



U.S. Intervention in Mexican Defense Appointment Part of a Long Pattern

By Catherine Cheney - February 7, 2013

Prior to the December inauguration of Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, the United States intervened to halt the rise of Gen. Moises Garcia Ochoa, who was expected to become Mexico's next minister of defense, according to reporting by the New York Times.

U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Anthony Wayne met with Pena Nieto's senior aides to express American concerns over the possible promotion of the general, including suspicions that he had ties to drug traffickers.

"This is not unprecedented, and it doesn't just apply to Mexico. The United States, over the decades, has done this with a number of Latin American governments," said Ted Galen Carpenter, senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Carpenter said the U.S. has effectively vetoed political appointments elsewhere in Latin America as well, including in Colombia and Peru. He detailed these examples in his book "Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America."

Mexico is of particular interest given its shared border with the U.S., ongoing security concerns and its extensive ties with the U.S. The job of Mexican defense minister ultimately went to Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda. Ochoa, reputed to be the original favorite, was meanwhile dispatched to a dangerous assignment in the Mexican border state of Coahuila.

Yet Latin America political expert George W. Grayson, a professor at William & Mary, stressed that U.S. concerns about Ochoa were not necessarily unfounded. "Ochoa had been head of acquisitions in the last administration, and that really is a honey pot for corruption, and the rumors had been rife with regard to his, shall we say, shadowy behavior," he said.

The U.S. had an interest in preventing someone with "questionable" character from becoming Mexico's defense secretary, Grayson said, especially as Mexico revamps its law enforcement structure. Ochoa has been dubbed "Mr. Ten Percent" by American officials because of his alleged skimming from defense contracts. The U.S., Grayson added, needs to stay vigilant about the Mexican military's "culture of corruption."

Carpenter noted that the U.S. has been particularly sensitive to the possible ascent of leftist officials in Latin America, especially following the rise of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Bolivian President Evo Morales. In the Mexican case and elsewhere,

suspicion of involvement in the drug trade has become an increasing concern over the past several decades for any new political appointments.

“In a number of cases, people who had received a great deal of praise turn out to be in the pockets of one of the cartels, so Washington is paying attention to that,” Carpenter explained.

Grayson gave the example of Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, who was the top anti-narcotics officer under former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo.

“This was a general who seemed to have impeccable credentials, to the point that our drug czar, Gen. [Barry] McCaffrey went to Mexico and praised him and brought him to the U.S. and praised him here,” Grayson said. “It turns out this fellow was joined at the hip with one of the most powerful of the narco gangs. It was quite an embarrassment to Zedillo, not to mention McCaffrey.”

In Ochoa’s case, Grayson argued, the U.S. did Mexico a favor by discouraging his promotion before it took place, rather than after the fact. “There will be blowback for Mexico anyway, but the blowback would be much stronger had the appointment gone through,” he said.

Duncan Wood, director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, told Trend Lines in an email interview, “There has always been great sensitivity in Mexico to interference by the United States in internal affairs.” But he argued that the Ochoa case was unique in that it appeared “to be an example of intelligence-sharing rather than forcing the issue.” Wood attributed the handling of the issue to “increasing levels of trust and comfort” in the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

Carpenter took a less sanguine view of the incident’s domestic political ramifications in Mexico. “Latin Americans in general and Mexicans in particular are very sensitive to instances of U.S. meddling in their internal affairs, in their politics or economics,” he said. “There are already allegations in the Mexican Congress of the U.S. being back to its old games of meddling. And incidents like this can be used by people who are not necessarily pro-U.S. to agitate the country.”

Wood added, “This kind of incident always needs to be handled with the utmost sensitivity to internal affairs, public opinion and diplomacy. This is particularly true in the age of WikiLeaks, and higher levels of transparency.”