Mexico's Secret War

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In considering the current status of the conflict in southeastern Mexico, four fundamental realities must be kept in mind. First, despite the contrary claims of the Mexican government, there is a war in the state of Chiapas. This stage of the conflict began on January 1, 1994, when the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) declared war on the Mexican army and federal government—a declaration that has not been retracted despite the group's agreement just 12 days after the uprising to abide by a cease-fire. In Chiapas, two armed parties confront each other, although only one of them—the federal government—has actively employed arms since the cease-fire.

The insurgents have been formally recognized under law as the EZLN. On March 11, 1995, Congress promulgated the "Law for Dialogue, Conciliation and Dignified Peace in Chiapas" and created the Commission of Concordance and Pacification (COCOPA), an organism meant to facilitate negotiations between the government and the insurgency. This legal framework designed to resolve the conflict explicitly states that its objective is to seek peace. Peace, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, is "the absence of war," while war is "a state of open, armed, often prolonged conflict carried on between nations, states or parties." So the legal framework for defining the peace process acknowledges the war in Chiapas. The two parties began formal peace negotiations in 1994, resulting in the February 16, 1996 signing of four documents on indigenous rights and culture in the town of San Andrés, Chiapas.

The war in Chiapas has produced only 12 days of open combat. On January 12, 1994, both sides agreed on a truce. But this truce has been broken on two occasions by the federal government: in February 1995, when it unsuccessfully tried to capture the Zapatista leadership, and in early 1998, when it launched political and military offensives against the autonomous municipalities of Ricardo Flores Magón, Tierra y Libertad and San Juan la Libertad. The Zapatistas have never used arms against civilians, and since the January 12 truce have not even employed them against the army. On the contrary, they have respected the truce and confronted hostile military movements in their communities with peaceful civic resistance.

But the existence of a truce—defined as "a temporary suspension of hostilities"—is not the same as peace. The situation in Chiapas over the past five years has been far from peaceful. To confront the growing indigenous rebellion, the government, despite its denial that a state of war exists, has applied a war strategy. Some 60,000 troops have been positioned in key points in 66 of Chiapas's 111 municipalities. At least nine paramilitary groups operate in 27 municipalities and have been responsible for hundreds of civilian assassinations. More than 150 foreign human rights observers have been expelled from the country. The federal government has repeatedly and publicly attacked the official

organizations established for mediating and facilitating the peace talks, to the point of forcing the most important mediating body—the National Mediating Commission (CONAI), headed by Don Samuel Ruiz, the Bishop of San Cristóbal—to dissolve itself, citing a lack of cooperation on the part of the government.

Any real strategy for peace, of course, would have to begin with social reforms. The Zapatista uprising has a military dimension, but Zapatismo is not strictly a military phenomenon. On the contrary, the military manifestation represents the last resort of people confronting a volatile mix of agrarian, ethnic and social problems. By 1994, these problems had been aggravated by a crisis in the regional system of political and economic control, and further inflamed by profound changes on the national level, especially the official cancellation of land reform programs and the privatization of communal and ejidal lands brought about by the presidential reform of Article 27 of the Constitution.

When the government denies that there is a war in Chiapas, it is seeking a way out of the conflict that avoids the negotiation of substantive reforms. It creates a smokescreen to cover up the fact that its real strategy and on-the-ground plan is the military defeat of the EZLN. The extreme tension that characterizes life in Chiapas now threatens to provoke a new phase of confrontations. To pretend the conflict in Chiapas can be reduced to a bunch of secondary problems amplified in the context of intercommunity violence only serves to accelerate a dangerous dynamic of political polarization, social breakdown and violent provocations by diverse actors and security forces in the area.

Second, the government's position once again notwithstanding, the conflict in Chiapas is national in scope. From the government's perspective, the strength of the EZLN has been unduly exaggerated—its impact, says the government, is basically local, not national. Government officials have worked hard, in Mexico and abroad, to sell the idea that Zapatismo is neither a national force nor a true representative of the interests of even a fraction of the nation's ten million indigenous people. They insist that the EZLN's range of influence is limited to a handful of scattered townships in Chiapas. According to this logic, too much has already been conceded to an organization that has scant military capacity and not nearly the stature of armed movements like those that once challenged state power in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Despite the propaganda, the general public does not appear to share the government's perspective. According to a recent survey of the Mexico City-based Rosenblueth Foundation, only 17% of the Mexican population believe that the conflict in Chiapas is strictly local, while 73% think it has national repercussions. At the same time, 44% think that the EZLN legitimately represents indigenous peoples, while 40% say it does not.

Aside from the military force of the EZLN, Zapatismo is a political force with national and international impact and influence. The rebels have managed to generate an enormous current of support and sympathy for their cause, or at least in favor of a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict. The same survey shows that 73% of Mexicans think that the indigenous populations had legitimate reasons to rebel against the government in

1994, and 68% believe that the government still has not improved conditions for indigenous peoples. Fifty-seven percent state that the government has not made its best effort to achieve peace. The conflict in Chiapas has received extensive coverage in the mass media, obliging President Ernesto Zedillo to make a record number of trips to the state to publicly promote his failing policies.

The war in Chiapas and the transition to democracy in Mexico have intertwined in such a way that there is no real possibility of resolving one without the other. The Administration sought to use the partial success of the mid-term elections of 1997 as proof that the nation as a whole opted for reforms through elections and that the Zapatistas were passé. But this line of argument did not succeed in isolating the Zapatistas. Given the power relations in play and the urgency to end the armed uprising by resolving issues pending on the national agenda—including the rights of Indian peoples—the price to pay for peace is nothing short of the transformation of the conservative regime which rules Mexico.

The supposedly nonexistent war in Chiapas has also conditioned much of Mexico's foreign policy. In negotiations of a free-trade agreement with the European Union, in discussions among human rights experts at the UN, and even in the recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Mexico, the Mexican government just cannot seem to escape the issue of Chiapas. To its great discomfort, when the eyes of the world turn to Mexico, they see Chiapas.

The governmental coordinator of the nonexistent dialogue, Emilio Rabasa, travels all over the world attending to what he calls "just a regional political conflict." And he has to, because no other liberation movement in recent times has achieved the network of solidarity that the Zapatistas have today. The Chiapas problem has become an international issue, drawing over 50,000 people into the streets of Rome for a solidarity march and causing President Zedillo to sweat under the collar in a recent encounter with human rights groups in France. In his recent visit to Mexico, even France's conservative president, Jacques Chirac, diplomatically reminded the Mexican government that it should comply with the agreements signed with the EZLN in San Andrés.

The Mexican government cannot achieve an internal consensus to move into open warfare. Nor does it have the option of forcing the rebels into conventional politics without conceding reforms. The current impasse is in part the result of the nature of the conflict. It is far from simply a local problem.

The third fundamental reality is the newness of the EZLN, and hence its attraction. The Zapatista movement has broken onto the international stage just when the dreams of peoples' liberation have been sundered by the decreed end of history. It emerges just when the idea of revolution, so costly to social-change projects, has fallen into disuse and is seen as an eccentricity. Whether it set out to or not, among the most important consequences of the Zapatista movement in our times is that it has stimulated dreams of social change, and has resisted the idea that all emancipatory projects must be sacrificed to global integration. It accomplished this first through the symbolic force of the image of armed revolution that still holds sway for many parts of the population, and then through

the moral force that indigenous struggles have acquired, especially in Europe. Finally, the nature of the Zapatista project itself was surprisingly distant from the traditional image of the guerrilla as an armed party struggling to take state power. In the long run, after the cult of the rifles wore off, what remained as the fundamental proposal of the Zapatista Mexican indigenous rebels is something else: a new political project.

The EZLN is not a Marxist-Leninist vanguard whose objective is to take over state power through violent means to install socialism. It was not in 1994, and is even less so now. To characterize it as such is to purposely conjure up visions of Cold War demons in a misguided attempt to delegitimize Zapatismo. But false stereotypes prohibit any real understanding of the movement, its proposals and its undeniable political success.

In their first public document, the "Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle," the rebels declared war on the government but did not exhort the people to destroy the bourgeois state. Instead, they proposed that the legislative and judicial powers restore the legality and stability of the nation by impeaching President Carlos Salinas. The proposal struck a responsive chord given that the opposition had declared the Salinas government illegitimate ever since he came to office through the fraudulent presidential elections of 1988. These accusations of illegitimacy were fueled by Salinas' decision to decree the privatizing reforms to Article 27 of the Constitution and by the assassination of over 500 members of the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) during his term.

From the start, the rebellion attempted to respect the framework of the law, citing Article 39 of the Constitution to argue the legitimacy of their uprising. Article 39 establishes that national sovereignty resides essentially and originally in the people, and that they have the right, at all times, to alter or modify their form of government. The EZLN did not seek to subvert the Mexican state, but to replace the existing political regime and transform its economic policies. Five years after the uprising, in its latest communiqué, it reiterates its demands for "recognition of the rights of Indian peoples and democracy, liberty and justice for all Mexican men and women." These demands, the Zapatistas claim, constitute the necessary foundations for peace.

Zapatismo has won legitimacy on the same terrain in which the regime has lost it. Its demands go to the heart of the nation's problems: the absence of democracy, the shrinking protective state, loss of sovereignty, the disappearance of social safety nets, the cancellation of land reform, the lack of recognition of the rights of Indian peoples. It has won legitimacy by explaining itself in its own terms, by naming the intolerable, by constructing a new language, by stimulating the will to aspire to higher and different kinds of goals, by appealing to the collective imagination and by tuning its discourse to harmonize with the sentiments of a large portion of civil society.

Many aspects of the new Zapatismo form part of a new terrain within traditional leftist discourse—the search for values accepted by the community in rebellion and supported by daily practices, the role of dialogue in establishing shared critieria, the demand for dignity, the struggle for the right to be different, the confluence of the social and the

political, the combination of the ethnic and the democratic struggle, the importance of popular sovereignty, and the refusal to seek to conquer power and the determination to transform it.

The Zapatistas moreover, have rearticulated and relaunched the new Indian struggle from a perspective of "difference" that has profound implications for the birth of a new model of the nation. The French sociologist Alan Touraine has defined and defended this perspective. "Identity and otherness are inseparable," he writes, "and, in a universe dominated by the impersonal forces of the financial markets, they should be defended together if the goal is to avoid that the only effective resistance to its domination come from sectarian fundamentalisms. Democratic multiculturalism is the main objective of social change movements today, much as industrial democracy was years ago. It cannot be reduced to tolerance or accepting limited particularisms, nor can it be confused with a cultural relativism charged with violence." At stake, says Mexican journalist Luis Villoro, is nothing less than "the reform of the national project. We have to reinvent the nation we want."

Chiapas is not the former Yugoslavia, nor do Indian demands in Mexico share the antidemocratic ethnicism of other movements. The politics of identity proposed by the Zapatistas does not seek control over national territory or secession from the nation. It seeks to change the country.

The fourth and perhaps dominant reality is that the Mexican government has no plan for peace. The latest interruption in the peace process is in large part due to the fact that the government views the means to resolve the conflict in Chiapas as a scheme of negotiations and not as a peace process. Its primary goal is not to achieve peace but to recover the political and military initiative. Any real peace policy must seek to resolve the root causes of the rebellion and assure the continuity of negotiations as part of a state policy that transcends the immediate interests of the government and the parties. A scheme of negotiations consists, on the other hand, of merely applying diverse measures to "contain" the enemy while trying to defeat it, meanwhile manipulating the conflict in the interests of national political objectives.

The government's scheme of negotiations aims to minimize the actors, to "Chiapanize" the conflict, and to offer the Zapatistas a plan of civil reinsertion that bypasses any real negotiation of their demands. In the latest phase, it has sought to retake the initiative by presenting a proposal for constitutional reforms on indigenous rights and culture that diverges significantly from the commitments agreed to in San Andrés. It has also set out to eliminate mediating bodies. It has chipped away at the legal framework and institutional context that have made peace talks possible.

In this way, the laudable advances that took place during the negotiation process such as maintaining the military truce, incorporating the army directly into the dialogue, involving political parties as facilitators and encouraging the participation of civil society, have all been abandoned. Likewise, the economic aid funneled into the region has served to buffer

social discontent and help some political clients, but not to develop the state, create effective institutions or to resolve the causes that originated the conflict.

The government's decision to monopolize the negotiations and dismantle mediating bodies not unconditionally allied to its interests provoked, first, the destruction of the CONAI and later the erosion of the COCOPA. These actions virtually cancelled out all possibilities of solving the conflict in the short run and increased the possibility of having to recur to international mediation.

But this governmental strategy has failed. During 1998, in the midst of the worst offensives against the EZLN in the conflict zone, the communities resisted the military offensive, the autonomous townships continued to function, the conflict remained a major national issue and the Zapatistas significantly increased their influence abroad.

Peace processes in other countries have taught us that paralysis in negotiations is frequently linked to insufficient commitment on the part of one of the major actors. To break an impasse requires recognition of the adversary, dialogue, compliance with all previous agreements and finally, unified negotiating mandates. In the case of Chiapas, the insurgency should be recognized as a legitimate actor, the government should reaffirm the path of dialogue as a solution to the conflict, it should comply with all agreed-to commitments and its negotiators should sustain a unified position which they are capable of implementing.

Only two of the four necessary conditions for breaking the Chiapas impasse have been met. The EZLN has been recognized as a legitimate actor since the first negotiations in the Cathedral of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Since then, both parties have insisted on dialogue as the only means of resolving the conflict, although the federal government has broken its commitment on several occasions. It failed to comply with the agreements on indigenous rights and culture and practically boycotted the second round of negotiations on democracy and justice. Neither the mediating bodies nor the facilitators—the backbone of any negotiation—had sufficient strength to oblige the government to comply with its commitments. This has aggravated the disorder that periodically reigns within the ranks of the federal government, especially now that a contested process of presidential succession has begun. Over and over, the declarations of different government officials contradict one another on official strategy.

The government's noncompliance with the accords on indigenous rights and culture is the main reason, although not the only one, for the impasse in negotiations with the EZLN. From the EZLN's point of view, only if the government complies with the terms it agreed to can the paralysis be unblocked. Only in this way can the government's insistence on its willingness to engage in dialogue be credible. This is crucial. Today the indigenous reforms depend on it, and tomorrow the lives of the rebels may be at stake. If in the future the Zapatistas negotiate their insertion into the civil arena and the government does not respect their lives or their liberty, there will be no chance of renegotiating—as is now still possible—the San Andrés accords.

But without confidence and credibility on the part of the government, there can be no negotiation. And without compliance with accords already signed, there can be no confidence or credibility.

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