Chapter 5
Internationalization Emergent (1975)

As they prepared to take their case to the United Nations (UN), the Belizeans had to bear in mind the positions of Mexico and the United States. Although Mexico supported Belize’s right to independence, it worried that Guatemala might end up with a piece of Belizean territory; at the same time, it did not want to worsen relations with Guatemala, its powerful southern neighbor. For the U.S. government, its relationship with the United Kingdom (UK) and its proclaimed support for self-determination had to be balanced against its concern for stability in the region and for upholding established pro-U.S. governments in Central America, and it relied heavily on Guatemala to maintain the status quo. Despite this, on the Belize issue “the Guatemalan military resisted U.S. interference, especially after Carter’s policy on human rights…it is a mistake to think that the U.S. can manipulate Guatemala.”\(^1\) The UK would overestimate the ability of the United States to influence Guatemala, and even when the U.S. secretary of state may have wanted to do so in response to British requests, the officials in the State Department were more concerned to support the Guatemalan point of view, as part of a wider policy of support for Latin American militaries.\(^2\)

The Mexican Factor

Since the signing of the Anglo-Mexican treaty in 1893, the Mexican government had never seriously questioned British sovereignty over the territory comprehended in the treaty,\(^3\) but it maintained what was called a “dormant claim,” and was determined to use it to ensure that its interests were protected as against Guatemala. In international organs in the 1950s, whenever Guatemala asserted its claim to Belize, Mexico would issue a protest. At the General Assembly of the UN

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in 1958, the foreign secretary stated:

Our position on Belize is that, if its present status is altered, Mexico will claim its rights in accordance with well-known historical and legal precedents...Mexico, when the time comes, will not neglect to take into account that a solution of the question of Belize must be based on freedom and independence for the people of that territory.⁴

When the Puerto Rico talks were held in 1962, President Adolfo López Mateos reaffirmed Mexico’s position:

any change in the status of Belize cannot be legitimately carried out without the participation of Mexico and without taking into account first and foremost the right of the people of Belize to obtain full independence if they so wish, through the free exercise of their sovereign will.⁵

At the same time, Mexican officials had to take into account not only Guatemalan, but also more general Central American resentment against Mexico. In 1969, Mexican Foreign Minister Carrillo Flores said that Central American countries feared Mexico, and reported that the Salvadoran ambassador in Washington had been “consulting his CA colleagues expressing concern lest BH independence lead to BH opening Bay of Chetumal to Mexican naval vessels,” arguing that if in addition to its naval base in Acapulco Mexico had another in Chetumal Bay, it would dominate all Central America.⁶

President Díaz Ordaz, in February 1970, affirmed that Mexico would always support Belize’s right of independence and that the independent Belize could be sure of the warmest welcome and assistance from Mexico.⁷ In April 1974, Mexico’s Foreign Minister Emilio Rabasa told Price that Mexico supported Belize’s right to self-determination and would officially recognize Belizean sovereignty one hour after independence. In return, Mexico wanted such strips of land as were necessary to guarantee her ships access to Chetumal Bay through Mexican waters.⁸ When the British learned in February 1975 that the Guatemalans were insisting on territorial cession, they immediately became concerned that Mexico might “be tempted to take the wrappings off their own claim.” Yet when Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Minister David Ennals met with Rabasa in Mexico City, Rabasa expressed Mexico’s main practical concern: access for all Mexican ships to Chetumal.⁹ Ennals assured Rabasa that Mexican concerns over access to Chetumal were