The Venture under Way

The conclusion of the Tripartite Convention was really just the beginning of discussions to reach agreement on the action to be taken in Mexico. Each government had, however, managed to achieve some compromise on the part of the other governments, which laid the groundwork for the ensuing preparations. France and Spain remained convinced of the inadequacy of limiting their actions as the British proposed, and France set about obtaining Britain’s agreement, or at least acquiescence, to moving their troops inland. Although Napoleon was accused of being underhand in relation to his intentions in Mexico, it will be seen that, on the contrary, he was open with the other governments about his ideas and plans, although he was, naturally, trying to get them to agree with his perspective. Yet contemporary writers supported the argument about the futility of limiting action to the coast. Charles de Mazade wrote on the impossibility of the powers having any effect on the situation in Mexico if their efforts were limited to the occupation of the coastal customs ports. He remarked that the ‘deplorable states’ of Mexico were accustomed to acceding to force, and as soon as the foreign forces departed they just resumed their demands and their violence against foreign nationals.\(^1\) An English observer, J.H. Tremenheere, later expressed similar views on the futility of limiting action to the control of the ports, but he was more forceful in his criticism, particularly of the British government, when he said, ‘if the objects of the expedition were to be limited only to the seizure and occupation of the ports, a more ineffective and preposterous measure for effecting the expressed purposes of the convention could scarcely be conceived’.\(^2\)

It was precisely with these realisations in mind that Thouvenel advised Barrot, his minister in Madrid, to discuss confidentially with O’Donnell and Collantes the suggestion that instructions to the French and Spanish
commanders authorise them to march to Mexico City, if the circumstances seemed favourable to them. In this confidential telegraphic dispatch Thouvenel said that a preliminary agreement in this respect would be impossible with England because of ‘the situation of the Cabinet before the parliament’. He felt, though, that if France and Spain together gave the broadest possible interpretation to the article providing for the necessity to protect resident foreigners, it was highly likely that their commanders would not encounter any opposition on the part of the English admiral. O’Donnell immediately agreed and said he would give ‘very elastic and discretional instructions’ to the commander of the Spanish forces, and that he would give him a personal letter authorising him to act if necessary in the manner outlined by Thouvenel.

Having obtained Spain’s agreement, Napoleon and Thouvenel were determined to be as open as possible with England, and Thouvenel wrote to Flahault, saying:

il était plus franc, en tout cas, de ne pas lui laisser ignorer nos intentions, si éventuelles qu'elles soient. Le Times, d'ailleurs, a publié un article reproduit aujourd'hui par les Débats et qui prévoit, sans nulle réticence, la nécessité d'aller dicter les conditions d'un arrangement dans la capitale même du Mexique. Demeurer à la Vera-Cruz, en butte aux manœuvres dilatoires du président Juarez et bientôt aux atteintes de la fièvre jaune, ce serait jouer un trop triste rôle!

[It was more honest, in any case, not to leave her ignorant of our intentions, even if they are only contingencies. The Times, moreover, has published an article, reprinted today in the Débats, which predicts, without reservation, that it will be necessary to go and dictate the conditions of an agreement in the very capital of Mexico. To stay in Vera Cruz, exposed to President Juarez’s dilatory schemes, and soon to the attacks of yellow fever, would be too sad a part to play!]

Included in this letter was a copy of the instructions that were to be given to Admiral Jurien de la Gravière, who was to command the French contingent, and this was to be shown to Russell. They expressed the possibility of his having to venture inland, and that it would be left to his discretion to decide that on his arrival. The issue of a possible change of government was also mentioned, in terms that indicated there was no predetermined idea on what might eventuate in this respect. Jurien was advised not to discourage any initiatives taken by any persons or party to try and form a more stable government, and to