CHAPTER 2

The Political Bases of Aztec Warfare

THE Aztecs conquered and incorporated other polities into an overarching political system. But it was a political system based on pervasive and dominating influence rather than on territorial control.

Why the Aztecs developed this form of imperial system can be understood largely in terms of technology. Mesoamerican civilization lacked efficient transportation, having neither wheeled vehicles nor draft animals. This limited the area from which goods could be drawn efficiently and correspondingly reduced the economic benefits of politically incorporating vast regions.[1] Thus economic benefits depended on exercising political control and extracting goods at local expense, by requiring tributaries to both produce and transport goods without recompense. In doing this, the Aztecs were faced with two basic options as they expanded their empire. On the one hand they could have conquered areas and consolidated their political hold by replacing local leaders and conquered troops with Aztec governors and garrisons. By exercising this much political control, the Aztecs could have extracted large quantities of goods from the conquered areas, but the cost in terms of administration, security, and the threat of rebellion would have been very high. On the other hand the Aztecs could have left the government of conquered areas in local hands. This approach would not have permitted so much economic extraction from the conquered area, but its administrative costs were relatively low. These two alternatives offered distinctly different advantages for empires. The former provides greater depth of political control but because of high manpower requirements it can be employed only in limited areas. The latter offers less control but frees more men for further imperial expansion.[2] The Aztecs em-

ployed the latter approach—a hegemonic one—and by analyzing it as such, we can explain many seemingly anomalous features of their empire.

IMPERIAL ORGANIZATION

My analysis of the Aztec Empire is based on the work of Edward N. Luttwak,[3] who analyzes political relations in terms of the degree to which they rely on force and power. Force is defined as direct physical action, which can be exercised only in proportion to its availability and is consumed as it is used. Power (in which force is a component) operates indirectly and, unlike force, is not consumed in use. Rather than being primarily physical, power is psychological—the perception of the possessor's ability to achieve its ends.

The more a political system can rely on power rather than force, the more efficient it is, because the effort required to implement its goals comes from its subordinates; that is, the subordinates police themselves, allowing the dominant polity to conserve its own force. Such a political system is more than an elaborate game of deception and bluff; the ability to wield force is a necessary requirement of power, although its actual use is not always required. A single strong example by a polity of its ability to compel compliance may render repeated demonstrations unnecessary.

The effectiveness of a political system also depends on its goals: the perceived costs of compliance must not outweigh the perceived benefits unless the dominant polity is, in fact, prepared to exercise force on its own behalf. For example, if the dominant polity has a goal of keeping the populace of the subordinate polity from rebelling, it may exert power by demanding that the people be repressed by their own leaders. Regardless of their own sentiments, the leaders will do so (using their own force) if they perceive that such repression will forestall the dominant polity's use of force, perhaps in the form of a punitive invasion. In short, as long as the subordinate polity perceives the benefits as greater than the costs, it will generally comply with the desires of the dominant polity. The very real limitations of such a political system arise from different perceptions of the power of the dominant polity. As the costs to the subordinates rise, the benefits decline, and compliance becomes increasingly unreliable. Consequently, the more exploitative a political system is

perceived to be, the more it must rely on force rather than on power.

While both territorial (i.e., Clausewitzian) and hegemonic systems use force and power to dominate and control, the territorial system emphasizes the former, whereas the hegemonic system emphasizes the latter, with markedly different consequences for control, extraction, integration, and expansion. The object of a territorial empire is to conquer and directly control an area, using the minimum force necessary to conquer and then to administer it. The object of a hegemonic empire is to conquer and indirectly control an area, but economy of force does not have the same meaning. Since no imperial troops remain in the conquered areas, overwhelming force and extraordinary measures may be used in the initial conquest to intimidate the local leadership into continued compliance after the conquering army leaves. Thus what may appear as excessive force from the perspective of territorial objectives is not excessive from the perspective of hegemonic objectives. Territorial conquest may require less force than hegemonic conquest, but territorial control requires a constant level of force in the area thereafter, whereas hegemonic control does not.

The salient features of the Aztec Empire were (1) achieving political expansion without direct territorial control, (2) maintaining internal security by exercising influence over a limited range of the subordinate states' activities (usually political and economic matters), and (3) achieving the latter by generally retaining rather than replacing local officials. Because the Aztecs' imperial concerns were limited, they maintained the empire with great economy of force by relying on local resources for local security and order. The Aztec army did not have to maintain a presence but was mobilized only for further conquests or to deal with rebellions and other major disruptions. For lesser matters the threat of its return was sufficient to ensure compliance by the subordinates.

POLITICAL INTEGRATION

In Mesoamerica the basic political unit was the city and its dependencies, legitimately governed by the local ruler (*tlahtoani*, pl. *tlahtohqueh*) and his successors. Such polities were generally small, usually having a radius of about ten kilometers (6.2 miles). Though larger political organizations occasionally arose, there were few

stable long-term means of integrating them. Sometimes ethnicity offered a basis for larger polities, but because each city's tlahtoani was theoretically autonomous, any political integration above the level of the city involved his relinquishment of his autonomy. The surrender of the various tlahtohqueh's authority, even if only partial, was not entirely voluntary. Rather, they subordinated themselves to a greater tlahtoani for reasons ranging from voluntary alliance to outright conquest. The result was larger polities that were built on a system of alliances in which obedience and tribute were owed to the higher tlahtoani. And although a common ethnic identity may have eased some of these hierarchical relationships, they were ultimately based on the perceived power of the dominant tlahtoani.

The surest way for a particular city to increase its perceived power was to demonstrate it through the exercise of force, which was most readily accomplished by war. To the Aztecs war was not simply the fulfillment of some religious imperative or the defense of what they perceived as vital interests. War *was* the empire. Halting war for too long diminished perceived Aztec power, undermined imperial ties, encouraged resistance to further expansion, and fostered disaffection and rebellion.

Because the Aztecs needed to maintain the perception of power to keep local rulers compliant, affronts or challenges to Aztec authority were often met with seemingly disproportionate harshness. Such exercises punished rebellious cities and emphasized the consequences of rebellion for all other tributary cities in the empire. The Aztecs' willingness to exact a harsh retribution raised the stakes for any city contemplating rebellion and played a key role in the perceived balance of costs and benefits of being in the Aztec Empire.

The threat of harsh reprisals did not entirely forestall rebellion, however, because political relations do not always conform to such logical expectations or to economic rationalities. Hopeless battles are fought and matters of principle are supported. But most important, political relationships based on power are in constant flux because perceptions of power change through time. Time, distance, new successes and allegiances, and organizational changes alter the perceptions of relative power—hence the Aztecs' emphasis on driving home the consequences of rebellion when a favorable opportunity to do so arose.

Although power was at the heart of Mesoamerican political relations, logistics played a key role in shaping empires. Spatial contigu-

ity was not of primary importance in the integration of a hegemonic empire, but logistical constraints did foster the creation of efficient spatial arrangements, and areas otherwise of little interest to the Aztecs were conquered when they formed vital links in the supply chain.

Cities were often attacked sequentially, with the resources, intelligence, and, sometimes, the soldiers of the latest conquest aided in the next one. The army attacked targets until it exhausted its resources, attained its objectives, reached some boundary (physical or cultural), or was defeated. The Aztecs' unprecedented expansion took them to regions where they had no traditional enemies but where they were sometimes able to exploit local antagonisms by siding opportunistically with one adversary against another. They also waged campaigns of intimidation against cities they did not attack directly. Emissaries were sent to such cities to ask that they become subjects of the Aztec king—usually on reasonably favorable terms. Both the proximity of a large, trained, and obviously successful army and the object lessons burning around them led many cities to capitulate peacefully.

Because the Aztecs integrated their empire through indirect control enforced through their opponents' perception of their power, victory and defeat were conceived of differently than in a more territorial system. Victory did not involve the destruction of the target polity's army but their acquiescence in becoming tributaries of the Aztecs. Thus unconquered city-states or empires were not necessarily those that remained unbeaten on the battlefield but those that refused to acknowledge their tributary status after the withdrawal of Aztec forces. And one reason that potential tributaries sometimes resisted the Aztecs so fiercely was that they feared an alteration in their own internal hierarchy of power after conquest. This threat came not from the Aztecs, who usually retained existing arrangements, but from subordinate groups within a polity, which sometimes shifted their allegiance directly to the Aztecs, bypassing and undermining the power of the local tlahtoani.

Governance of these conquered areas was tailored to the hegemonic imperial system: the Aztecs were unconcerned about many local activities. They allowed local laws, customs, and beliefs that did not obstruct imperial aims to be retained, even when they differed from those of the Aztecs. Thus incorporation into the Aztec Empire did not necessarily mean that tributaries altered their behav-

ior vis-à-vis other subgroups. In effect, there was no imperial foreign policy, just an Aztec foreign policy coexisting with the policies of individual tributaries as long as the latter did not conflict with the former. This limited interference in local affairs made submission more palatable to the tributary cities, and often they did not vigorously contest domination. Conquest was not a matter of total intimidation and destruction of the tributaries. Although incorporation into the empire had liabilities—notably, the imposition of annual tribute payments, logistical support for the Aztec armies, and, sometimes, troop support—there were also benefits, such as participation in the Aztec trading network.

As long as the core of the coâlition remained strong, it was in the allied cities' best interests to adhere to it. But because each city retained its own leadership with its own goals and ambitions, the system was unstable. Any weakness in the core alliance reduced its ability to enforce adherence and offered an opportunity for cities to withdraw. As a result, the system possessed considerable elasticity, allowing rapid shifts in power.[4]

To avoid any perception of weakness, information about conquests was disseminated, which was as significant to the Aztecs as the actual victories. Thus, when they won a victory, they dispatched messengers with the news. Often these messengers were not merely runners but formal emissaries of some status. They disseminated information, but their primary function was to elicit new signs of loyalty from tributaries potentially disaffected from the empire. The Aztecs also sent emissaries to potential tributaries with gifts (and implicit threats) to seek peaceful submission. The most fruitful time for such missions was immediately after a successful campaign.

When a war was lost, that also was learned, at least along the army's line of march. Enemy spies and wide-ranging merchants quickly spread such information throughout Mesoamerica. Unlike victories, which were formally communicated both throughout the empire and to enemies and nonallied polities, formal news of defeat was largely confined to the empire, usually as a prelude to recruitment of troops and arms for another campaign.

POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Conquest and internal control were only two of the problems the Aztecs faced. Another was the presence of independent and hostile

polities. Individual city-states posed little threat because of their relatively small size, but complex polities such as multicity states, multicity alliances, and empires, posed greater problems.

Multicity states composed of several major cities and their dependencies, varied considerably in their internal power structures, but their member cities possessed relatively autonomous leadership, offering a range of centralized control. Those states reinforced by ethnic ties, however, were relatively stable and unlikely to fragment under external pressure.

Multicity alliances were composed of allied city-states or multicity states drawn together by mutually perceived interests, including security from external military threats, and they could thus be of considerable size. Although they lacked the coordinated and disciplined control of a centralized government and persistent stabilizing ties, such as a common ethnic identity, they were less bound by geographical limitations. These alliances were essentially special-purpose institutions, arising from perceived needs and persisting as long as the needs were satisfied. But over time if there were no changes in the way an alliance was structured, it disintegrated when its members' interests diverged.

Empires were the most complex Mesoamerican polities, reaching considerable size and having a relatively centralized and hierarchical political organization. Being multiethnic, empires suffered some internal divergence of interests, but because they were centralized (at least for imperial matters), they could ward off some of the centrifugal forces that pried alliances apart. Thus, although the various political subunits were not free to leave the empire, they might nevertheless lack a major commitment to it. Because these complex polities had larger populations and greater military potential than individual city-states, the Aztecs used different tactics in dealing with them.

City-states generally controlled relatively modest areas, so they confronted attacking armies at the outskirts of the city, and the defenders' defeat in battle meant defeat of the city-state. The attackers could immediately follow up such a victory by sacking the city. Empires and multicity groupings, by contrast, controlled relatively large areas and intercepted attacking armies at their borders, where the loss of a battle meant only a tactical defeat rather than the loss of the entire polity. The defenders could simply fall back, regroup in friendly territory, and renew the fight. Thus complex polities could not be

easily conquered in their entirety; the attackers could only chip away at the borders, since each side's main centers remained far from the battle, and transport and logistical constraints made deep penetration of hostile territory very difficult. Nevertheless, the advantage lay with the aggressor: defenders risked their armies and their polities (entirely, if they were city-states; partially, if they were larger), while the attackers risked only their armies.

Alliances could be formed en route to the battle to offset the strength in depth of larger polities, but the effectiveness of this strategy depended on the degree of internal disaffection in the defender's system. Generally, this strategy was most feasible for alliances, less so for an empire, and least for a multicity state.

The presence of moderately disaffected elements was not too significant as long as the defenders kept the attackers at a distance so that they could not challenge the polity's internal control. But once the defender's area of dominance was penetrated, its internal control was demonstrably challenged, and the dissidents could ally with the invader. These considerations of internal control further prompted larger polities to meet the enemy at the borders, not for territorial purposes but for hegemonic ones; the defending polity needed to ensure that its internal support remained intact and, inter alia, this was achieved by marching to the borders.

The defense-in-depth strategy was an effective one, and the more area a state dominated, the safer it was from external conquest, all other things being equal. This safety, together with the vulnerability of individual city-states, led to their general absorption into one of the complex polities.

Cities between more powerful polities were in a difficult position. As polities expanded, nearby city-states could not remain neutral; only alliances offered any security. Conquest left no choice of allies, so many precariously situated towns selected allies on the basis of military considerations, frequently favoring whichever polity could and would project force into the area. A city-state located where several polities exercised influence, might consider factors such as ethnic ties, trade, and access to markets.

Whatever the choice, city-states situated between power blocs allied with one or the other and thereby formed the imperial perimeter. This realignment of perimeter cities altered the relationship of the competing power blocs, since the successful empire gained additional military and logistical capacity from these city-states. Simi-

larly, the newly-incorporated city-states gained by being tied into the empire's trading network (which was exceptionally far-flung and prosperous) and by falling under its protection. Conversely, however, the city-states were then vulnerable to attack by an enemy over matters previously of concern only to the empire, and they were dependent on that empire for protection.

The existence of various power blocs altered the political environment in Mesoamerica but did not lead to the ultimate emergence of only two competing coalitions, largely because of the limits on projecting force. Logistical constraints meant that areas had to be relatively contiguous to be incorporated or to form an effective coalition, because widely dispersed areas could not readily reinforce one another. Moreover, this type of empire was effective only when the conquered groups were settled, civilized peoples. The Aztecs' method of extracting goods through an existing power structure was unsuited to seminomadic peoples such as the Chichimecs who lacked formally recognized political hierarchies and offices.[5]

REBELLION

Empire building also caused internal opposition, the most serious manifestation of which was rebellion. Rebellions ranged from the failure of a region to grant the Aztecs certain presumed rights, such as unobstructed transit, to defaulting on tribute payments, to killing Aztecs and their subjects. Few or no imperial forces were necessary or available at any given location in the empire; only the local leadership kept tributary provinces loyal. But because the hegemonic system depended on the perception of Aztec power, this situation could change with any alteration in the status quo; thus one of the expected results of a hegemonic system was the occurrence of intermittent rebellions.

Rebellions were likeliest to succeed when the empire was temporarily weakened (e.g., after a disastrous campaign or the death of a king), especially if the rebellious polity could form an alliance with another power nearby. Thus cities near Tenochtitlan were less likely to revolt, even under oppressive conditions, than were more distant cities and those near independent regional powers.[6] Moreover, many of the tributaries that had been "voluntarily" incorporated into the empire—particularly those at some distance from Tenochtitlan—were less reliable allies and more likely to rebel than those that had

been militarily subdued, because they had never experienced the full might of the empire.

Although they were expected, rebellions were not taken lightly, and the Aztecs monitored the level of disaffection among tributaries at least intermittently. When rebellions broke out, vigorous action was crucial to prevent their spread. When the empire was weak, less direct challenges and affronts were ignored, but they were not forgotten.

The Aztecs could have reduced the threat of rebellion within the empire by fragmenting large tributaries to increase the power disparity between ruler and subject, but they rarely did so. They generally retained large tributaries intact because larger client states could more effectively maintain internal order. This arrangement also lessened Aztec military cost, and the benefits of greater internal order apparently outweighed the threat to imperial stability.

SUMMARY

In summary, the Aztecs' reliance on hegemonic rather than territorial control produced an empire of distinctive character and vast expanse but loose control. Mesoamerican technological constraints limited the size, strength, and duration of forays outside the empire, and such engagements took on strategic characteristics that varied with the political nature of the target. Furthermore, the Aztec Empire was essentially an alliance, and was expectedly fraught with rebellion. Nevertheless, the system functioned admirably within its cultural context, and through it the Aztecs expanded their domain to a size unprecedented in Mesoamerica.

CHAPTER 3

The Military Life Cycle

CONQUEST and warfare in the Aztec Empire were tied directly to the army and its organization. This organization is not clearly understood: however, the interpretations of many modern writers often conflict.[1] Unfortunately, there is no extant account of the complete ranking system and organization of the Aztec army. Thus, any description of the army system must necessarily be a reconstruction.

There were army ranks similar to the modern "general," "major," and so forth, and there were likewise general groupings of warriors much like our "enlisted men" and "officers."[2] However, the members of the Aztec army had many different and cross-cutting loyalties—to the city, the *calpolli* (ward), the king, the calpolli headman, and so forth—and their rank did not depend merely on their position in a monolithic, centralized military hierarchy. Thus, an exact classification of ranks and statuses, in the modern Western military sense, is falsely precise and distorts the way the Aztecs conceived of their military system. There are parallels between the Aztec and Western systems, born of similar organizational and operational necessities, but these similarities should not blind us to the differences.

The historical development of the Aztec military system creates another problem in interpretation. The writings of the conquistadors and other chroniclers offer the impression that the Aztec military system as encountered by the first Spaniards reflected an unchanging norm. In fact, Aztec developments were not always simply an elaboration on common Mesoamerican themes. Both the political and military organizations of other central Mexican polities varied considerably.[3] Furthermore, the Aztec military system had been evolving rapidly. The army created new offices and it promulgated