Civil-Military Relations in Democratic Mexico

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**Introduction.** The study of civil-military relations generally focuses on the military and civilian sides of the equation as a totality, rather than dissecting the military into its component parts. Yet different branches of a national armed force may develop differing relations with national civilian authority. These relations, moreover, are likely to be influenced by regime type and the national security decision making process as well as their de facto and de jure roles in the polity. The embedded culture in each branch may drive them to adapt to civilian oversight differently, particularly if the scope of that oversight is changing. In the U.S. case, President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously complained about the U.S. Navy as a service that was particularly difficult to control, and Defense Secretaries Robert McNamara, Richard Cheney, and, more recently, Robert Gates fought difficult battles with the U.S. Air Force in particular. During the early years of Charles DeGaulle’s presidency, defecting units of the French Army tried to overthrow his 4th Republic, while the French Air Force stepped in to save it. The Imperial Japanese Army and the Imperial Japanese Navy often competed for influence during World War II, probably to the detriment of the Japanese war effort.

In Mexico, inter service rivalries have not produced such dramatic ruptures and battles, though intra service divisions were commonplace prior to the 1940s. (Camp 2005; Haber, et. al. 2008; and Hamilton 2011) Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that it is now a significant issue in Mexican civil military relations and an underexplored one. In this paper we first review the relevant theoretical terrain. Second, we parse the Mexican military into its two functional branches, the Army (SEDENA), and the Navy (SEMAR) and focus on explaining why there are some clear differences in each service’s approach to civil-military relations. Although the scholarship and policy literature on the Mexican Navy is even thinner than it is for the Army,
available material suggests that significant differences exist between the two branches and that the evolution of this relationship will shape civil military relations. Scholars and analysts point to the pitfalls of competition but we point out that there may be salutary effects as well.

Third, we weigh the effects of democratization to this inter-branch analysis. With the opening of the Mexican political process that begins during the Administration of President Salinas (1988 -1994), the incentives of Mexico’s dominant political party and the military, especially the Army, begin to diverge. Finally, we apply this inter-branch comparison to the Mexican military’s involvement in counter-narcotics, which goes hand in hand with political liberalization. In Mexico, because of corruption and uneven state development across a federal system of government, police and criminal justice institutions were unequal to the task of containing inter and intra cartel violence as it worsened during the late 1980s through the present. Beginning with President Salinas, the military was asked by successive administrations to step up their participation in efforts to quell increasing violence associated with expanding drug commerce. Such a role provides risks and opportunities for SEDENA and SEMAR. Given institutional independence – each ministry reports directly to the President in the national security decision process – it is reasonable to anticipate that they would not react in lock step due to institutional differences as well as competition for resources and new responsibilities.

In Mexico we show that military inter-branch cultural and institutional characteristics become more salient as both democracy and the war on drugs became more entrenched during the 1990s and 2000s. These changes in the political and strategic landscape presented opportunities for the balance of power and influence between branches to evolve. Our preliminary findings, for now based mostly on the secondary literature, suggest that inter-branch rivalry between SEDENA and SEMAR is real and merits more thorough and systematic
investigation. The Mexican Navy has emerged as the progressive, modern, cooperative, and forward-leaning of the two branches. It has proven to be more engaged, open, and cooperative with Congress, the public, and the United States as cooperation between these two countries has expanded and intensified, beginning with the Zedillo Administration (1994-2000). We suspect that this will place pressure on SEDENA to make similar advances albeit more slowly given its size, its misanthropic and hierarchical culture, and bureaucratic inertia rooted in its own successes and popularity among the public. We caution that more systematic and primary research is warranted, particularly since we simply do not know as much about the sociology of SEMAR and the factors that drove its recent and successful modernization efforts cited by analysts and scholars. Whatever the roots of these changes, SEMAR’s prestige has been rising and it seems poised to thrive and grow as democracy takes root in Mexico.

The Civil-Military Dynamics of Inter-service Relations. In this section, we briefly survey the existing literature on how inter-service relations impacts, and in turn is impacted by military relations with civilian authority. This dimension is important because where there are independent service components to a national military, they often compete for resources and influence. While their narrative may be “serving the nation,” organizational loyalties drive their competition for resources, prestige, and autonomy from excessive political oversight. That competition is interesting in itself, but more pertinent to this paper is the point that inter-service rivalry is a mechanism in many modern states to facilitate civilian control of the military.

Decades ago, Huntington (1961, 42) noted that, in the American context, “In almost every modern state, the division of military forces into two or more separate groups has been used to bolster civilian control….Interservice rivalry not only strengthened civilian agencies but also furnished them with a whipping boy upon whom to blame deficiencies in the military
establishment…” Interservice rivalry also allows civilian leadership to choose between competing military voices; Feaver (2003, 81-82) refers to the outcome of interservice rivalry as an institutional check to block untoward actions by rivals. The fierce competition for nuclear weapons dollars, for example, drove the U.S. Air Force and Navy to mount bitter criticism of each other’s programs (Sorenson, 1995, 41-45; McNaugher, 1989, 38-42), allowing both Congress and the Secretary of Defense to eliminate poorly performing systems.

Interservice rivalry is significant for civil-military relations for several reasons. First, it is generally less difficult for civil authority to control a divided military that one that is unified, partly because the services may spend more energy combating each other than they quarrel with civilian leadership. Civilian political leadership can play on these rivalries by rewarding one service over the other for fidelity to that leadership, often forcing a rival service or services to go along. They might also utilize one over another to bend them both in a positive direction, perhaps to improve efficiency, transparency or cooperation with civilian leadership.

U.S. interservice rivalry often centered on competitive weapons acquisition, which sometimes resulted in excessive duplication of effort as each service bought weapons to compete for a particular mission (Kanter, 1979, 24-44; Armacost, 1969; Hammond, 1963; Caraley, 1966, Davis, 1973; Sorenson, 2009). Interservice rivalry is not unique to the U.S.; Britain saw considerable competition for missions during the development of airpower, for example (Gollin, 1989, 203), in India, where a tradition of land power emphasis crippled the Indian Navy (Roy, 1995), and in Japan, rivalry between the army and navy that began in the 19th century hampered the efficiency of both services (Evans and Peattie, 1997, Ch. 1). Sometimes interservice rivalry manifests itself in differing political venues for competing militaries; the Argentine military split between the Army and Navy in the post-Perón period over central political issues, with the Navy
claiming that it had opposed Perón from 1943 until his 1955 downfall. This enabled the Navy to dominate the post-Perón period over both the Army and the Air Force, which Perón largely built (Lieuwen, 1964, 12-25).3

What does this literature tell us to expect when examining the Mexican services relationship with each other and with civilian leadership? Given that interservice rivalry can impede military effectiveness, civilian leadership might be expected to mediate between the services to dampen rivalry when it hampers military operations. Yet civilians benefit from interservice rivalry, which allows them to play one service over another, rewarding the service that best complies with civilian policy preferences. So we hypothesize that both the legislative and executive branches in Mexico will encourage the Army/Air Force and the Navy to compete for resources and political influence, at least up to the point where competition results in a loss of military effectiveness. Moreover, both those institutions will structure a reward system to allocate more resources to the service that best complies with civilian direction.

Interservice rivalry can bring about positive effects for both service and polity in that it can foster competition that weeds out inefficient doctrines and weapons, where single-service or dominant service militaries may comfortably settle into the status quo. Yet interservice rivalry can also be costly, leading to duplication as services compete for roles and missions. It can also lead to services developing policy and advocating weapons to please civilian overseers rather than to build a more effective armed service. Consequently it is the responsibility of civilian authority to balance between effective and wasteful rivalry. This may be particularly necessary for small militaries; while the U.S. military budgets could stand the price of competition for bombers, missiles, and tanks across services, a smaller military like Mexico’s must be very careful to regulate competition for scarce military resources.
**Democratization and Civil-Military Relations.** Civilian control of the military is essential for democracy to develop and grow, and thus it follows that the national military must accept democracy for that form of governance to survive. Professional soldiers must learn to work within established boundaries, where they can manipulate a democratic system to get the resources they believe they need to perform professional military functions without dominating or unduly influencing that system (Barany, 2012, Ch.; Brooks, 2009; Kohn, 1997). This means that democratic nations must establish norms and institutions that regulate military access, limiting contact with civilian political leadership to the top military echelon, and, ideally, balanced between executive and legislative branches (Barany, 2012, 29; Giraldo, 2006), though in practice legislative oversight of militaries varies considerably across countries (Avant, 1994; Blischke, 1981). It also requires the members of political institutions to develop their own expertise on military affairs, so that they can exercise effective oversight of the services without having to rely on them for information and analyses. That process under democratic governance normally places the armed forces under ministerial control, and it follows that the greater civilian control of military ministries, the more effective the civilian military controls. Military ministries headed by a civilian are more likely to argue for military resource claims, placing the uniformed military in a support role, because such ministers receive their legitimacy through democratic processes, while soldiers get authority through their service in organizations that are not, and cannot be, democratic. However, many defense ministries (including those in Mexico) are headed by uniformed officers, and in such cases democratic militaries are more likely to mandate strict limits on ministerial power relative to both president and party.
For democracies, military policies must, to a degree, reflect the popular will, and where militaries fail, elected governments often suffer the consequences. The failure of the French military in 1940 undermined the legitimacy of the Third Republic (Porch, 2006, 105-106), as Algeria and Indo-China ended the Forth Republic, the 1973 Arab attack on Israel belatedly ended that country’s long-serving Labor government (Maoz, 2006, 169-170; Tyler, 2012, 263), and while initial success in Afghanistan and Iraq likely helped President George W. Bush win the 2004 election, ultimate disappointments in both theaters likely contributed to the defeat of his Republican successor in 2008. Because defeat can sometimes stem from too much civilian oversight, civilians may scale back military scrutiny, yet sometimes military failure can be explained partially by a lack of civilian controls, as in the Israeli cases where military failure (in 1973, and in Lebanon, from the first incursion in the early 1980s through 2006) may be partly a consequence of too much military independence from civil authority (Maoz, 140-230; Freilich, 2012, 67-68; Peri, 2006, 127; Cohen, 2010, 243).

Given the consequences of internal military operations, we expect that as the Mexican military engages in counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency operations, both the executive and the legislative will expand oversight to include not only oversight of strategic objectives, but operations and tactics as well.

**Mexico’s Transition to Democracy.** Modern Authoritarian Mexico, which begins in the wake of the Revolution that erupted in 1910 and took the lives of somewhere between one and one and a half million Mexicans, lasted to the end of the 20th Century. The state began to take root under President Calles (1924-1928; 1928-34), who succeeded the brilliant General President Obregon, in the late 1920s amid periodic outbursts of violence and is further consolidated by President Cárdenas (1934-40). Under Presidents Calles and Cárdenas, former revolutionary generals and
gifted politicians, violence was mostly contained and a dominant mass party corporatist regime was built that would remain firmly in power until the late 1990s. In 1946 the party took its final name, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and it held an iron grip on political power that was so complete that the line between state and party became virtually indistinguishable form more than seventy years. Though not a single party state per se like those of China, Cuba, or the Soviet Union, the PRI held the strongest position and controlled the vast majority of elected positions in the nation, from the federal all the way down to the local levels. Elections were important but non-competitive and fraudulent affairs designed to confer legitimacy on the PRI. The PRI supported the loyal opposition and, when it could not buy off opponents, crushed them. During this PRI regime the military enjoyed considerable autonomy from civilian control and yet was thoroughly subordinate to the state and the official party.

Mexico’s transition to democracy during the late 1980s and 1990s was triggered by the economic crisis of 1982, at the end of the President López Portillo Administration. His successor, President de la Madrid opened Mexico’s economy and held the PRI regime together. The economic crisis of 1982 lingered throughout the entire decade, essentially because of the scale and scope of restructuring that was needed to put the Mexican economy on a sounder footing. President Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) managed by the end of his administration to implement NAFTA, further opening and entrenching the Mexican economy into North America, and greatly advanced privatization albeit with some notable exceptions. To accomplish some of these objectives, however, President Salinas required political support from the opposition, particularly when constitutional changes were needed because the PRI had lost its overwhelming majority in the congress. The PRI, in a nutshell, was forced to make electoral concessions to the National Action Party (PAN) that was permitted to take office in exchange for supporting the
PRI’s policy agenda. In other words, elections began to matter more and they were becoming better regulated, i.e. harder for the PRI to steal, as a consequence of the electoral reforms by the late 1980s and early 1990s. Electoral competition, in short, was palpable by the early 1990s. This is a crucial point that we return to below.

By 1993 and 1994, in the aftermath of the NAFTA signing, macroeconomic stabilization and economic restructuring, Mexico began a strong recovery heading into the 1994 presidential election campaign, a function of excessive bank lending and strong currency. These amounted to a de facto and unsound stimulus that triggered a major economic crisis in 1994-1995. Election year 1994 also endured political assassination, including that of PRI presidential candidate Colosio, as well as the Chiapas insurgency. At the outset of the new administration, the economy collapsed sharply and growth recovered only slowly during the administration of President Zedillo (1994-2000), who put the finishing touches on democratic electoral reforms and stabilized the economy and financial system.

By this time, the PAN had gained great popularity as did the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the party of the left in Mexico comprised of smaller leftist parties joined by the faction that bolted the PRI during the Salinas presidency. The opposition won seats and votes at all levels of government while Mexican civil society and the print media matured rapidly. By 1997, the Chamber of Deputies fell to the opposition parties who together had enough votes to defeat the PRI, if needed. In 2000 the presidency fell. The PAN governed from 2000-2012 and the PRI returned to power in 2012 under President Peña. Today Mexican democracy is extremely competitive and can be said to be consolidating with three main parties and several smaller ones. From the standpoint of civil military relations, it is crucial to remember from this short narrative of the transition to democracy that the PRI was in acute trouble by the early 1990s. It was
conceding power in parts of the country and committing itself to cleaner and fairer elections, in exchange for support on specific policies. In short, the political writing was on the wall and the military would need to weigh its relationship with its civilian masters who were increasingly accountable to voters and electoral politics more generally. We will see that they did not in the end choose a particular party; rather, they have thrown their support to the state and have been adapting to growing checks and balances.

**Civil-Military Relations in Mexico.** The pattern for civil military relations in democratic Mexico were set over more than seven decades during authoritarian Mexico. Today, the military is subordinate to civilian authority, highly professional, and in the process of modernization amid the war against narcotrafficking and adverse side effects that include weapon flows, trafficking of undocumented immigrants that is increasingly controlled by cartels, and myriad violent crime that balloons steadily in the 1990s and explodes during the democratic era after 2000. It is doing while filling the void of weak criminal justice institutions, particularly uneven policing at all levels of government. The Mexican military still wields considerable autonomy, however, public and political oversight and scrutiny are on the rise as the country transitions to democracy (Diez 2008; Camp 2010; Guevara 2011). This section briefly summarizes the state of civil military relations, before, after and during the transition to democracy. Next, discusses changes in inter-branch competition between the Army and Navy, which emerges during the Fox Administration (2000-2006) as the Navy begins a process of internal reforms and modernization, seemingly to better gird itself for battle against narcotrafficking and competitive democracy.

President Calles (1924-1928), the architect of the dominant party system as well as basic configuration of the post-revolutionary authoritarian state in Mexico, made the most consequential advances that set the stage for modern civil military relations in Mexico. The
The scope of these relations was embedded within the post-revolutionary dominant party authoritarian regime that he founded. These are well summed up by Serrano:

“While the unity of civilian elite materialized in a fierce party discipline, the effect of the professionalization process, placing special emphasis on civilian supremacy, became clear in the loyalty devoted by the armed forces to the civilian government. Over the years the normative code, derived from the 1928-29 pact, endorsing civilian supremacy gave birth to procedural rules which not only contributed to institutionalize relations between civilians and soldiers, *but also to regulate relations between the official party and the armed forces.*” (Serrano 1995, 432; Emphasis ours)

In the wake of President Calles, the next three administrations continued to fashion this basic mold for civil military relations that lasted until the transition to democracy in the 1990s. The sturdy devotion to civilian political supremacy, notwithstanding the tribulations that affected the military as well as doubts and concern manifested by observers at home and abroad, can be traced back to Calles and his successors.

President Lázaro Cárdenas, in 1937, introduced a major structural transformation in Mexican civil-military relations when he broke up the Secretariat of War and Navy into two parts, thereby making the Navy autonomous from the Army and Air Force, the latter subordinate to the Army under the Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA). In the wake of the revolution, of course, the Army was the vast pillar of the Mexican military and the Navy and Air Force were relatively small. Still, the separation of the Navy from National Defense would have longer term implications, particularly as the Navy expanded in relative size and responsibilities over time. The Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR) was officially born in 1940, under President Cárdenas’ successor, President Ávila Camacho. Camp notes that Cárdenas may have done this because of the potential for reducing the military’s power, which was certainly something Cárdenas was
after given his fears of the potentiality of a military that would evolve separately from Mexico’s revolutionary society. (Camp 2005, 21) In fact, this president formally incorporates the military into the official party, then known as the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), which he rechristened the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM). According to Camp, Cárdenas sought to simultaneously develop – professionalize – military and political leadership and did so in part for fear that the military would get ahead of civilian leadership. (Camp 2005, 22)

The military, just as it was settling into life in the official party under President Cárdenas, was immediately rooted out of the party by President Ávila Camacho who took measures to professionalize it and further subordinate it to civilian authority. (Camp 2005, 27) Modern civil military relations in Mexico, as do many modern features of Mexican national policy, finally take their modern form under President Miguel de Alemán. Serrano, however, notes that “By 1946, when the first civilian president [Alemán] is elected, the military institution had not only been unified and disciplined, but had also been subordinated to the civilian power.” (Serrano 1995, 433-434) He made myriad changes at the top in order to purge political general officers, established a presidential guard that was drawn from SEDENA forces, and re-oriented energies towards internal security, in effect, utilizing the military as an arm of the state and official party which President Alemán renamed the PRI. Camp also notes that no President, not until President Salinas de Gortari (1988-2004), would use the armed forces as a de facto enforcer for the policies of a particular administration as did Alemán.

More generally, though, we should bear in mind that after the revolution the military developed into a subordinated and professionalized armed force, small in size, and relatively autonomous within the broad guidelines established by the official party. This situation can be characterized as being one of embedded autonomy. The military got a free hand internally with
respect to organization, promotion, and allocation of resources to accomplish its core mission of
national defense – one that de facto included internal security as well – in exchange for its
unquestioned loyalty and commitment to its PRI civilian masters. It was, in short, de facto
embedded into the fabric of the PRI regime with considerable autonomy even after it was
formally separated from its role within the official party, as noted above. (Diez and Nicholls
2006, 9-10)

So, throughout the PRI regime the armed forces served the official party and the state.
The literature points out that several key events helped to shape the state of civil-military
relations as the nation began its political and economic transformation during the 1990s: the
1968 Tlatelolco massacre of students, which affected the high command’s confidence in the
political class; the 1980s Central American wars, which heightened concern of their southern
border as migrants from Central America began to flow northward towards the United States, a
trend that continues to this day exacerbated by the drug trafficking and violence as well as the
economic pull from the U.S.; and the insurgent uprising in Chiapas during the the 1990s. To
these, of course, we can add the growth of the war on narcotrafficking that accelerates during the
1990s as Mexico gradually becomes the epicenter of drug trafficking from South America to the
United States.

In the Tlatelolco massacre the Army was ordered to suppress student activists prior to the
1968 Olympic Games after civilian authorities failed to mitigate the protests. Anywhere from
thirty seven to perhaps as many as three hundred students died during the operation. (Hamilton
2011, 90) Camp notes the profound effect that this event had on civil military relations because
the military got a black eye as a consequence of bungling by civilian politicians who guided it
operationally and thoroughly mismanaged it politically. (Camp 2005, 31-33) He notes that
military officers became much more circumspect with respect to civilian leadership and that the armed forces, as something of a peace offering, received new hardware and positions as if in tacit admission by the politicians that they had put the military in a hard spot. Interestingly, it is not clear what role if any SEMAR played in this event. Tlatelolco, though it strained civil military relations, did not rupture the underlying compact – the military remained a loyal if more weary and circumspect partner for the PRI.

The Central American wars during the late 1970s and 1980s came as something of an exogenous shock for Mexico. The violence stemmed from insurgencies on the isthmus which threatened spillover violence and refugee flows. The Sandinistas succeeding in ousting the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 but were soon engulfed in a US-supported Contra War. During the 1980s El Salvador waged a war against a formidable FMLN rebel army that very likely would have buckled without military aid from the U.S. Guatemala, similarly, endured a brutal campaign by the military against a much more disorganized set of rebel forces throughout the decade. These nasty affairs raised concerns for Mexico’s southern territorial integrity as did U.S. support for conservative regime of the region, which if failed raised the specter of growing Cuban and Soviet involvement. Under President Lopez Portillo (1976-1982), in part also fueled by largesse stemming from Mexico’s debt boom, the defense budget expanded dramatically as Mexico increased its forces and implemented modernization programs aimed at both human and physical capital. (Serrano 1995, 441) Under President Lopez, too, the SEDENA chief was more closely incorporated into national security decision-making as Mexico participated in the Contadora process that helped to bring an end to the Central American wars. (Camp 1992, 32; Diez and Nicholls 2006, 32-33) It is not clear, however, that the SEMAR chief received the same attention at this time although he would do so under President Salinas (1988-1994). In sum, the Central
American conflict prodded military modernization, as would the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas and the war against drug trafficking.

The Zapatista rebellion in Mexico’s most southern state, Chiapas, was a deftly organized and led insurrection that caught the Salinas administration by surprise at the beginning of his last year in office. Wager and Schultz (1995, 14-23) and Serrano (1995, 41-42) together provide evidence that explains why the government was slow to respond to the uprising, the consequent bungling, and the implications for civil military relations. These scholars note that democratization and a more politically open environment transformed the relationship between the party and the armed forces and that the Chiapas fiasco, which erupted on New Year’s Day 1994, made the change manifest to all. The political terrain, as electoral competition intensified, had subtly shifted underneath them and both had great difficulty finding their balance as events unfolded for Chiapas was a fiasco from a strategic perspective even if it was not from an operational one. (Wager and Schultz 1995)

The rebellion in this southernmost and heavily indigenous Mexican state had broad social and political consequences far beyond the minor fighting that took place. (Hamilton 2011, 183-191) By the time the fighting had stopped – serious operations did not last more than a few weeks – the crisis opened up the military to accusations of human rights abuses and incompetence. The government was accused of being unprepared for what should have been a palpable threat to internal security as well as for being politically feckless and corrupt in dealing with a state that the PRI overwhelmingly controlled. Indeed, during the 1982-1988 its governor was a sitting general. (Díez and Nicholls 2006, 33) In the aftermath of the little hard-fighting that there was, civil military relations were not the same and would never be so again. As in
Tlatelolco, there is little doubt that military leaders felt unease with the political vulnerability of their PRI masters.

At the beginning of Salinas Administration, in late 1988, operating off of the playbook laid down by Calles and his successors noted previously, the military seemingly went all in in support of the new president who had won a dubious election that was by all accounts likely stolen. For President Salinas, the military threw a parade, helped take down a well-armed labor leader and traffickers, helped break up a major strike in northern Mexico, and likely contributed to helping “pressure” leftist opponents of the regime. The latter even accused President Salinas -- who never made an effort to hide his contempt of the left -- of systematic violence that they claimed left nearly 70 activists and state officials dead in the state of Michoacán alone.

Michoacán was the home state of President Salinas’s rival for the presidency, Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, who had bolted the party in protest of the selection of Salinas as the PRI nominee. (Hamilton 2011, 150) Civil military relations, with the military subordinated to the PRI’s governance project, seemed like business as usual. In the aftermath of Chiapas, however, Wager and Schultz (1995, 14-23) and Serrano (1995, 41-42) stress that sea changes had occurred. The former underscore that the military felt, in effect, that it had been sacrificed as a consequence of electoral pressures by the PRI and commenced investment in capabilities to fend better politically for itself. Serrano (1995, 442, n. 56) underscores that the administration made efforts to compensate the damage done to the military, both fiscally via the budget and also politically, by permitting four generals to take seats in the Senate (2) and Lower Chamber (2).

Both Serrano and Wager and Schultz agree that something fundamental had changed in civil military relations after Chiapas and the political violence during the 1994 presidential campaign during. Serrano in 1995 painted a rather pessimistic picture whereas Wager and
Schultz, around the same time, were more optimistic and, as it turns out, correct in this observation:

“Uncontrollable events brought on by accelerated democratization seem to be forcing military leaders into a more neutral corner with respect to politics. In the past, the Constitution has served to justify, and explain, the army’s unique relationship to the ruling party. Since the president was head of both the legitimate government and the PRI, the military invariably favored the latter. Given the weakness of the opposition, this relationship was seldom questioned. However, the past decade has witnessed the growth of more viable opposition parties, which led the SECDEF to declare on more than one occasion that the army would stay on the sidelines vis-à-vis the presidential succession, supporting the results of the August 1994 election.” (Wager and Schultz 1995, 24; emphasis ours)

Throughout the transition to democracy, the so-called uncontrollable events referred to above, the Mexican military did indeed remain neutral and, as noted above, the country transitioned rather smoothly during the 1990s after the 1994-95 economic crisis. Subordination to civilian rule, initially towards PRI governments and later to democratically elected ones, vindicate the choices by Mexico’s post-revolutionary founding presidents – all of them former generals – to stress civilian authority via carrots and sticks (Haber et. al. 2008). Military commanders perceived themselves to have gotten burned by the PRI during Tlatelolco and, later, Chiapas. Coupled with the popularity of the armed forces, their choice to remain neutral appears to be the optimal one from the standpoint of defending their institution and perrogatives. The upshot is that in contemporary Mexico, amid the challenges associated with drug trafficking, the military remains fully subordinated to civilian authority.

**Democratization, the War on Drug Trafficking and Civil Military Relations in Mexico**

Through the lens of civil military relations, democratization in Mexico commences during the Salinas presidency and accelerates during that of his successor, President Zedillo
Ponce de León. The growing power of the PAN, the ostentatious exit of Cárdenas and his followers from the PRI to form the PRD, the growth of civil society and the press, and the rollback of military regimes in the Americas could not have been lost on military leadership. During this presidency, moreover, according to Ríos (2012), violence associated with drug trafficking picks up as the PRI loses its monopoly over regional governments. This stimulates inter cartel competition and violence over drug trafficking business. Not surprisingly, scholars note that the antinarcotics campaign expands during the Salinas administration as the problem deepened (Díez and Nicholls 2006; Camp 2010). Drug related violence was driven by a combination of democratization and growing demand for trafficking through Mexico spearheaded by the large cartels (Ríos 2012; O’Neil 2013).

Camp notes that military leaders, both Army and Navy, as well as politicians dropped whatever reservations they might have had about SEDENA’s and SEMAR’s expanded role in counternarcotic operations (Camp 2010). Military and civilian authorities understood that the nation’s criminal justice institutions at all levels were typically not fit to handle the adverse effects of the struggle against narcotrafficking (O’Neil 2013). Even under ideal circumstances, reforming defunct federal, state, and local courts and police would take many years to serve as a bulwark against crime and violence associated with narcotrafficking. At the beginning of Mexico’s democratic era, therefore, the military would be the indispensable institution as the government sought to contain and reverse the adverse effects of narcotrafficking.

The modern relationship between the military and political leadership perhaps can be dated to the beginning of the Salinas Administration. Upon taking office he added a fifth section, national security, to the previously existing four sections of the technical cabinet that also included agriculture, foreign affairs, social welfare and foreign relations. National security would
include the chiefs of the Army, Navy, Attorney General, Foreign Relations, and the powerful Interior Ministry (Gobernación). This was the first time that both Navy and Army were formally represented in national security matters at the cabinet level (Camp 2005, 106). Put another way, this is the first time that they were pitted together and they have been so ever since. President Fox further integrated the national security cabinet in 2003, including other elements of the government, most notably the Center for Research and National Security (CISEN) [i.e. intelligence] and Public Security (Camp 2005, 106). Public Security has since been placed back under the Interior Ministry’s umbrella by President Peña, putting an end to the PAN’s effort to elevate it to cabinet level status.

During the Fox Administration, the Mexican Navy leadership implemented a major overhaul, the main motivations for which are not entirely clear. At one level, these were tough years for the admirals. During the Fox Administration the 11,000 strong marine force, according to Guevara (2011, 30-31) was halved and forces were transferred to the new federal police. Under President Calderón, however, this trend was reversed and the admirals succeeded in pushing forward plans to rebuild and expand infantry battalions: 30 robust groupings at between 650-680 per battalion would be permanently based in coastal states. The transformation of the marines was engineered to battle organized crime. (Guevara 2011, 31) Furthermore, by 2008 a Marine Infantry Special Operations Brigade was stood up in Mexico City closely linked to the naval intelligence agency (UIN). Interestingly, these forces are designed for operations beyond the coasts and rivers and are controlled by the Navy without input from the Army, which according to Guevara (2011) angered the latter. Naval and Marine (Naval Infantry) special forces have been employed in counterinsurgency operations, they have been especially active against transnational criminal organizations. (Turbiville 2010, 36) Moreover, by 2009, a US Navy
Admiral reports to the US Congress that unprecedented levels of interaction and interoperability have been achieved with the Mexican Navy. (Turbiville 2010, 37) All observers and analysts, including the authors’ own experience and interactions with US Embassy and Mexican military officials, note that the Mexican Navy is highly cooperative partner and that SEDENA, though improving, is lacking in this regard.

President Calderón, who decided to take the fight to the cartels, needed dramatic and rapid reforms to improve his administration’s capabilities vis-à-vis the traffickers. The reason is because violence associated with the drug trade exploded during his administration. Drug related homicides increased more than 80 percent per year between 2006 and 2010 and added up to more than 50,000 casualties by 2011. By 2011 Mexico had 19 of the world’s 50 most violent cities (Ríos 2012, 1-2). Without documentary evidence it is difficult to conclude with any certainty what on the surface is palpably clear: the Mexican government under Calderón appears to have thrown considerable weight behind the Navy to improve effectiveness in the fight against drug traffickers. For political as well as policy motivations, President Calderón needed results he could point to and needed them fast or he would thoroughly undermine his party’s electoral prospects for the foreseeable future. Upon Calderón taking office in 2006, SEMAR offered a far more attractive and tractable institution with which to work with thanks to reforms engineered during the previous administration. During Calderón’s presidency, Guevara sums up the restructuring as follows: “This command restructure, which follows a political-strategic character, has the specific intention of generating better efficiency in the Navy’s participation against organized crime and insecurity.” (2011, 27)

By the beginning of 2007 – shortly after the new president took office in December of 2006 – SEMAR had implemented a major institutional transformation begun during the Fox
Administration in late 2000. Both the Army and Navy military has a glut of top ranked officers and the former had made little headway on the issue. Under President Fox (2000-2006), the Secretary of the Navy announced that they had too many admirals and initiated reforms. By various means, Navy leadership reduced the proportion of admirals by 40 percent. (Camp 2005, 241-242) The Navy wrote an entirely new organic law in 2001, approved by congress in late 2002, which initiated the Council of Admirals in charge of promotions and to provide policy and strategy advice to the Secretary (Camp 2005, 242; Díez 2011, 132; Díez and Nicholls 2006, 40). The Army made more modest progress (Camp 2005, 242-243). The Army of course is much larger than the Navy, is sorely underpaid, and such dramatic reductions of the brass seem prima facie altogether more risky.

The Navy has also been more exacting in addressing divisive internal matters oriented around pay, retirement, professionalization etc. This in part is due to its coherent leadership (Camp 2005, 275) “The “Junta (or Council) of Admirals” plays a unique consultative and advisory role within the headquarters, and indication of the institutional importance placed on seniority and “year groups” that go back to admirals’ days as cadets in the naval college. They are a very tightly knit group, and great importance is place on consultation among the factions within year groups: the Navy speaks with one voice.” (Diez and Nicholls 2006, 15)

**The Civil-Military Relations of Mexican Inter-Service Rivalry.** Mexico has two military branches, the the Army (Ejército Mexicano) under the La Secretaria de Seguridad y Defensa Nacional or SEDENA), and the Navy (Armada de México under the Secretaria de Marina, or SEMAR), as SEDENA administers the Mexican Air Force (though SEMAR has an air arm). While both services have external defense as one of their mandates, both concentrate on
domestic security. SEMAR, for example, has as one of its responsibilities “To cooperate in
keeping the constitutional order of the Mexican State,” but like military bureaucracies, it has its
organizational preferences which it exercises to support its missions. Mexico’s army (Ejército
Mexicano) under SEDENA has the same bureaucratic mission, to protect its resource in
competition with SEMAR. This section first considers the service missions and equities, and
then considers how these factors impact on civil-military relations.

Armada de México. Armada de México is a large navy for a country of Mexico’s size, operating
two ex-U.S. destroyers, 6 frigates, and almost 180 other naval craft, with an air arm and a naval
infantry force. Its missions include protection of Mexico’s long coasts and harbor protection,
including protection of PEMEX petroleum facilities. SEMAR’s head, the secretary of the Navy,
is an active duty naval officer and reports directly to the president.

Armada de México, like other Mexican military forces, is heavily involved in counter-
narcotics operations, patrolling the coast for smuggled drugs and drug components, and gaining
publicity for successful operations; for example, in December 2011 Armada de México forces
intercepted 195 tons of a precursor to methamphetamine smuggled from China and destined for
Guatemala (“Mexican Navy…,” 2011). Naval infantry forces have captured several high-profile
drug bosses like Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sanchez and Ivan Velazquez Caballero, Miguel Angel
Treviño Morales and killed Antonio Ezequiel Cardenas Guillen, and reportedly killed Heriberto
Lazcano Lazcano, one of the most wanted cartel leaders in both the U.S. and Mexico (Archibold,
2012). Because of successes like these, reports hold that the Armada de México is replacing the
Mexican army as the premier drug and crime enforcement agency, operating even in traditional
army territory in landlocked states (Johnson, 2012) empowered by a 2007 decision by Mexico’s congress.

Partly because of its reputation as a less corrupt organization than the army, and its professionalism (naval officers commonly seek professional education and interact with civilians, for example), Armada de México has fostered better relations with American security forces, (including both the U.S. military and U.S. intelligence agencies) than has the army. Armada de México maintains liaison with U.S. Navy organizations at Norfolk VA and Key West, and with the Northern Command, and purchases some of its aircraft and vessels from U.S. suppliers. Mexico’s larger ships came from the U.S., and the U.S. Congress has invested at least $310 million for the Mexican navy since 2007, including surveillance planes and Black Hawk helicopters (Miroff and Booth, 2010).

Organizational competition behaviors may range between deception and efforts to please the institutional resource grantors through openness. SEMAR has chosen the latter response, thus after President Fox introduced the Law of Access in 2003, SEMAR was particularly forthcoming about its weapons acquisition plans to the Navy Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, and facilitated visits by the committee to its seaports. In contrast, the SEDENA refused to reveal information on its acquisitions to the same committee (Díez, 2008, 130-131). Such plans have considerable political impact as SEMAR operates a number of shipyards that both build and maintain naval vessels, providing significant employment and economic growth opportunities (Díez and Nicholls, 2006, 17).
**Ejército Mexicano.** Mexico’s land and air forces are combined into a single force, *Ejército Mexicano* under the authority of the National Defense Secretariat (*Secretaría de la Nacional* or SEDENA) commanded by a four-star general selected by the president. It is the largest Mexican military unit, with approximately 241,000 personnel, and receives the largest share of military funds. Like SEMAR, SEDENA focuses on internal defense, including maintenance of domestic order and combat against criminal activity, particularly narcotics traffic and operations. The army operates mainly light tanks and armored personnel carriers, and its infantry fire Mexican-supplied rifles. The air force has 107 aircraft; a combination force of obsolete fighters, trainers, and surveillance aircraft, complicated by multiple types with complex supply chains and a low budget, often forcing air force personnel from the service into better paying positions in the private sector (Díez and Nicholls, 2006, 24).

*Ejército Mexicano* has drawn criticism for its internal corruption (Johnson, 2012; Archibold, 2012b; Camp, 2005, 113), and though corruption charges have also been linked to *Armada de México*, the army has suffered more from them. [MORE]

**The Civil-Military Implications for Mexican Inter-Service Rivalry.** As we note above, services compete for roles, missions, and the resources to conduct them. As Mexico’s military efforts on combating drug crime expanded, SEDENA appeared to win the first budgetary round, as its budget increased by 338 percent between 2000 and 2008, while SEMAR’s budget share actually dropped by 8 percent during the same period (Camp, 2010, 298-299). Yet a closer look at the figures reveals that the jump occurred in only the first four years; Moyano shows a trend between 2006 and 2011 where SEDENA’s budget about doubles, from 26 million pesos to
around 50 million pesos, as did SEMAR’s budget also doubled, from 9 million to 18 million pesos (Moyano, 2011, 4). For 2014 the navy’s budget came in at 26 million pesos (Presupuesto De Egresos De La Federación Para El Ejercicio Fiscal 2014).

It is possible that interservice rivalry between SEDENA and SEMAR may increase following the 2012 pronouncement by President Enrique Peña Nieto that his predecessor, President Felipe Calderón had used the Mexican military to excess in fighting internal violence, and that the arrests by the services only spawned new criminal organizations (“Autodefensas, Vigilantes and Self-Policing in Mexico: Civilian Dominance over Public Safety Policies?”). Both services saw their respective budgets dramatically increase during the first decade of the 2000s, and should Peña have his way, they would both face declining resources.
Sources


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1 This paper reflects the views of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of any U.S. government agency.

2 We are grateful to Roderic Camp for sharing references and corresponding with us via email. His *Mexico’s Military on the Democratic Stage (2005)* is the place to begin one’s education on the history and sociology of the Mexican military.

3 The Navy argued that the aristocratic background of its senior leaders made it more compatible with constitutional governance, while the Army’s leaders came largely from petty bourgeoisie origins and thus more likely to favor the Perónist style of authoritarian social-political orientation (Lieuwen, 1964, 15).

4 This section draws liberally from two excellent texts, Hamilton (2011) and Haber et. al. (2008). See also Aguilera (2012, 422-23) for a brief synopsis of the political and economic transition.

5 Roderic Camp’s works, provides the more thorough survey of Mexican military sociology. We draw on them freely in this section. But his work only speculates as to the motivations for the transformative changes and the relative weight of factors that influenced Mexican admirals into charting a new course for their institution. One that, let it be said, has left it in remarkably good shape at the present.

6 In comparison, no Middle East navy operates destroyers, and very few operate frigates. Most European navies do not have ships as large as destroyers.

7 It is assumed that the naval infantry killed Lazcano, but masked intruders later stole the body from the funeral home, so there was no positive identification.