

standing differences, particularly in the economic sphere.

Vulnerability of Mexico becomes apparent

Once again, as at the end of the 19th century, the two nations' projects converged. The Mexican government decided that the social reforms were over and got down to the business of becoming industrialized. At the very least, it succeeded in making its presence felt in the world.

The friction between the two countries, which naturally and inevitably concerned trade, emigration, health and so on, kept steadily becoming less and less conflictual right up until the 1960s. The United States was engaged in an unremitting struggle against the Soviet Union and international communism. Mexico, for its part, despite the revolutionary rhetoric its leaders still liked to affect in official statements, had a thoroughly conservative and anticommunist system.

However, Mexico took no part in this anticommunist struggle. And when Washington's anticommunism gave rise to direct American initiatives in the continent — in Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic — that violated the principle of nonintervention, Mexico let it be known it disapproved. At any rate, relations with Washington did not take long to become normal again once things were over the critical hump.

The Mexican economic model began breaking down in the 1970s producing repercussions on domestic and foreign policy.

The shortcomings of development based on a relatively weak home market and an overprotected industry resulted in the foreign trade posting regular deficits.

Devaluation of the peso in 1976 touched off a crisis of confidence be-

tween the private sector and the government. However, the extraordinary increases in oil prices helped the Mexican economy to pull itself together. But the respite was short-lived and was followed by a far worse situation caused by collapsing oil prices. Mexico's vulnerability in the face of the outside world then became apparent.

Very early on in the 1970s, Mexico's political leaders decided to abandon their policy of isolation and take up the cause of the Third World and its demands. The public stance that Mexico adopted for external consumption became anti-imperialist and Mexican diplomats turned into activists.

The change took shape with the adoption of the Mexican-sponsored "Bill of Economic Rights and Obligations of States" at the United Nations and the holding of the Cancún Conference.

Unfortunately, the adoption of the Bill of Economic Rights and Obligations and the Cancún Conference had very little practical impact and succeeded only in irritating the United States. Mexico's change of attitude coincided, quite by chance, with the victory of the Sandinist revolution in Nicaragua, and all this resulted in embittering the differences in perception between Mexico City and Washington.

The issue of Central America is at the very core of the present tension. Mexico considers that the conflicts in Central America are of local origin and can be solved by change (reform or revolution) that does away with decrepit social and political structures.

The United States, on the other hand, sees what is happening in Central America as the product of Cuban and Soviet activities, and consequently supports direct intervention for strengthening conservative governments and toppling Nicaragua's revolutionary regime.

Mexico considers it cannot accept such a policy which would effectively destroy the principle of noninterven-

tion on which relations between the United States and Latin America have been based — at least in theory — for the past 30 years.

For their part, the Americans see the Mexican attitude as threatening their national interests, for they consider it is working in favor of a regime — Nicaragua — that Washington has tagged as a Marxist ally of the USSR, to obtain a firm foothold in the Western hemisphere.

American misgivings

The economic crisis has inevitably taken a heavy toll of Mexico's authoritarian, though tolerant, political system. The collapse of its economic model has tainted its legitimacy. The enormous \$102 billion foreign debt is seriously interfering with the government's efforts to carry out a rapid industrial redeployment as a response to the problems spawned by the crisis.

The United States is convinced that Mexico's political stability is essential for its own security. Any weakening of the Mexican political system, which happens to be the most solidly entrenched in Latin America, could only cause misgivings in Washington. The United States has not found a way of getting Mexican leaders to take adequate measures for revitalizing the system which it wants democratized.

Mexican leaders react very badly when Americans disagree with, or express reservations about, their domestic and foreign policies and they see that as a threat affecting them directly or indirectly.

Lorenzo Meyer

(1) Which broke out in 1861.