

# Mexico's national security equation: Adding up the variables

## MEXICO'S INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Mexico's national security depends on two fundamental factors. The first is Mexico's capacity to achieve its own political, economic, and social objectives, in order to minimize its vulnerability. Mexico, a country with grave social deficits, is also facing the political conflicts that accompany any new democracy on its way to consolidation. But, above all, it suffers from a grave institutional weakness when faced with making the rule of law prevail nationwide. The second factor is that Mexico is an inseparable part of the North American security equation. The complex human and trade interests linking it to its North American partners make Mexico a direct part of the regional security agenda.

Unfortunately, balancing these two factors is not always easy. Attempting to harmonize the internal and external security agendas means that Mexico suffers relatively frequently from domestic—and sometimes external—political frictions with different stakeholders. Internally, the nationalist ideology that views with suspicion any kind of cooperation with the American security agenda continues to hold sway among a very large sector of the Mexican political class. For example, in the first weeks of 2008, social and peasant organizations that wanted a renegotiation of the agricultural chapter of the North American Free Trade Agreement included among their demands the abrogation of the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) and the cancellation of the so-called Merida Initiative. Although these mechanisms have nothing to do with agriculture, they have become, for some sectors, a political banner for resistance.

## PRAGMATISM WITHOUT A PROJECT

Looking beyond protests, the central issue is the absence of strategic clarity

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about the kind of relationship that Mexico can have with its northern neighbour and trade partner. Mexico does not have a strategic political proposal—nor does the United States—for the kind of long-term security cooperation that would be desirable. Until now, both countries have opted for pragmatic cooperation, following general Homeland Security guidelines in matters of border and aeronautical security, and operational coordination with anti-drug agencies. But there is no overarching plan that specifies objectives and commitments for the two governments over the coming years. There are also no guidelines about whether security issues should or should not be made trilateral matters, or whether they should remain bilateral questions that Mexico and Canada manage separately with the United States.

For political and ideological reasons, Mexico also has not managed to link up its migratory priorities (the naturalization of 12 million undocumented persons in

the United States) with the security issues that have developed in recent years. This has been very frustrating for Mexicans, who hope for a more equitable kind of integration. The Mexican request for a migratory accord was answered with the political offensive of fence construction along the US–Mexico border. A lot of things can be said about a fence along the border, and one of them is that it is not a friendly gesture between two neighbours who share the same security paradigm.

Externally, the Bush administration's unilateralism, which reached its zenith with the invasion of Iraq, put Mexico in a very tense position. As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Mexico was forced to decide whether or not to support the United States. The flimsy proof of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction did not prevent political pressure from being exerted on the Mexican government. Like few other moments in its history, Mexico experienced the tension between the bilateral security agenda with which it cooperated unreservedly and an international policy fostering multilateralism and condemning the use of force without the approval of the Security Council.

## DRUGS AND BORDER SECURITY

Another element that has fed this great tension is the drug-trafficking-related violence along the common border. The number of people assassinated in the last three years has been scandalous. Mexican authorities responded to US officials' criticisms of the Mexican state's weakness in dealing with this level of violence by suggesting the principle of co-responsibility for both countries. The principle of co-responsibility in dealing with the drug problem has been embodied in four major issues. The first is the Merida Initiative, which, among other things, includes earmarking resources

and US assistance to improve the capabilities of different security and law enforcement agencies. The US Congress has still not approved the resources requested to make this support a reality.

The second issue is the widespread availability of arms. Hundreds of thousands of light weapons, mostly from the United States, circulate in Mexico with absolutely no control. Mexico has systematically denounced this situation; the US response on a diplomatic level has been understanding, but always with the caveat that in the United States the right to bear arms is one of the basic, founding rights of the republic (Second Amendment) and an internal political problem because of the influence of the National Rifle Association. This continues to be an open question, while Mexican criminal gangs have a continuing supply of firearms and ammunition via the United States.

The third issue is economics. The figures on criminal financial operations are only approximations because of their covert nature, but Mexico's Attorney General's Office argues that the volume of cash-based operations using illicit money in the United States runs into the billions of dollars. John Walters, the US anti-drug czar, concurs, saying recently that the earnings of Mexican drug kingpins in the United States come to nearly US\$14 billion.

The fourth issue is linked to the cooperation between the American and Mexican judiciary systems working to prevent national jurisdictions from becoming spaces for criminals to enjoy impunity. Along these lines, the Calderón administration has moved ahead with an aggressive agenda for extraditions of Mexican citizens wanted by the US justice system.

Co-responsibility can be handled on a conceptual level or on the level of a political statement. However, firearms continue to enter into Mexico seemingly without restriction, thus strengthening criminal groups' firepower, which surpasses that of the police forces in border states. In addition, the cash flow into money-laundering and illegitimate busi-

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nesses continues to fuel the activities of organized crime. There is also still a lot of work to be done to ensure that Mexican customs officials have the capacity to secure the borders.

### TOUGH CHOICES AHEAD

In the medium term, the upcoming change in administrations in the United States is likely to open up space for moderating the excesses of Bush's unilateralism and, as a result, decrease frictions with Mexico. Ideally, this will lead to cooperation between the trade partners in multilateral forums. A minimal alignment of both countries' national interests in the international arena is the basis for

reducing political conflicts and mistrust. Similarly, it is to be expected that the issue of migration, so sensitive for Mexico, can be dealt with from a broader perspective than just security. Though migration has a security component, it is fundamentally an expression of the labour markets of two highly integrated economies.

The degree of co-responsibility that the United States will assume in the fight against drugs waged by the Mexican government will be determined in the short term. The amount of resources that is finally approved and the conditions under which they are approved will show that level of commitment. But the urgent issue will continue to be cooperation to reduce the flow of arms and cash that strengthen the groups defying the Mexican state.

Mexico will have to do its job of internal reconceptualization, and, in the coming years, its security program will have to harmonize a domestic security agenda with an external security agenda. It will also have to adjust the plans of all the bodies involved in national security to fit in with national priorities and those derived from our inevitable belonging to the geostrategic space called North America. 

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