

# Mexico, security, and the towering task before the Mexican state

## A FAILED STATE?

Mexico is having a hard time trying to deal with its own security problems. These include the further expansion of drug cartel activities into US border states where they have long been the major suppliers of drugs to American consumers. Indeed, experts are of the view that Mexican trafficking organizations also network with terrorist organizations whose purposes go well beyond drug smuggling.

There has been speculation in the media about radical Iranian Islamist organizations training members of the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels. Allegedly, they provide instruction in five areas: arms and explosives, tactics, leadership, training, and commando operations. The expansion of cartel activities, and with that expansion the intensification of the bribery and blackmail of government officials, poses an imminent threat to the rule of law in the United States. In a nutshell, the risks for American homeland security certainly increase because the United States shares the most active border in the world with, in the words of *The Economist*, “a narco state as their neighbour.” The actual reign of fear, much in evidence in the daily life of Mexico, has given Mexico—fairly or unfairly—the label of a failed state.

The fact is the Mexican government has taken on what may be the most titanic task in the history of the country, namely, the fight against the scourge of organized crime. However, the very real danger is that the Mexican state is failing to win this fight against the ruthless tactics of the drug gangs, and this is because those in power formerly and those currently responsible for leading the fight have been complicit and closed their eyes to the aims, actions, and instincts of the drug gangs.

BY JOSÉ LUIS VALDÉS-UGALDE

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde is the director of the Center for Research on North America at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

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## THE “COLOMBIANIZATION” OF MEXICO

The Mexican government is now forced to demonstrate to the world that its sovereignty has not failed and that its strategy against the crime syndicates can be both timely and smart. As a result, Mexico cannot yet, as a nation, aspire to be taken seriously as a partner of the United States in bilateral and regional arenas where the two countries need to work together. The current Mexican administration is not able to show that it is capable of managing its all too real domestic security problems effectively, let alone contribute to the strengthening of the North American security perimeter. The question is not yet whether or not Mexico is a failed state, but whether it is drifting irreversibly toward ungovernability. If this is the case, will the result be a return of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) to the presidency in 2012 and an authoritarian reversal of the political democratic transition, which began in 2000?

For the last ten years, the Mexican state has failed to provide public security at a level that meets North American standards. It has been disastrously unable to enforce internal rules of law to protect Mexicans from the criminal gangs, which operate with what many see as impunity. For these reasons, Mexico’s image and prestige have been severely damaged. Although Mexico is not what Colombia was at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, the Mexican press is filled with references to the “Colombianization” of Mexico because of the escalation of violence and the power of transnational criminal organizations. However, despite these comparisons, there are factors, such as narco-trafficking with its links to the illegal migration into Mexico from Central America and the absence of narco-guerrillas like the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), among others, that make Mexico’s war against crime a unique problem that requires a Mexican policy response.

## THE MEXICAN BIPOLAR CONDITION

The Mexican government, for its part, has been using the chauvinistic argument of blaming Mexico’s security crisis on the US demand for heroin. The Calderon government has adopted a defensive, paranoid position, but instead of playing the blame game, it needs to accept the gravity of its homegrown crisis and begin to act as follows:

- strengthen the rule of law and the culture of legality as a fundamental measure to fight the cartels;
- engage in a deeper housecleaning of corrupt state institutions, which are dangerously infiltrated by the cartels;

- vigorously attack and punish the complicity and corruption of local and federal authorities;
- think seriously and responsibly about the need to professionalize the different police forces within a greater framework of a comprehensive judicial reform;
- streamline the criminal and political intelligence unit, the Center for Research and National Security (CISEN), to justify the enormous budget that has been earmarked for it; and
- propose a multidimensional risk-reduction agenda jointly with the United States, which is truly the towering task before the Mexican state.

Unfortunately, the evidence before us indicates that a sustainable national consensus remains far from complete, and that in Mexico, under the current conditions, such a consensus is unachievable. A spate of recent US government reports—see, among others, the National Drug Intelligence Center's *National Drug Threat Assessment* (US Justice Department) and the *CRS Report for Congress: Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Congressional Research Service) leave little room for doubt that the prevailing perception among US decision-makers is that Mexico has gone off the rails in many areas of common concern. As a result, our mutual security is in danger.

This perception has damaged Mexico's reputation and has led to many US politicians forgetting that drug trafficking and money laundering are global in nature. Thus, if the Obama administration wants to preserve its national security perimeter—including the security management of its borders—it will have to ask itself frankly to what extent Mexico's security crisis is a risk for US security. Then it must find ways to act responsibly in coordination with Mexico to tackle these transnational threats. This response must include measures to detect and deal with the more than 35 million Americans, according to 2007 estimates, who use illicit drugs or abuse medications.

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The response will also have to confront the crime wave plaguing at least 230 US cities nationwide in which Mexican drug gangs have extended their operations, including major cities such as Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles. At the same time, a clever strategy is necessary to fight the huge black market in high-powered weapons imported into Mexico from the United States. The \$10 million allocated for Project Gunrunner in the economic stimulus package, to target illicit US gun-trafficking networks, is definitely not enough to deal with the fact that more than 2,000 heavy-calibre weapons enter Mexico from the United States every day. Experts estimate that 90 percent of the firearms confiscated in drug crimes in Mexico come from the United States (730,000 per year is the total estimated by the US Senate).

### NOT A FAILED STATE BUT A FAILED STRATEGY

The bilateral effort should go beyond programs like the Merida Initiative, a security cooperation assistance package for Mexico, Central America, and two Caribbean countries, Haiti and Dominican Republic. In fact, it is very probable that the Merida Initiative is inadequate to the task and has failed to stop the trafficking of guns and drugs, as can be seen in the aforementioned Washington reports. Indeed, the US war on drugs is considered by many to be a failure. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed (February 23, 2009), former Latin American presidents

call for a paradigm shift in drug policies from interdiction and criminalization of consumption toward an approach that focuses on reducing consumer demand and treating the drug epidemic as a public health problem.

This frank recognition of the failure of existing programs makes us question the strategies currently in force. Under such examination one finds that the Merida Initiative is too narrowly conceived to have the desired effects. Most of the budget is going to contain the cross-border trade in narcotics, reduce criminal terrorism, and strengthen border security. Large amounts of money and technology are being transferred to Mexican police forces, yet this may fall into the hands of corrupt elements of the police and military. To make matters worse, recent events—the \$150 million cut in financial assistance provided by the Initiative and the US decision to delay sending to Mexico the helicopters and aircrafts needed in the fight against narco-terrorists—send the wrong signals to Mexicans. If the ultimate intention is to ensure closer cooperation with Mexican authorities, it is counterproductive to reduce the resources that are badly needed in the war against the drug gangs. The legalization of drugs remains a taboo topic, and its enactment is far from probable, in either Mexico or the United States.

To be more effective in the war on drugs, both Mexico and the United States need to reconsider their strategies. Although Washington's response has started to improve, it is still too timid. For example, on February 25, 2009, US Attorney General Eric Holder announced the results of the 21-month Operation Xcellerator. These included 755 arrests of criminal elements, many linked to the Sinaloa drug cartel, 23 tons of narcotics, 169 weapons, vehicles, ships, and even planes, plus the seizure of \$59 million in cash and \$6.5 million in other assets. However, much more needs to be done and the seizures to date represent only a modest beginning. For its part, Mexico needs to contribute more to an integrated

Mexico, page 52

program of drugs and weapons seizures and the arrest of gang members. In addition, it must mount its own comprehensive agenda that makes sense and, most important, delivers results.

A shift in strategy is required with a move away from uncoordinated policy responses and mere assistance packages. An improved bilateral framework of cooperation must include a multilevel strategy that addresses nationally the culture of illegality, a developmental program for drug-crops replacement, and the public health side of the problem. It must include a genuine compromise on intelligence cooperation, gun control, and extradition, and the drafting of a bilateral and trilateral risk agenda. It is not an exaggeration to argue that Mexico is facing the greatest crisis in public life since the Mexican Revolution, and its response should reflect the magnitude of the problem.

## THE PROSPECTS FOR TRILATERALISM


The need to rethink Mexico's response to narco-terrorism from top to bottom becomes even more pressing when we see how differently Canada and the United States deal with their common security problems. On President Obama's recent visit to Canada, it is significant that when he talked with Prime Minister Harper about their joint future as members of NAFTA there was hardly a mention of Mexico. Both leaders boasted that they shared so much in common, especially stressing their trade interdependence. Also noteworthy was Harper's strong statement that "[t]hreats to the United States are threats to Canada. There is no such thing as a threat to the national security of the United States, which does not represent a direct threat to this country [Canada]." That is, the United States and Canada posed security as a common issue intimately linked to their different domestic situations, and they look to the future in an affirmative way where they will propose viable solu-

tions to each other. This event inevitably leads Mexican observers to rethink questions often raised in Mexico around US-Mexico and US-Canada bilateral relations and of the sustainability of the trilateral relationship between the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

At moments of crisis, it appears that Canada takes better advantage of its relationship with the United States than Mexico does. Apart from trade issues, Mexico and Canada deal with transnational problems, such as security and immigration, separately with Washington. However, the war on drugs will not succeed with Canada and Mexico operating within their "solitudes" simply because the bulk of the cocaine in Canada comes from Mexican cartels via Canadian-based organized crime routed through middlemen in major US cities to arrive in Vancouver and Toronto.

What then are the "hidden" barriers to cooperation between Mexico, Canada,

and the United States? I would say there are two: Mexican passiveness and lack of international political leverage, and a historical cultural apathy toward and underestimation of Mexico, by both Canada and the United States, as an equal partner, because of development gaps and governance limitations.

It seems that Mexico is incapable of performing as a reliable and constructive partner. At the same time, Mexico and the United States are dealing with their bilateral issues at the expense of deepening the trilateral security agenda. This makes it very difficult to defend Mexico's role in and the trilateral character of the North American integration process. If the United States and Canada have overlooked Mexico in their respective strategic stands on security, as it appears they have, Mexico must remind them forcefully that it is a central part of the equation if regional security is to be successfully guaranteed. 

## North America Next: A Report to President Obama on Building Sustainable Security and Competitiveness

February 10, 2009, 10:00 am

National Press Club, Washington, DC

[T]he North American Center for Transborder Studies (NACTS) at Arizona State University will formally release the findings of a year-long effort, "North America Next: A Memo to President Obama on Building Sustainable Security and Competitiveness" as part of the National Press Club's "Morning Newsmaker" program in Washington, DC.

Speakers at the Newsmaker event included . . . U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Canada, Mexico and NAFTA, and Colin Robertson, a senior Canadian diplomat currently directing Canada-US project at Carleton University in Ottawa. . . .

The objective of this initiative, which was undertaken by NACTS with the input of its trinational Board of Advisors, its faculty advisors and a large group of private and public sector partners, is to promote a more cooperative, secure, sustainable, and competitive North America. The release of the recommendations is timed to coincide with the new President and his administration settling in and searching for details and implementation mechanisms for their visions.

<http://nacts.asu.edu/north-america-next>