

The new role of the military

by Dolia Estevez Pettingell

Over the recent months, the armed forces have adopted a new politically active role in Mexico. Putting aside their traditional role, which has been restricted to little more than periodic expressions of loyalty to the Mexican Constitution, top officers have made it known that the military will henceforth play an aggressive role in defending and participating in Mexico's economic development. This, they have stressed, represents the best guarantee for Mexico's security and national sovereignty in a time of great national and international danger.

The Mexican military is taking on this new high profile under the direction of President López Portillo himself.

This policy shift was signaled by a July 24 speech of Defense Minister General Félix Galván López. Speaking to the 7th Regional Meeting of Chiefs of Military Zones, General Galván spelled out for the first time the concept that security equals economic development, and that "the concept of national security is not now, nor has it ever been, set apart from [the concepts of] justice, freedom, and progress." President López Portillo, present at the ceremony, regaled General Galván with unusual praise: "I would have liked to have conceived and written the speech myself; it is made up of the most massive, complete, and structured foundation that I have ever heard."

One month later, on Aug. 23, the head of the Naval School of the State of Veracruz, Rear Admiral Fourzán Márquez, emphasized that "foreign and domestic threats" against Mexico make it imperative that the armed forces play a leading role in protecting the government's industrial development plans.

And more recently, on Sept. 2, Brig. General Alfonso Pérez Mejías, the head of the Superior War College, spoke at the armed forces' annual banquet in honor of the Mexican president and drew the same conclusion, focusing attention on Mexico's agricultural sector. Attacking those who attempt to use "food as a weapon," General Pérez announced that the military will actively help implement the government's plan to achieve self-

sufficiency in food. This is essential, he said, to "eliminating our foreign dependence and securing our sovereignty." The reference to Kissinger-authored threats to blackmail Mexico by withholding food shipments was unmistakable.

All three of these remarkable military statements should be viewed as tantamount to official Mexican policy, since they were all made in the presence of López Portillo. In Mexican politics, the presence of the chief executive usually means that all speeches delivered have been cleared and approved. Furthermore, long-time observers of the Mexican political scene have stressed that General Pérez's speech in particular, delivered scarcely 24 hours after López Portillo's State of the Union address, should in fact be viewed as part of the President's intended message. Pérez merely put in words what protocol prevented López Portillo from stating personally, lest he aggravate the already strained diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Mexico.

The new military role is significant more as a statement of intent than as a deployable capability. Mexico's military strength, as is generally known, is underdeveloped and relatively incapable of confronting a major foreign military aggression of the sort that they fear an oil-hungry American administration might launch. Rather, it should be seen as a commitment by the López Portillo government to correct this situation, by increasing the military budget and granting the armed forces a prominent role in Mexico's development plans.

As for the possibility of Mexico's military deciding to run the country on its own, the fact of the matter is that 60 years of uninterrupted constitutional rule in Mexico have made it virtually impossible to manipulate the Mexican armed forces into such a move. In fact, in 1968, when Mexico went through the worst crisis of recent history as a result of a classical "right versus left" destabilization, the Minister of Defense at the time, General García Barragán, personally intervened to stop coup plotting promoted by the U.S. Pentagon.

General García Barragán's personal secretary at the time was the current Defense Minister, General Félix Galván. General Barragán's son, Javier García Paniagua, is today the Minister of Agrarian Reform.

López Portillo's confidence in the military is perhaps best expressed in the increasing budget allocations that his government has been granting to the armed forces. According to U.N. statistics, this year Mexico and Cuba will be the two countries in Latin America with the greatest increases in armaments expenditures. The Mexican armed forces, as well, have gone on shopping tours for sophisticated equipment from Europe. As General Pérez Mejía proudly stated: "Mexico has today, may I say, a better army than it had last year . . . because of the support, understanding and trust shown by our commander-in-chief."

General Galvan Lopez on development

From the speech by Gen. Félix Galván López at a regional conference of military zone commanders, July 24, 1980, in the presence of President José López Portillo:

“At this point in our history, we are looking toward the future, conscious of our needs.”

In making this statement in reference to our national development plan, our president, José López Portillo, affirmed that being conscious of our needs and positing them as problems also makes them solvable.

“We wish to take on,” our commander-in-chief added, “predetermined and free but obligatory action. . . .”

In my judgment, this predetermination is located in our freedom and democracy and has been grounded in the most advanced and coherent Global Development Plan in our history.

That plan, which we have understood to be the fundamental key to the required transformation of Mexico, is a commitment already made by the state sector in which our armed forces are located.

By guaranteeing the integrity, independence and sovereignty of the nation, the Mexican army and air force contribute to the viability and attainment of this national vehicle for planned development.

In this global plan, it is clear that the great objectives and strategies it poses are contingent on the existence and preservation of a climate of dynamic stability, order and peace. . . .

The military offers subordinate obedience to the people, through their government.

Of course, it is impossible to understand the army outside of the government or the state, without confusing those terms. . . .

The military institution, far from eliminating or annulling social potentialities, gives them sustenance through legitimately constituted civil authority.

It takes a vanguard position, incorporating ethical conceptions into its own authority.

It is thus located as an adjunct of political stability which is a precondition of freedom, and it lays a solid basis for the organization that consolidates power and authority. For, “in the modernizing world,” (or so say the theorists), “he who organizes his policies controls the future.” . . .

As a country, we have more to defend today than in previous times. Our coveted resources are greatly expanded. Our vital installations have grown considerably,

and our very population has multiplied in impressive proportions. Even so, we will meet our obligations with the means our country provides.

While it is true that in the history of revolutionary governments, the percentage of public expenditures allocated to national defense has been reduced because of other justified national priorities, we have with great conviction accepted [this fact] in our training, esprit de corps, sacrifices, but above all, our broadened concept of loyalty in which we were trained.

Our enthusiasm and sense of service is not a financial question or matter of pesos and centavos. This is the difference between a mercenary and a soldier of the Republic.

Our president has indicated that there will shortly be more funds so that we may recruit more troops and [improve] our way of life and methods of combat. This is glad news and is proof of the understanding and affection of our head of state toward the armed forces. . . .

The concept of national security is not now nor has it ever been set apart from [the concepts of] justice, freedom and progress. . . .

National security is a dynamic concept; it evolves at a social pace and is based on the certainty that the army plays an unquestionable role. . . .

It is unnecessary to allude to the sharp and ever-present threats to national security facing us from abroad.

We Mexicans know, and have always known them.

History has given us no truce, but we have learned that [threats] do not overwhelm or destroy us. We could almost say that they have given us cohesion and strength.

Admiral Fourzan Marquez on oil field defense

The following article appeared in the Aug. 24, 1980 edition of the Mexico City daily Excelsior. It reported on the speech given the previous day by Admiral Osvaldo Fourzán Márquez, director of the Veracruz Naval Academy.

Admiral Osvaldo Fourzán Márquez, director of the Veracruz Naval Academy, warned yesterday that the country's oil wealth demands a more advanced conception of national security. “We cannot trust that our interests will be respected based only on our policy of non-intervention,” he said.

Speaking in the presence of President José López Portillo, Fourzán warned that “we cannot continue to develop Mexico's commercial and industrial infrastructure without also considering the possibility of some external or internal action perpetrated against our interests.”

He added that it becomes more difficult each day for



Photo: Government of Mexico

A banquet given Sept. 2 by Mexico's military command for President López Portillo (center). At right are Admiral Cházaro Lara and Congressman Luis M. Farías; at left is General Galván López.

the Navy to adequately defend the country's oil rigs and platforms.

The Admiral explained that the country's oil wealth has an enormous strategic value, and that this enhances the nation's power, as new industries and new sources of employment are created. But, he continued, "The current world situation is unfortunately such that our geopolitical situation has taken on increased importance."

Fourzán emphasized that in the construction of new industrial complexes, the opinion and advice that the armed forces can offer with regard to national security should be taken into account to guarantee and facilitate the defense of these installations. As an example, Fourzán pointed to the difficulty the Navy faces in protecting the port of Dos Bocas in Tabasco, the oil rigs of Campeche, the complexes at Pajaritos, La Gangrejera and Morelos in Veracruz, and the works planned for Cayo Arenas off the coast of Yucatán.

General Perez Mejia on the food weapon

Speech given by the Director of the Superior War College, Brig. Gen. Alfonso Pérez Mejía, at a breakfast given by the armed forces in honor of President López Portillo on the occasion of his Fourth State of the Union address:

The loyalty of our armed forces, dictated by our laws, our conviction and our nature, has proven to be an important factor in the peaceful development of the country.

The absence of armed conflicts indeed creates the illusion that we live in a time of peace—a dangerous mistake.

The world is presently engaged in a bloodless war, the weapons of which are gold and energy speculation, the shrinkage and restriction of credit, deliberate infla-

tion, and the control of the markets and the imposition of low prices for raw materials, among others.

An economic war exists, then, that has been imposed by the highly industrialized countries to maintain their hegemony and their lifestyle, and which paves the way for an imminent and overwhelming food war.

In this war, the use of food as a weapon promises to exceed what already takes place in economic activities.

The fundamental importance of the Mexican food system, the first objective of which is to attain self-sufficiency, will eliminate our foreign dependence and secure our sovereignty.

The participation of the armed forces in the Mexican food system will also be important and shall be directed to the tasks of guaranteeing peace in the countryside, aiding and supporting the peasants in their agricultural tasks, and maintaining the vitality of communications that make the transportation and supply of their products possible.

This effort fits within the context of one of the postulates of the Global Development Plan, reaffirming and strengthening the independence of Mexico as a democratic nation.

We have been given the mission of securing the nation's integrity, independence and sovereignty through the maintenance of constitutional rule and the effectiveness of law.

As specific tasks that complement the traditional ones, we are responsible for protecting strategic installations and marine resources, as well as protecting our territorial waters, air space and communications. But in all these missions, however difficult circumstances may seem to be, we have not been prevented from improving and expanding our action within the institutions.

Mexico has today, may I say, a better army than it had last year, and this not only because of the commitment made from the lowest ranks to the high command, but because of the support, understanding and trust shown by our commander-in-chief.