

"Si labor empeñosa exige los intereses materiales, empeño aún más valioso reclaman los intereses morales" (Juan Zorrilla de San Martín)



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Mexico's "Wicked" Security Challenges and Collaboration with the U.S.

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Scholars use the term “wicked” problems to refer to those whose complexity, changing nature, and difficulty of impacting in necessary ways make them almost impossible to solve. At the beginning of March 2025, as Mexico’s senior security officials were in Washington D.C. engaging with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, I was in Mexico, giving presentations to the country’s Army and Navy War Colleges and engaging with a range of security experts about the country’s challenges, to include countering transnational criminal organizations. I was profoundly impacted by the contradiction between Mexico’s significant efforts to combat organized crime, control migration, address known deficiencies in their own institutions, including collaborating with the U.S., versus the pessimism, shared by most of the people to whom I spoke that those efforts were unlikely to significantly improve the situation.

Mexico’s Dilemma and U.S. Pressure

Mexico’s dilemma is how to combat the phenomena that are tearing apart its society with corruption and violence, when the system to combat those ills is itself broken, while its neighbor to the north, harmed by flows of drugs and migrants across the border and contributing to the problem through the equally difficult-to-address demand of drugs and availability of arms, is demanding immediate action.

While some with whom I spoke in Mexico hoped the pressure by the Trump Administration might oblige the Mexican government to address the problem of endemic corruption and institutional problems, others were deeply concerned about the possibility of unilateral U.S. military action against drug cartels on Mexican soil, which they warned, could be the tipping point between the Sheinbaum Administration’s “cool headed” negotiations with the U.S. and a far more acrimonious government and societal response.

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The Sheinbaum Administration’s New Security Approach

For me, the United States and Mexico are bound by a “marriage” of geography, family, and economic bonds, with the actions of each profoundly affecting the other, and the cost of “divorce” unacceptable. In that spirit, I offer the following personal observations, based on 27 interactions, some involving fairly senior persons, over 12 days:



challenges. Through one of her closest security advisors, Omar Garcia Harfuch, President Sheinbaum is building a civilian-led security structure around the newly empowered Secretariat for Public and Citizen Security (SSPC), supported by the Mexican Defense Ministry (DEFENSA), Navy (MARINA), and a new National Intelligence Center (CNI) that Harfuch, as head of SSPC, is seeking to build into an organization to collect criminal, rather than foreign or political intelligence.

Reforms and Challenges in the National Guard and Police

The effort is intended, in part, respond to a vulnerability created when Mexico's previous President, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), eliminated the Federal Police and replaced it with a new National Guard that lacked its predecessor's intelligence and investigation capabilities.

The focus on the CNI for criminal intelligence arguably comes at the expense of the Agency for Criminal Investigation (AIC) within the Attorney General's office, which some feel had been politicized by AMLO to go after political opponents.

As a complement to the empowerment of the SSPC and transformation of the CNI, the National Guard, which, since October 2024, has been fully subordinate to, and part of DEFENSA, has received investments in equipment and has made progress in establishing its own training and personnel (once largely borrowed from the Army and Navy Military Police). Still, the entity, which was never in its original conception intended to be a traditional police force, retains a notably military character, with its members beginning with DEFENSA basic training, attending public security-focused training within the DEFENSA system, and reflecting DEFENSA's culture and command structure, without any plans for this to change.

Although the Guard continues to improve, its posture tends to deemphasize developing relationships with the communities in which it operates that facilitate effective intelligence and avoidance of crime, although in a circular dilemma, some would argue that the powers of the criminals to corrupt and intimidate make community police unrealistic.

The Role of the National Guard in Migration Control

Thus far, the Guard has arguably been most effective in its contribution to the control of migration, both through the deployment of 10,000 personnel on the U.S. border as well as through its work at the southern border and throughout the country. Still, some would argue that such work has arguably also drained National Guard resources from other missions, such as internal security.



organizations and substantially defunded as the national government has reduced resource transfers to state-level entities, in part because of perceived corruption in such resource transfers.

U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation

Although the U.S. does not conduct joint military operations with its Mexican counterparts on either US or Mexican soil, it does coordinate closely with them in a range of ways from training, joint exercise and capability acquisition, to some intelligence sharing. Indeed, the Mexican Army and Navy have representatives in at least 12 US military institutions.

In addition to Mexico conducting the unprecedented, accelerated extradition of 29 high-value criminal leaders to the U.S., the high level dialogue between the U.S. Secretaries of Defense and State, and the heads of SSPC, DEFENSA and MARINA, have paved the way for a new security cooperation framework structured around areas of mutual interest, including going after criminal organizations, addressing flows of drugs, migrants, arms, and confronting the source of drug demand in the US.

Contrary to some perceptions, the US designation of six Mexican groups as “foreign terrorist organizations” does not create the basis for unilateral U.S. intervention on Mexican soil, but it only facilitates legal action against persons belonging to or supporting those groups in the US, in criminal and immigration actions.

Conclusion: The Need for Bilateral Cooperation

I returned from Mexico convinced that, although Mexico is not about to solve its “wicked” problems anytime soon, the best approach is for the US and Mexico to work more, rather than less, closely together in addressing the challenges that involve and affect both, looking pragmatically at what needs fixing and working incrementally to transform the reinforcing cycle of criminality, corruption, and impunity and violence into a virtuous cycle of strengthened institutions and mutual development.

Read in Spanish

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