

Mexico's Evolving Security Cooperation Policy in Central America

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Mexico has long attempted to enter the Central American sub-region for its own strategic interests. Besides, throughout the 20th century, the “progressive” foreign policy ideology strongly influenced its approach to the republics of the Isthmus. The benefits from the mechanisms of building lasting civic peace during the 1980s Central American conflict won Mexico the reputation of a constructive negotiator in Latin America and beyond. However, with the security agenda and international system becoming more complicated, there are fewer levers for active foreign policy in the area. Mexico is struggling to “reset” its policy in the sub-region while experiencing serious security challenges at home and pressure from abroad, balancing between its dependence upon the United States and pretensions for independent medium-power status. In this article we examine the search by Mexico for new security instruments in Central America, putting forward the issues of mutual development, migration and combat on violence. Particular attention is paid to the change in Mexico-U.S. relationship as regards Central America, both in matters of its domestic policy and international assistance efforts. It is concluded that the sub-region provides Mexico with wide opportunities not only to establish partnerships along the lines of regional cooperation but also use the smaller republics to the south as a model for solving its own security problems.

Keywords: Mexico, Central America, United States, security, cooperation.

Latin America in the past decades set examples of various successful international cooperation mechanisms. However, the region has proved highly vulnerable to failures caused by the shortage of finance, corrupt politics, weak and divided civil society groups and low security level. Among all the challenges security presents a persistent problem for Latin America, although its condition varies greatly. The issue is acute independently from economic growth and empowered political parties, ranking high even for Brazil and Mexico, the regional leaders. This strife raises uncomfortable questions about the efficiency of state institutions and governmental policies, along with the interest of the empowered elites to genuinely seek the cure. Central American republics have long become the most insecure zone and the object for regional and external efforts alike.

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The tragic legacy of the conflict of the 1970s and 1980s still looms over its societies, restraining the capacity of institutional building. Sinister images of Central America include caravans of migrants, many of them refugees, violent street gangs and drug cartels, massive civil rights abuses with no clear remedies ahead. Weak economies and high birth rates nurture the deep-rooted neglect for creating business opportunities through balancing large monopolist interests with medium-sized and small companies, neoliberal policies of slashing down on health-care and education spending, low-paid and poorly trained police and court personnel. It is only true to stress that the level of economic, social and justice problems within the sub-region are far from being identical. Costa Rica, Panama and until recently Nicaragua under the Sandinistas have shown sustainable growth and solid institutional functioning, as compared to crisis-ridden republics of the “Northern Triangle” (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras). Nevertheless, they are also included in the complicated network of pitfalls and challenges that dominate the isthmus. UN agencies such as ECLAC, FAO and UNHCR, and the regional structures (OAS and IADB, SICA, CELAC) have so far contributed little to the shift away from negative trends. As for national regional actors, the United States, Mexico and Colombia have been involved deeply in the region.

The Mexican part is especially interesting, for its study helps to understand more clearly the approaches to security in Latin America in the forms of national security efforts, regional and sub-regional cooperation. Mexico is an example of a complicated shift from politicized activism in the sub-region before the 1990s to much lower participation after its entrance into the North American integration project. In the last two decades the country embarked upon a goal to reinstate itself not only as an economic power in relations with the southern neighbors, but to mark its profile as political and, particularly, security guarantor towards Central American states. The following research looks into the vision of regional and sub-regional security by Mexico and its partners of the Isthmus. We will begin by outlining the place of Central America in Mexican foreign policy with its historical background. Then we shall pass to the changing conditions in Central American states, the rising of new transnational threats and their impact on the sub-regional security ambient. Finally, we will examine the signs of a new relationship between the United States and Mexico in the framework of contemporary American approaches to security and defense in Latin America and the Caribbean is critical to understanding the key successes and failures.

Mexico's attempts to venture into the Central American security field have two main reasons. First, it may be seen as a part of the Mexican foreign policy goal to “return” to Latin America, “diversifying” its diplomacy of cooperation. In this sense, it serves as a supplement for recent economic efforts. Mexico started a few bilateral and multilateral trade and development projects with Central American countries. From the Tuxtla Accord and the Mexican Commission for Cooperation with Central America (1990) to much more ambitious Plan Puebla Panamá and Project Mesoamerica (2000 and 20008, respectively), Mexico sought to stimulate economic and social development of its partners. Second, Mexico inevitably suffers from the security problems in Central America, being a country of transit for legal goods, smuggled drugs, legal and undocumented labor force from the south to the U.S. border, and arms trafficking in opposite direction. The later makes the Mexican state a target for criticism almost on all parts: its own political parties and NGOs, Central American governments and civil society groups, the U.S. Government, with ac-

cusations for “porous” southern border, human rights abuses and links between security forces and criminals.

Given this pressure, it is clear that Mexico simply could not choose for “abstention” against the problems of Central America. Furthermore, active foreign policy in this sub-region is well founded in the past. At the turn of the 20th century Mexico tried on, if timidly, the robes of medium-size regional power, countering U.S. unilateralism toward Central America and the Caribbean. Mexico’s long-time “strong man” Porfirio Díaz assisted in creating the Central American Tribunal in 1907, designed to smooth territorial conflicts between the nations, and mediated between Guatemala and El Salvador with the United States taking it as a positive step [1, p. 199–201]. But in 1909 Díaz almost openly confronted Washington by lending aid and refuge to the deposed Nicaraguan dictator, José Santos Celaya. To a large extent, the support was offered due to the rivalry between Celaya and Guatemala’s leader Manuel Estrada Cabrera, with whom Mexico City had disputes over the southeastern boundary [2, p. 154–155]. At the end of the Mexican Revolution the nationalist President Venustiano Carranza attempted to spread the doctrine of “Indo-Latinism” as opposed to Pan-Americanism. In Central America the continued tactic of playing one republic against the other brought dubious results: while the ties with El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras strengthened, Guatemala’s complaints against Carranza’s pressure to Washington contributed to irritating the Americans and more uncompromised work for his ousting [3, p. 218–220].

The directions of Mexico’s foreign policy since the Mexican Revolution and especially after the World War II were characterized by what is usually qualified as “progressivism”. The legal and ideological base for such behavior was derived from Estrada Doctrine, put forward in 1930 and remaining the nation’s guide in foreign policy roughly until 2000. The main pillars of the doctrine were respect of international law, national sovereignty, non-intervention and peaceful conflict resolution by arbitration [4, p. 720]. Mexico established constructive relations with reformist and leftist governments in Latin America and worldwide, criticized U.S. aggressive meddling in the social struggle in the region on the part of the land-owning, extractivist and military elites. During the Cold War Mexico served as an “intermediary” between Cuba and the United States, being the only nation voting against the expulsion of the island republic from the OAS, broke diplomatic relations with Chile after the U.S.-sponsored 1973 coup and Nicaraguan Somoza regime in 1979 when the struggle of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) intensified [5, p. 195].

The peak of Mexico’s efforts to champion non-intervention politics was its participation in the Contadora peace process. Apart from stalling investment capabilities in the sub-region, raging civil wars presented a great social and national security challenges to Mexico, including rising militarization of the governments, migration of about 50 thousand Guatemalan Indians across the border into Chiapas and Quintana Roo, Honduran air surveillance flights encircling Mexican oil fields, and obstacles for the realization of the 1980 San José agreement between Mexico and Venezuela to supply Central American nations with oil at fixed prices [6, p. 399–400]. From the very beginning of the conflict Mexico sought to create a group of supporters within the OAS in order to block the joint inter-American armed intervention in Nicaragua and denouncing U.S. up-build of the “Contra” forces on the soil of the other Central American states. The Franco-Mexican Regional Détente Plan of 1981 sought to recognize the Salvadoran Farabundo Martí Na-

tional Liberation Front (FMLN) and the National Revolutionary Front as combatants and legal political subjects [7, p. 23].

Despite Ronald Reagan administration's pressure over Mexico to incorporate to leave its "internationalist" stance, under President Miguel de la Madrid the efforts to resolve the conflict increased. The 1983 Contadora group included Mexico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela, formulated the multilateral approach to both inter-state and internal conflict in Central America. While the relationship with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua remained constructive, dialogue between Mexico and the rest of the Isthmus republics proved tenacious at best, which was one of the main reasons for Contadora's failure. However, the Esquipulas process, sometimes seen as a "child" of Contadora, which became possible after the power change in Guatemala and Costa Rica, paved the way to elaborating final peace formulas for Central America and contributed to the creation of the Central American Integration System (SICA) in 1991 [8, p. 183–185]. Mexican diplomacy during the *sexenio* of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) developed capability of mediating the conflict both on bilateral and international levels. Mexico also broke the record of long-time abstention from participating in military peace missions, sending a police force to the UN Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL). The Chapultepec Castle served as a site for negotiations between the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments and the guerrillas [9, p. 182–184].

Meanwhile, the ability of Mexico to play the part of a mediator had been seriously constrained by the flaws in its own political condition. The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed a dramatic shift in regional political standards, generated by the rise of new parties and coalitions, and, most notably, the rapid march down the path of a "democratic transition". Military regimes both in South and Central America were replaced by pluralistic democracies, and the topics of human rights abuses, corruption and international cooperation in combating these system vices. In spite of Mexico's "progressivism" in foreign affairs, it had remained under the rule of the same political force for more than half a century. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) manifested the principles of anti-imperialism and democracy abroad but swiftly suppressed radical movements and organized opposition at home, the events of 1968 leaving the most negative record in national memory and provoking highly controversial international image [10]. What was most important, putting more emphasis on democratic standards affected the transformation of security in Latin America. Both the inter-American system under the OAS structures and the new organizations and regimes of competing "regional" agenda, such as the Rio Group, MERCOSUR, SICA, CAN, deemed democratic procedures a prerequisite for security cooperation. The idea of International Integral Security made military and police efforts dependent on building state and civil society institutions, modernizing urban and rural infrastructure, protecting land and maritime borders. "Harmonizing" national security and defense doctrines led to larger military cooperation training, which alleviated old suspicions between the countries due to territorial disputes and status rivalry [11, p. 256–263].

Yet another purpose was to divert the armed forces from actively participating in national politics by assigning them to deal with "new generation" threats: underdevelopment, poverty, illegal resource procurement, drug trafficking and street violence. For Mexico to take on these values and goals was far from easy, the reason being the perception of the military as a guarantor of national sovereignty and integrity, the non-intervention ideology straining their use abroad. Unlike such post-authoritarian states as Argentina, Brazil

and Chile, Mexico maintained a low profile in international peace-keeping operations, which sometimes led to criticism on the part of the United Nations and U.S. government [12, p. 645–648]. In this sense, it was not so clear what real help could it provide to eradicate the problems pestering Central America. The beginning of a new “democratic” period with the center-right Party of National Action (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox winning presidency in 2000 led to unprecedented attention to democracy and human rights issues, besides fostering solid alliance with the United States [13, p. 297–298].

The 2000s were the period of slow yet sure growth of the Mexico’s trade with Central America. From 2000 to 2010 the total amount of commerce increased from 1,836 million USD to 6,554 million USD, with Guatemala providing 40% of export and Costa Rica over 65 % of import for the sub-region [14]. The “privileged association” concept determined Mexico setting the task of modernizing the economic capacities of its southern neighbors. Thus, the Plan Puebla–Panama was aid at modernizing transport, energy networks, custom service and border control, integrating the five Isthmus republics, Belize and Panama with North America. Nevertheless, the corresponding programs of the Plan, such as the International Route Network in Mesoamerica (*Red Internacional de Carreteras Mesoamericanas*), worked far more efficiently than the whole structure, which led to its later reorganization into the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project. A highly important breakthrough was the entrance of Colombia in the project, which laid the grounds for future security cooperation [13, p. 270–271]. However, at first security was secondary to economic considerations, and bilateral relations in this area bore more gains than attempts at setting collective “Mesoamerican” agenda. In 2002, Mexico and Guatemala established the High-level Group for the Frontier Protection (GANSEF). Comprised of the personnel of the National Defense Secretaries, the Army and the Navy, the Secretaries of Foreign Affairs and the Mexican Office of General Prosecutor of the Republic, the Group was meant to address the problems affecting trade and transport. Almost simultaneously, the same Group was created with Belize. But it was not until 2005 that the three nations set out to create a shared mechanism of border security — a goal that in the end failed to materialize [15, p. 20].

Migration was the main reason that set the security issues relations with Central America on top of sub-regional relations. Already in 2006 the number of persons passing illegally through the national territory annually reached 500 thousand. If before and immediately after the Central American conflict the reasons for migration were mainly economical, later political persecution, unrestrained criminal violence and natural disasters appeared as even stronger incentives [16, p. 173, 175]. The greater percentage of the migrants have the United States for final destination, yet large numbers stay in Mexico before they dare to leave the northern frontier. Mexican internal security institutions and foreign policy alike proved unable neither to stem the tide nor make it more organized and safe for the migrants themselves. Many Central American migrants take up the railroad, the “*Bestia*” (the Beast) train becoming the symbol of suffering and dangers that one may face on the way north.

The rise of the Mexican drug cartels in the 1990s and the slow slipping of vast territories into the condition of permanent criminal wars throughout the next decade further complicated the migration issue, which now could be hardly separated from the ever increasing menace of organized crime. One of the reasons was the profit derived by the criminals to assist in reaching the border and entering the United States, the specialization known as “*polleros*”, “*pasantes*” or “*coyotes*”. It is not uncommon for these groups of crimi-

nals to be involved in extortion and kidnapping, often on the very “Bestia” and change stations to other clandestine routes. The statistics of disappeared persons in Mexico has always included a significant number of undocumented Central Americans. The international community was shaken by the killing of 72 migrants in San Fernando (the state of Tamaulipas) in 2010, attributed to the members of *Los Zetas* cartel [16, p. 178–180].

It has been widely argued by both scholars and civic activists that the Mexican government, hardly limited in its resources, responded to the migrant crisis with the so-called “securitization” of the southern frontier, to a large extent championed by the United States. “Securitization” discourse is based on the assumption that an “elastic” border which lacks the solid control by the neighboring countries needs a wide range of military, intelligence, justice measures to enhance its potential to restrain migration and deal with the organized crime, in order to transform it into a “hegemonic” one. The best example of the later is the U.S.-Mexico border. Discussions on the means to broaden the opportunities for the population of Central American republics to raise public safety were inevitably mingled with building security infrastructure [17, p. 10–11, 14–17]. Yet to some researchers it seems painting the governmental practices in black. They point out that despite the frequent use of “security” discourse, “cooperation” describes the Mexican approach to security much better. In fact, there is nothing in evolution of the Mexican migrant laws that supports conclusions of any radical departure from previous practices, dating back to the 19th century [18, p. 274–275]. Although the formulas of the National Development Plan for 2007–2012 called to make migration policy “respond to the security needs”, it was from insisting on any “coercive” measures against the migrants; instead, their protection was included into the top issues [19, p. 70]. As for the National Migration Law of 2011, it stressed the need to aid the migrants on transitional routes and even integration of those remaining in the national territory [20, p. 3–7].

Positive and constructive, the national outlook on migration could accomplish little to address the roots of the insecurity. Modest programs of bilateral actions, such as the Plan for Transparency and Corruption on the Southern Frontier, started in the Fox era, could not either raise the living standard in poor southern states of Mexico. The “War on Crime” campaign, a part of Felipe Calderón’s 2006 electoral promises, made internal and transnational security the high priorities of his *sexenio*. The internationalization of the region security received a strong impulse from the Mérida Initiative of 2007, which resulted in 1,4 billion USD of U.S. financial aid, small arms, aircraft and surveillance devices for Mexican and Central American military and public security forces [21, p. 8–10]. What was really important is that the Mérida Initiative gave valuable lessons on the scale of using sheer military force in highly vulnerable and unstable societies. It established a model for the future regional security projects by the United States, with the Central American Regional Security Initiative (2009) and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (2010) following, with more efforts directed to modernizing the police forces, the courts and the civil service [22, p. 19–21].

During the Calderón presidency (2006–2012) Mexico continued posing itself as a medium-size power. Its trade and development projects with Brazil, Argentina and Chile encompassed more involvement into the regional security mechanisms in bilateral and multilateral formats, yet to a much lesser extent than South American nations [23, p. 877]. In 2007 Mexico urged its Central American partners to outline the Central American Security Strategy along the principles of SICA. Three years later Mexico expanded the

configuration of the framework, raising the issue of joint actions between the United States, Mexico and Canada by launching the Two-Regional Dialog SICA–North America (*el Diálogo Biregional SICA–América del Norte*). The first conference of this forum took place in Wakefield (Canada) in 2010, with Mexico, Canada and the United States as the Group of Friends of the Central American Security Strategy. With the support from North America, in 2011 the SICA nations developed and put into practice the SICA Democratic Security Monitor and Index (*el Observatorio e Índice Democrático de SICA*), with the purpose of providing and analyzing data on the subject. In 2012 the five Central American republics (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) agreed for the joint efforts in border control through the Regional Program of the Frontiers Security (SE-FRO), encircling customs, police and migration services for targeting criminal networks and transnational trafficking.

Central American security situation demonstrates high controversies. The *maras*, or *pandillas*, street gangs that date back to the 1980s, operating in big cities and towns with smaller impact on the countryside, are usually to blame for the escalation of violence statistics. *Mara* activities are named as the most typical reason undocumented migrants give to leave their home countries [24]. In 2015 Guatemala was beat by El Salvador in the rating of daily murders for Latin America, when the later became the regional “leader” with more than killings per 100 thousand inhabitants [25]. The rates continued to grow, rendering hopeless police efforts and international aid programs. One by one, the Northern Triangle governments undertook *mano dura* (“strong hand”) policies in the gang imbroglio, while the officials expressed serious doubts for their success even before implementation [26, p. 163–165]. Still the Central American gangs do not appear to possess enough resources to exert control over large territories as was the case in Mexico [27, p. 46, 52–53].

But it has been long stated by international experts that notorious influence of Mexico’s drug cartels is expressed in the shift of their activities to the Northern Triangle, after suffering defeats at the hands of Mexican justice, police and military forces. In fact, there are assertions of “alliances” established between the cartels and the *maras* [28, p. 55]. This may be not without foundations; however, more plausible is the use of the Northern Triangle territory for money laundering, concealment and cross-border trafficking purposes, because the *maras* themselves have little to contribute to either *Los Zetas* or *El Golfo* cartels. Decentralized in structure, members of the Salvadoran MS-13 gang were present in 20 of 32 Mexican states, according to the OAS investigation of 2010, the Mexico–Guatemalan frontier as the most important area [29, p. 9]. During the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) in Mexico the use of the military for internal security was reduced. The Northern Triangle governments also applied the *mano amiga* (“friendly hand”) policy even earlier, with little evidence of success [29, p. 11].

In the past few years Mexico has become the subject of vigorous, if not aggressive, U.S. efforts to raise security levels in North and Central America. Besides the alleged Mexican trail in the “gang” activity in the southern republics, Washington pressed Mexico to cooperate more in its migrant policies. By early 2017, as much as 94 % of those were sent back to their countries of origin, the Guatemalans being the majority in contrast to 2013 when Hondurans were at the top, with relative decrease in figures [30]. Yet Mexico’s actions clearly benefited Barack Obama administration hard line on deportation. This issue could well be named as the largest inconsistencies in U.S.-Mexico and Mexico-Central American relations. The immigration crisis of 2014 was especially complicated as more

than 57 thousand undocumented minors from Central America were detained by U.S. Border Enforcement. Although Mexico was not responsible for the exodus, greater security efforts were expected by the United States [31, p.61].

With Donald Trump in the White House, the U.S. uncompromising stance became more solid, although its own deportation pace during 2017–2018 grew insignificantly. On the campaign trail, the Republican want-to-be nominee claimed Mexico to send “drug dealers and rapists and murderers” in the United States. As early as February 2017, the then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly went on a tour to Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. While in Mexico, the American emissaries urged to reinforce security measures on the Guatemalan border, most notably in the areas where the “Southern wall” separates the two countries. After Peña Nieto’s “concessions”, the Guatemalan politicians went in uproar [32]. In September 2017 the White House announced the closing of DACA (Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals), which caused strain to both Mexican and Central American recipients; a few months later, the Department of Homeland Security terminated the Temporary Protected Status for a few countries, El Salvador and Nicaragua among them [33]. Trump lashed out against Mexico’s failure to curb the transitory migration across its territory and deliberate neglect of the U.S. requirements by providing transportation facilities for undocumented migrants. In a peculiar self-confidence, the President quite erroneously called the journey from Guatemalan to U.S. border as safe as “if it is walking through the Central Park” [34]. In reality, the Mexican governmental agencies, including federal and state police, the National Migration Institute (INM) officials commit not much less amuses in comparison to criminals. Torture, plunder, extortion and rape appear almost in all complaints against the “securitized” migration policy [35].

There is also one more aspect for Mexico’s participation that cannot be overlooked — the growing U.S. efforts to gain new military presence in Central America and the Caribbean. Projects of economic, humanitarian, technical and scientific aid are matched by the military training programs, creating new special task forces and regular exercises of U.S. and Central American troops. The U.S. Armed Forces Southern Command (US SOUTHCOM) with headquarters in Miami (Florida) has launched various initiatives, fight on organized crime, smuggling and drug trafficking seen as the main targets. Joint Task-Force Bravo (JTFB), located at Soto Cano air-base in Honduras is the best example of U.S. militarized security overhaul in the sub-region. In the latest US SOUTHCOM Theatrical Defense Strategy illegal migration is addressed in terms of protecting the territory of the United States from Special Interest Aliens from Central America, which might be involved in terrorist activity [36]. The surge for greater military control over Central America became during the second Obama term; the difference of security issues and Trump are focused mainly on budget cuts for development, for example, recognizing the 2014 Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle project inappropriate [37]. It is especially important that the U.S. seem to pass some of its functions to the regional nations, Mexico and Colombia as two key partners.

In the case of Mexico the difficulty is that U.S.-Mexican military cooperation has been developing within the framework of North American security, supervised by the US Armed Forces Northern Command (US NORTHCOM). Nevertheless, in fulfillment of bilateral accords the Mexican Navy conducts border surveillance in the river basins on the southern frontier, Usumacinta river in particular [38]. In early 2017, a tri-national task

force of Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran under the guidance of the SOUTHCOM Defense Institutional Reform Initiative (DIRI). It was very symptomatic for Mexico to hold the first Central American Security Conference at the SOUTHCOM auspices [39]. Mexican instructors and special task forces under the also carry out educational programs for Panamese Public Security Forces, thus upgrading the SENAFRONT system (Seguridad de la Frontera Nacional) to improve its capacities to break the smuggling chains along the coast of that country [40]. All these militarized security innovations feed the fears of civil rights organizations both in Mexico and Central America. The most obvious shortcoming of the military build-up for them is the involvement of security forces in murders and abuses with indifference on the part of their U.S. “patron”. On June 7, 2017, in an open letter to Tillerson a few dozens of Mexican and Central American NGOs urged the State Department to rely more on dialog than force [41].

In some sense, Mexican security policy in Central America is placed between the hammer and the anvil. It cannot miss the strategic need to “reset” affairs with the sub-region, but simultaneously should not do it at the cost of alienation from the United States. Of course, to see the complicated balance of “North American” and “Latin American” priorities in “all or nothing” terms would be an exaggeration. Despite fierce and sometimes “bullying” vocabulary of Donald Trump and a few members of his administration, narrowing the gap between Mexico and the United States in the matters of regional security is one of the priorities for the White House. With the new turn of migration crisis after the U.S. resorted to “zero-tolerance” policy and division of families at the borders, Mexico will inevitable become a “buffer”, especially considering the fact that vast majority of undocumented migrants coming to the U.S. are not Mexicans. There are signs that the political shift in Mexican politics after MORENA’s and a bit unexpected takeover of national politics might even turn into an asset for Mexico’s activism in Central America. Talks between the the president-elect Andres Manuel López Obrador and U.S. Secretary of state Mike Pompeo in July 2018 resulted in the decision to outline a genuinely bilateral approach to the problems of Central America [42]. It is almost certain that the president-elect Andres Manuel López Obrador will try to achieve both the widely spoken-of “mutual respect” with the United States and revive the “Latino “friendship”. It is remarkable that for his first meeting with a Latin American counterpart he reunited with Jimmy Morales of Guatemala, the two leaders pledging to treat the sub-regional problems avoiding “walls” erected by the hemispheric leader [43].

Mexico may act as a medium-size power toward Central America, but its purposes are neither hegemonic nor fully cooperative. For the first model it lacks military potential and policy guidance that could help shaping the international relations between the republics. The level of security also varies significantly between the countries: while the Northern Triangle has long been the object of international assistance efforts, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and especially Panama are less dependent on it. Cooperation is abruptly limited by low trade and investment rates, although Mexicans and Central Americans claim that a breakthrough is imminent. Mexico’s political system is much more solid than that of the Northern Triangle nations, its main partners, but it still faces great discrepancies. Large sectors of Mexican population suffer almost from the same underdevelopment, low opportunities and violence that haunt the Northern Triangle. However, to some extent it is a way to capitalize on the similarities, with more emphasis on studying the structural weaknesses, developing expertise to change the countries fist in order to make them more

secure. The long tradition of developmental agenda in the foreign policy has once more begun to characterize the Mexican approach to the sub-region. Although the initiatives here are more subject to the control on the part of the United States, there are questions where only joint efforts of Mexico and its southern partners can bring about far-reaching reconstruction. It is especially important for Mexico to see itself not as an external actor in Central America, but as an organic part of the LAC region. In this case the long-proclaimed appeal to be a “bridge” between North and Latin America will achieve a more practical dimension.

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