligence has very little experience in combating foreign espionage operations, primarily because most of the espionage occurring inside Mexico is directed against the US; the Mexican Government has limited concern with such operations. [Deleted]

Outlook

For the foreseeable future the Mexican intelligence and security establishment will face serious problems caused by corruption and inadequate funding. Effective law enforcement in Mexico faces major obstacles because of the pervasive influence of drug traffickers who have corrupted large numbers of police and intelligence personnel. Corruption is a less serious problem within the Mexican Armed Forces where greater discipline prevails. Within the PJF and the state police services, corruption is widespread and has led to large-scale dismissals [...]

The January 1994 outbreak of an organized insurgency in Chiapas has presented Mexico's intelligence and security services with a serious challenge. A significant percentage of Mexican military and police forces have been diverted to Chiapas to contain the violence. Until a peace settlement is reached, this reallocation of intelligence assets is likely to remain in effect. The main consequence of this situation is a weakening of the Mexican effort against drug trafficking. At present it appears that the EZLN, the guerrilla group behind the insurgency, does not have enough resources or adherents to spread its activities to other Mexican states. If this proves true, and the government is able to reach an agreement with the EZLN, the rebellion in Chiapas will not have long-term repercussions for the stability of Mexico. On the other hand, if the EZLN and the government are unable to come to terms, there is a chance that unrest could spread to other parts of Mexico, which would threaten the overall stability of the country. [...]

The Mexican Army-Still Passive, Isolated, and Above the Fray?

In contrast to the Pentagon's intelligence report on the Mexican military, the U.S. embassy of Mexico produced its own assessment of the armed forces around the same time. It is a 46-page cable written by a political officer in May 1995 describing the military in the wake of the events in Chiapas and the disastrous peso crash. An analysis based in part on conversations held between the U.S. official and two senior Mexican officers—former intelligence chief Gen. Jorge Pérez Toledo and liaison officer Lieutenant Colonel Acata Paniagua (first name unknown)—the cable describes the status of the military in the midst of the country's political and economic crisis.

The Mexican Army-Still Passive, Isolated, and Above the Fray?

In the face of a turbulent Mexican political and economic situation, the Mexican military remains by and large isolated from the currents of crisis eddying around the government (although the crisis has affected both military budgets and the financial lives of military officers markedly). While far more aware than in the past of the need to strengthen its public image (particularly with

all parts of the Mexican government competing for scarce financial resources), the Mexican military remains a world largely separate from the rest of Mexico. [...]

We are highly dubious of U.S. and Mexican press stories that occasionally appear suggesting the possibility of some form of Army intervention in the Mexican government if economic or political conditions should greatly deteriorate. We are dubious of these accounts (which also sometimes emanate from Mexican and Wall Street investors and others speaking publicly) not only because they contradict what seems to us to be the Army's continuing commitment to non-intervention in national politics, but also because it is difficult to imagine journalists of any kind, Mexican or foreign, getting close to an

authoritative source (or even a reliable leak) in an institution so hermetically sealed and paranoically anti-press as the Mexican Army. [...]

All Decisions Are Made at the Top

The key to understanding decision-making in this isolated, self-absorbed institution is to know that it is centralized to what seems a manic degree even when compared to the world of obedience and discipline which is the military in

most countries. Even the smallest decisions must be made at the very top of the hierarchy. Once issued, decisions are not deviated from unless there is a new high-level decision.

For example, U.S. military officials last year had been planning for a joint annual parachute jump with the Mexican Army. When the time came for jumping from Mexican planes, that side of the jump was cancelled. Why? Because the order allowing the jump had specified that it was to take place from an Arava plane, and at the moment none of Mexico's Arava planes were available. No other type of aircraft could be substituted since only the Arava had been specified in the order. [...]

Relations to the PGR

The Army view, shared by many, is that the PJJF is corrupt, unprofessional, and ineffective, while the Army is incorruptible. Needless to say, non-military observers do not share this view of the Army's incorruptibility.

[Foreign liaison officer to accredited military attachés LTC. Acata] Paniagua put matters into clearcut Army perspective in his conversation with Poloff [Embassy political officer]: “If you want to see the difference, just look at the expensive homes PGR officers live in, the cars they drive, the watches they wear. How can they afford such luxury on a government salary? How did (former deputy attorney general) Ruíz Massieu (detained at Newark Airport with large quantities of undeclared cash) make eighteen million US dollars in just ten months at the PGR? Then look at where Army generals live, the cars they drive, the humble watches they wear. Who is corrupt? See for yourself!” (Comment: We note that high ranking Mexican military officers are felt by most observers to live lives of pleasant material comfort, despite Paniagua’s plaintive cry. End Comment.) [...]

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Reticence with the U.S.

We present this portrait of the Mexican Army today to give Washington readers some insights into a largely closed institution. We hope for closer U.S.-GOM political-military cooperation, as well as closer relations between our military and the Mexican Army. But we believe Washington should know what we are facing when we pursue improved relations.

We want readers to continue to be aware of the lack of accessibility of Army officials to USG representatives in Mexico, whether civilian or military. Poloff’s [Political Officer’s] visits to the Defense Ministry required the careful intervention of Embassy [Defense Attaché,] whose own office must persevere to obtain such occasional contacts and which faces frequent disappointment due to Army policy frowning on practically any contacts, diplomatic or social, with U.S. officials.

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