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A Military Treaty Between Mexico and Japan: Fact or Fiction?

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Abstract
The first decades of the 20th century marked the rise of political-diplomatic tensions between Japan and the United States. In this context, increased friction deployed a geostrategic game having a main stage in Latin America. In that sense, Mexico played an important role implementing actions to capitalize in its favor the approach by Japan. In this particular context, the recurring theme of the existence of a "military treaty" between Mexico and Japan emerged in the press and within the US intelligence services.

Resumen
Las primeras décadas del Siglo XX marcaron el aumento de las tensiones políticas y diplomáticas entre Japón y Estados Unidos. El aumento de las fricciones desplegó un juego geoestratégico que tiene como escenario principal América Latina. En ese sentido, México jugó un papel importante mediante la implementación de acciones para capitalizar a su favor el acercamiento por parte de Japón. Bajo este contexto particular, en la prensa y dentro de los servicios de inteligencia estadounidenses, surgió el tema de la existencia de un "tratado militar" entre México y Japón.

A Military Treaty Between Mexico and Japan: Fact or Fiction?[1]

Carlos Uscanga

Introduction

This year it will be the 133th anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship, Trade, and Navigation that marked the beginning of economic and diplomatic relations between Mexico and Japan. At the end of the XIX century, Mexico was experiencing a process of economic transformation under the government of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911), which sought to diversify its diplomatic links as a counterweight to the United States' growing economic and political influence.

The first communications with Japan for the signing of a bilateral agreement began in 1882. As this attempt did not proceed, the dialogue with the administration of Porfirio Díaz resumed at the beginning of 1888 and it concluded on November 30th of the same year with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Trade, and Navigation. A central aspect of it was, on the one hand, all its provisions were in terms of equality; and, on the other, the elimination of the extraterritoriality provision that was detrimental to Japanese sovereignty. The Treaty allowed Japan to use it as a benchmark in negotiations with the Western powers.

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Elia Vazquez, Yukiko Uscanga and María Blancas Larriva for helping me out to thoroughly review the content of this chapter. This document is a short version of the paper "*La Armada Imperial Japonesa en México: ¿Buscando una alianza militar o desplegando estrategias geopolíticas*", Revista Asia y África, Vol. 157, No. 3 Septiembre-Diciembre 2021

At the dawn of the XX century, Japan's triumph in the 1905 war with Russia resulted in its recognition as an emerging power in the East Asian region with great military capabilities. Above all, this was hard evidence that the rising Japanese empire would push forward to modify the balance of power in the Pacific Rim. The frequent resistance and non-recognition of Japan as a relevant actor in the region marked an inevitable route against the United States, which was expressed in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Within the emerging geopolitical scenario in the new century, Mexico was a permanent variable inside the relations between Japan and the United States during the Interwar period. In the governments of Francisco I. Madero (1911-1913), Victoriano Huerta (1913-1914), and Venustiano Carranza (1914-1920), Japan was a key piece in their foreign policy strategies with the aspiration of being a counterweight against Washington.

In that context, the United States newspapers pointed at the danger of the growing Japanese presence in Mexico and it frequently denounced the signing of secret treaties with the Japanese government. Meanwhile in Mexico, newspaper publishers highlighted the desire for an alliance with an extra regional actor (Japan) for better results in containing the constant threat of Mexican sovereignty by the United States. During these events, the Asama, Izumo, and Yakumo warships of the Imperial Navy of Japan made their visits to Mexico as part of the actions of Japanese naval diplomacy in Latin America. This chapter will analyze the existence of an alleged secret bilateral military treaty, or it was a part of Mexico as a simply part of a hidden agenda within a more complex geopolitical game against the United States and Japan inside an imminent confrontation in the Pacific.

A Bilateral Military Treaty?

The projection of Japan as an emerging actor in the Pacific created in the United States government a deep suspicion of Japanese expansion in Latin America. In Mexico, diversification policies towards Europe and Japan that were undertaken by Porfirio Diaz gave space for Washington to consider that the strengthening of those bilateral ties, it could impose a national problem for the United States.

Friedrich Katz explains that the German secret service claimed to have a copy of a document that had been stolen from the offices of José Yves Limantour, the Mexican Secretary of the Treasury under Porfirio Diaz´s government. In the document, Mexico gave Japan certain rights in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (The Isthmus of Tehuantepec represented in that time the shortest distance between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Before the opening of the Panama Canal, it was one of the major international trade routes) (Katz, 1982, pp. 100-101).

In fact, German diplomats were highly active in spreading this kind of rumor and they passed such information to the press. Nevertheless, regardless of the source of the information, the U.S. intelligence services remained on alert. In March 1908, the U.S. embassy in Guatemala, requested a meeting with Fidel Rodríguez Parra (a Mexican diplomat) to question him about the secret offensive and defensive alliance with Japan (AHGE, 1908). Japan has always denied the existence of such agreements with Mexico.

The Minister Ramon G. Pacheco reported to the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs about the reactions to a published news in a German newspaper about the commitment of Japan to support Mexico in a conflict with a “third power” in exchange for: concessions of the railroad that crosses the isthmus of Tehuantepec, immigration rights for Japanese citizens, and the establishment of a coaling station in Magdalena Bay located in Baja California.

The Los Angeles Examiner released the news that President William H. Taft had received a copy of the secret treaty signed by Mexico and Japan. According to the newspaper, the U.S. ambassador in Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, had the original document in his possession for a couple of hours. It is said that the diplomat went to Washington with a copy of that treaty, where he presented the evidence during a meeting with the U.S. president and his cabinet. This resulted in a decision to deploy 20 000 troops to the border and send ships to the Mexican coast. (Los Angeles Examiner, 1911, p.1)

Also, it is mentioned that in a meeting with José Yves Limantour, Wilson orally expressed to him that the United States would regard carrying out the content of the provisions of the treaty as an unfriendly act. Otherwise, Washington would take the necessary actions against Mexico and Japan (San Francisco Chronic, 1911, p.1). The information was inaccurate and later I was denied by the Taft administration. Years later, Henry Lane Wilson said: "no such treaty was neither ever placed in my hands, nor to my knowledge in the hands of the Department of State…" (NARA, 1919). Additionally, Limantour himself pointed out that these kinds of rumors were false.

Fake news proliferated lacking further arguments, such as Japan's commitment to support Porfirio Diaz during the beginning of Mexican Revolution. In addition, on the front pages of American newspapers, there were contradictory reports about the cancellation of such a military bilateral agreement as a result of pressure from Washington. (Daily Telegram, 1911, p.1).

Apart from the information actively generated in Germany, other European countries widely reproduced this news. In that regard, the topic of "military treaty" would remain present throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century in the press, as well as in the U.S intelligence services.

Mexican diplomats were sent mixed signals. While some denied the existence of a bilateral defensive or offensive treaty, others were very vocal to deliver comments that gave a wide margin of interpretation on the existence of a "special relationship" (meaning in military terms) with Japan. The newly appointed Mexican consul in Yokohama, Manuel A. Esteva was credited with a comment stating his new accreditation in Japan would have full powers to negotiate a military alliance with Japan. (NARA, 1913a)

Similarly, the consular representative of Mexico in Laredo, Texas, Antonio Lozano, was credited with a comment stating that the Mexican government was dissatisfied with the lack of recognition from the United States towards the Victoriano Huerta´s administration, in which Japan would support Mexico against any attempt from the United States to push forward on an invasion in Mexican soil. (NARA, 1913b).

It is also clear that Mexico was an active player inside the geopolitical game by using rapprochement with Japan as an extra-continental ally. These strategies were useful as a bargaining chip in the trilateral diplomatic game between Washington-Tokyo-Mexico.

Several news were released in Mexican newspapers. In a report published by El País, which referred to the announcement credited to the Mexican minister in Japan, Luis G. Pardo, stated that fifty Japanese military—prior to being naturalized as Mexicans—could be incorporated into the Mexican army. (El País, 1913, pp.1, 8).

In this context, the issue of the "military alliance" remained as a permanent concern in Washington. The U.S. intelligence services remained very active in following up on the issue, while Mexican officials also continued leaving the possibility to have reached a negotiation with Japan on such matter. In a statement allegedly sent to Cándido

Aguilar, the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs under Carranza´s administration, the U.S. Embassy requested a reply about a "secret treaty" with Japan. The United States did not get any reply from Mexico.

It is interesting however, that the same U.S. diplomats believed that those rumors had little margin of credibility. Despite this, in November 1919, the State Department once again, instructed the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo to investigate, on the basis of existing evidence, Japan's proposal to Mexico to form a defensive-offensive alliance, which was being considered by the Mexican government. (NARA, 1919b).

As noted earlier, Germany had been very active in spreading rumors of a military alliance between Mexico and Japan. In January 1917, an intercepted telegram sent to Britain by Foreign Minister of Germany Arthur Zimmerman, a diplomatic German representative in Mexico, raised the proposal of a triple alliance between Germany, Japan and Mexico, offering to Mexico financial support and the return of territories lost in the U.S-Mexican war in the XIX century. After the release of that news, Tokyo denied any triple alliance.

Suspicions of any kind of "bilateral military treaty" remained within the context of increasing economic and political tension between the U.S. and Japan. In 1927, in a consultation with officials from the Department of State with the Ambassador of Japan in Washington Matsudaira, Tsuneo (NARA, 1927) he was questioned about the existence of any kind of secret military treaty with Mexico as it was published in the newspaper New York American.

As I explained before, beyond the possible existence of formal or informal talks about the negotiations of secret military treaty between Mexico and Japan it served as a motivation to be investigated by the U.S. intelligence services. However, it is a fact that The Department of State thought, in a kind of zero-sum game, Japan's increasing closeness to Mexico was a constant threat to U.S. security.

Mexico and Japan were both able to capitalize to their advantage at different times, a constant concern of the "military treaty" by giving way to ambiguous declarations, including statements of friendship and solidarity between the two nations. Beyond the fact of the possible existence of the "secret alliance", it is true that it was used as a bargaining chip to foster their negotiations capabilities inside the international strategies of Japan and Mexico vis a vis Washington.

Final Remarks

During the first four decades of the twentieth century, Japan's geopolitical game used Mexico as a key element in the interplay of strategies against the United States. Tokyo efficiently used the strong bond of friendship forged between the two countries after the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation of 1888. This, along with anti-American sentiments of an important sector of the elite and the Mexican people, sent signals to Washington (who was watching the movements of diplomats and members of the Japanese community in Mexico and Latin America in general) on Japan's involvement capabilities in its area of influence as an affront to the Monroe doctrine. (Shuller, 2010, pp. 56-57).

From the United States' defensive perspective, Mexico was (and still is) a weak link. Different factors such as geographic sharing of a border of 3 185 kilometers and its porosity, generated constant concerns. The use of Mexico's vast costs and ports as potential checkpoints to supply the Imperial Navy in a hypothetical scenario of conflict were aspects that constantly tipped off not only the tabloids, but also the U.S. intelligence services.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Japan deployed a pragmatic foreign policy, which regardless of the group in power in Mexico, sought to obtain guarantees for the protection of

the Japanese community residing in the country, open up business opportunities, as well as the fact that Mexico was a bargaining chip before the policies considered unfavorable by its emerging projection in the Pacific by the United States.

The idea that Mexico was an important and highly vulnerable piece for the U.S. national security was not only recognized by other countries like Germany, which was very proactive in spreading rumors of Mexican-Japanese defensive and offensive alliance, but it was even used as a tactic in World War I with the Zimmerman telegram. To sum up, during the interwar period, Japan played a strategic role in Japan's relations not only with Mexico, but Latin America as a whole.

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