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Transnational Organized Crime in Mexico and the Government's Response

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Introduction

The U.S. government threats of tariffs on the Mexican government if it did not do more to control illicit fentanyl flows into the United States have cast new attention on the growing problem of transnational organized crime that has wrought violence and corruption at all levels in Mexico. This work, based on the authors research in interviews with senior Mexican security officials in Mexico City in March 2025, examines the evolution of transnational organized crime in the country, and the Mexican government's response, with the support of the United States and other partners.

The principal drivers of transnational organized crime dynamics in Mexico are flows of cocaine through the country, largely destined for European and Asian markets, as well as the production of fentanyl there from Chinese and other precursors, mostly oriented toward export to the United States. In addition, other illicit activities including petroleum theft (huachicol), smuggling and exploitation of migrants transiting the country, extortion and kidnapping, illegal mining and money laundering, have also fueled Mexico's evolving illicit economy.

With respect to murders and other violence in Mexico, arms, including long arms imported from the United States, arms obtained on the black market from Central American and other global wars, drones and other military products principally from the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as a large, well-developed illicit domestic industry for military vehicles and supplies all contribute to the lethality of multiple ongoing conflict within the country.

The organized crime dynamics in Mexico, the domestic and international groups involved, in the pattern of violence has evolved significantly in the almost two decades since 2006 when Mexican president Felipe Calderon declared war on the drug cartels for their escalating violence and deployed federal troops into Michoacan to respond. This work analyzes of those dynamics, their evolution, and the response of the Mexican government, in conjunction with the US and other partners.

Background

The contemporary illicit dynamics in Mexico have evolved significantly over the past century from the First and Second World Wars when Mexican states such as Sinaloa produced heroin, first legally in response to wartime demand from the US market, and later illegally, and on a greater scale.[1]

During World War II and the years that followed, the needs of the US economy for labor, including the Braceros program which brought seasonal migrant farm workers to the US from Mexico from 1942 through 1964.[2] Although the underlying role of US demand as a driver was the same, flows of both migrants and illicit substances were limited.

With respect to drugs, in the 1970s, in response to the changing demand of the US market, illicit shipments from Mexico to the US evolved from heroin to marijuana to cocaine. The crackdown on in the 1980s maritime smuggling routes for cocaine through the Caribbean increased reliance on overland routes through Central America and Mexico. In the 1990s, the dismantling of the powerful Medellin and Cali cartels in Colombia, which had previously organized and dominated much of the international cocaine trade, opened a space for Mexican intermediaries to grow into more powerful players with respect to those flows through the region, still predominantly oriented toward the US market.

During this time Mexico's principal cartels evolved and increased in power, based initially on familial groupings including the "Gulf Cartel" of Juan Garcia Abrigo and the Sinaloa-base "Guadalajara Cartel" of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, which later devolved into organizations led by the Arellano Félix clan (Tijuana), the Carrillo Fuentes clan (Juarez), and a Sinaloa-based organization led by Joaquín ("El Chapo") Guzmán Loera. [3]

During the early 2000s, rivalries between groups led to an escalation of conflict. This included an attempt by the Sinaloa cartel to encroach into Gulf Cartel territory, and the response of the later, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, to create an armed wing by recruiting ex Mexican military members, the Zetas. The

success of such militarization in the fight over territory quickly led it to be copied by the Sinaloa cartel, and later, others, dramatically expanding the level of violence.

The deployment of the military into Michoacan in 2006 by the new government of Felipe Calderon in 2006, and later, to the rest of the country,[4] as well as the targeting of cartel leadership by Mexican government forces, fragmented those structures and forced their diversification.

By the 2010s, the original 2-4 major cartels in Mexico had degenerated into hundreds of criminal groups, including the fragments of the earlier family based organizations, whose leadership had been eliminated by the government and by each other, the armed wings of those organizations, sometimes as small as affiliated local gangs, vigilante groups initially formed to resist encroachment into their territory by criminal groups, but which became corrupted criminal enterprises themselves, plus as various other criminally connected local entities.

Also shaping the evolution of the criminal dynamics in Mexico, the previously noted formation of armed wings to protect the cartels or encroach on the territory of others, drove the diversification of criminality as those entities turned to extortion, kidnapping, robbery and other activities to finance themselves.

Beyond these dynamics, growing numbers of immigrants, initially originating in Central America and traveling through Mexico, and later, those coming from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, and Ecuador among other countries of origin, provided revenues for human smugglers and a range of human trafficking industries, whose revenue reached levels rivaling and sometimes exceeding those from drug production and smuggling.

The diversification of criminal activities in Mexico also expanded to include petroleum theft (huachicol), particularly around major refineries such as that in Guanajuato, as well as theft from pipelines moving both crude oil and refined products to the United States, including those in the state of Tamaulipas, as well as those in other parts throughout Mexico.

In the 2000s, the nature of the illicit drug industry in Mexico itself began to change, with the emergence of synthetic drug production and smuggling. This industry initially focused on the production of methamphetamines, assembled in Mexico from Chinese precursor chemicals, but in the 2010s, increasingly produced fentanyl, primarily for the US market.^[5] The dynamic was exacerbated by the opioid crisis in the United States, which initially led to an upsurge in heroin production as a substitute for the painkiller oxycontin, as well as fentanyl, with opioid-like effects.

In the fragmented, violent competition between criminal groups in Mexico of the 2020s, two groups came to dominate the others: the Sinaloa cartel, with a largely franchise-based criminal structure, and the more centralized and violent Jalisco Nuevo Generacion cartel (CJNG). The groups waged proxy wars, supporting local rivals of the other in different parts of Mexico in struggles for control over drug routes and other sources of illicit earnings. Following the extradition of longtime Sinaloa leader “El Chapo” Guzman to the United States, control of the cartel, while highly functional, was divided between one of its established early leaders, “El Mayo” Zambada, versus the sons of “El Chapo,” known as the “Chapiza.”

Over the course of these struggles for “plazas” (key nodes of drug routes) in Mexico, Sinaloa came to dominate much of the territory in the northwest of the country, leading to the border with the United States. That position cemented its focus on

the US market, and the supply of fentanyl, the primary drug demanded by that market, produced in laboratories in Sinaloa state under the group's control.

On the other hand, CJNG, which came to dominate the central Pacific coast of Mexico, and which made some inroads into Mexico's Central Atlantic Coast, focused more on the European market, which it could access from Pacific coast ports. Consequently, it also tended to focus more on cocaine, which it could import from the Andean region, including Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, and which commanded a street price in Europe almost twice what the drug received in the United States. CJNG also focused on non-fentanyl synthetic drugs, which were more popular in the European market than fentanyl.

In each of Mexico's states, the level of violence and criminal dynamics came to reflect the operations and competitions between the two major groups, their surrogates, legacy and local groups, involving flows of these different drugs for different markets, as well as the other criminal activities facilitated by the economic base of the state and conditions there, from oil theft, to the extortion of tourism, to human smuggling.

The following section examines the state of cartel and criminal dynamics in a select subset of major Mexican states. It should be regarded as a "snapshot" taken in early 2025, of what continues to be a complex and evolving struggle.

The Criminal Dynamics of Individual Mexican States

A study by the think tank Lantia realized in 2022 identified 442 criminal groups in Mexico,[6] highlighting the degree of fragmentation of the criminal landscape that has occurred

since President Felipe Calderon first deployed the Mexican military to Michoacan in 2006 in response to escalating cartel violence.

As noted previously, the evolution of the criminal dynamic in Mexico has been shaped by multiple factors, including Sinaloa domination of the routes to the United States in the northwest of the country, and their corresponding concentration on the fentanyl trade, along with the domination of Mexico's central Pacific coast by CJNG and its corresponding focus on the shipment of cocaine to Europe and Asia. [Z]

All across Mexico, but particularly in key locations defined by petroleum infrastructure such as Guanajuato, petroleum theft and the struggle for control over the petroleum assets to be robbed has continued to play an important role in criminal dynamics.

In the northeast, and along the Atlantic coast, the failure of multiple prior attempts by CJNG to consolidate territorial control has left the landscape in a situation of fragmented control by other groups.

In the South of the country, human smuggling and trafficking, fueled by the flow of migrants from outside the region through Mexico and toward the United States, has expanded conflict in once lower violence areas. Correspondingly, however, the decrease in migrant flows through Mexico, as a long-term consequence of the new policies of the Trump administration in the U.S., will change that dynamic once again.

Sinaloa. Sinaloa state is the stronghold of the Sinaloa cartel, which as noted previously, has been split into factions since the extradition of "El Chapo" Guzman to the United States, It is also the primary area for the fabrication of fentanyl from

foreign, mostly Chinese precursors. The state is also is the site of multiple “plazas,” principally logistics nodes for both drugs and migrants going to the United States, and correspondingly subject to struggles for control between groups for the illicit revenue opportunity control of those plazas entail.

In June 2024, El Mayo Zambada was “tricked” by Chapito, into boarding a plane that took him to the United States, where he was arrested.[8] Since that time, Sinaloa state has been the focus of a bitter struggle between the two dominant factions, the “Mayiza” formerly those loyal to “El Mayo” Zambada, and now led by his son El Mayito Flaco; versus the “Chapiza,” centered on the sons of El Chapo Guzman, and once considered the more powerful of the Sinaloa factions.[9]

Because of the trickery in capturing El Mayo and taking him to the United States, the current fight is considered a “war of honor,” with uncertain prospects for how it will end. [10] Prior to the betrayal, were reportedly negotiating a cooperation agreement with Cartel Jalisco Nuevo Generacion (CJNG) against their internal rival El Mayo Zambada, but the way in which El Mayo was lured into the aircraft and taken against his will to the United States reportedly led to the deal being called off. [11]

Other groups involved in the criminal struggle in Sinaloa state include a faction led by Aurelano “El Guano” Guzman Loera the brother of El Chapo,[12] and Los Rusos, reportedly on the sidelines awaiting to see who prevails.[13] In this struggle, the Cartel de Caborca, formerly led by Rafael Caro Quintero, was also regaining importance, due to his control over Nogales, a key point of entry for trafficking of migrants into the United States, which he reportedly ran from prison until he was

extradited to the United States in March 2025, one of 29 expedited extraditions agreed to by the Sheinbaum government that month.[14]

In Sinaloa itself, because the technology for creating fentanyl labs is relatively inexpensive, there has also been a takeoff in the number of local laboratories, with variation in quality, contributing to overdoses among users in the United States, as well as a dramatic fall in price from \$12,000 to as little as \$3,000. [15] The contending cartel groups, particularly the Chapiza, reportedly stepped up control over the “authorization” of laboratories, both to decrease how uneven quality, massive production and overdoses was making them a target for US drug enforcement pressures on Mexico,[16] and also to control price. By March 2025, Sinaloa had achieved some control over production, reducing volume and restoring prices to approximately \$6,000. [17]

Chihuahua. Because Chihuahua state is dominated by desert-like conditions and sparsely populated, the main plaza and object of struggle there has traditionally been the city of Juarez and the highways leading to the border there from other parts of Mexico. The area was traditionally dominated by the Carillo Fuentes drug trafficking organization (Juarez cartel), although in the late 2000s, became an object of intense struggle between the Sinaloa and the Juarez cartel[18] backed by a then advancing Gulf Cartel and its armed wing, the Zetas. More recent struggles have focused on La Linea, descendants of the Juarez cartel, aligned with CJNG against the Salgueiros, a different fraction of the organization backed by the Sinaloa cartel.[19]

Baja California. In Mexico’s extreme northwest, the Baja California peninsula, and in particular, the Tijuana border crossing with the United States, was dominated by the

Armando Felix organization (the Tijuana Cartel). CJNG made a failed attempt in the previous decade to enter the state.[20] In recent years, the struggle for the Tijuana Plaza has cooled somewhat, with the descendants of the cartel focusing more on their real estate holdings and the tourism business in the area, while collaborating with the Sinaloa cartel regarding drug and migrant flows through the Tijuana plaza.[21] Nonetheless, previously noted infighting between the Mayizas and Chapizas in Sinaloa may have opened the door for increased presence in Baja California by CJNG in alliance with the Chapizas.[22]

Tamaulipas. The state of Tamaulipas is the site of three border crossings into the US: Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. All have been the objects of struggle between criminal groups. From the 1980s through the 2010s, the criminal economy of the state was dominated by the Gulf Cartel. The takedown of leaders of the Gulf Cartel, its struggle with the military organization it originally created, the Zetas, the takedown of Zeta leaders, and attempts by outside groups including CJNG, to take over the plazas in the state, all contributed to violence.

Currently, the Reynosa and Matamoros plazas are reportedly dominated by descendants of the Gulf Cartel: the Cyclones, Metros, and Scorpions, among others. Meanwhile, the western part of the state, with the Matamoros plaza, is dominated by the Northeast Cartel, a splinter of the Zetas.[23] Currently, violence is lower than in previous years, with a relative division of labor between groups with respect to the channeling of persons and drugs through the plazas each controls, without major efforts by each to challenge the plazas of the other.

Nayarit. The state of Nayarit, as an effective border between the state of Sinaloa to the north, dominated by factions of the Sinaloa Cartel, and Jalisco to the South, dominated by CJNG,

has been the focus of struggle between the two major groups, although violent struggle there as of March 2025, was lower than in prior years. [24]

Jalisco. The domination of the state of Jalisco by CJNG, and the relative difficulty of other groups to challenge the cartel's control there, has limited violence in the state. Nonetheless, the brutality occurring in Jalisco was brought to the international spotlight in March 2025 when a CJNG training facility believed to be a crematorium for disappearing those murdered was discovered in the Jalisco town of Teuchitlán.[25]

Zacatecas. The state of Zacatecas, despite being disputed territory in the center of Mexico between that dominated by Sinaloa, and that dominated by CJNG, has been relatively at peace. Nonetheless, the March 2023 discovery of a “megalaboratory” for the production of synthetic drugs, predominantly methamphetamine for the European market,[26] illustrated the amount of criminal production occurring there.

Michoacan. The state of Michoacan has been the site of some of the most intense combat between armed groups in Mexico, including the use of surveillance drones, armed attack drones, landmines and improvised explosive devices, and armored vehicles. The mountainous north of the state, near Agula, is the birthplace of the leader of CJNG, “El Mencho,” possibly now dead.[27] The port of Lazaro Cardenas there, is a key item of value for the cartels. CJNG dominance of the criminal economy of the state is contested on multiple fronts by a tapestry of other groups which are the legacy of the splintering and recombination of predecessors.[28] These include the remnants of the highly violent and militarized La Familia Michoacana (LFM) and the Knights Templar (KT) organization which once split from it. They also include various self-defense militias, once created to fight extortion and other crime by the

cartels, but which eventually came to be supported by rival cartels and corrupted through their involvement in organized crime. The largest of these is the loose umbrella organization “Carteles Unidos.”[29]

There were some rumors that fentanyl was being produced by LFM in Michoacan, the only other state outside of Sinaloa where it was being produced, although it appears more likely that the group was actually just purchasing and packaging it to sell through their own criminal networks.[30]

Colima. In small Colima state, sandwiched between Sinaloa-cartel dominated Sinaloa state and CJNG-dominated Jalisco state, there is an ongoing struggle for the important port of Manzanillo. The strategic importance of the port and the territory for narco revenue has made the city of Colima one of the most violent in the world. In 2024 and during eight of the past ten years, Colima has been the most violent state in Mexico. In 2024, the homicide rate in the state exceeded 110 per 100,000 persons.[31] In addition to CJNG, the struggle principally involves the Mayisa faction of Sinaloa (“Pacific Cartel”),[32] and the previously-mentioned Northeast cartel (Zetas). [33]

Guerrero. The state of Guerrero is one of the most complex tapestries of violence in Mexico,[34] with an estimated 90 armed groups there. [35] The violence reflects the extreme underdevelopment and inequality there, which once spawned a guerilla movement, the Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN), relative geographic fractionalization of communities, and a violent political culture. The largest of the groups currently operating in the state is the Rojos, a splinter of the former Beltran Leyva drug trafficking organization (BLO), yet each of the subregions of the state reflects different struggles between different groups. These include the contesting of the port city

of Acapulco between CJNG, the local “Independent Cartel of Acapulco,” and Los Rusos. In the center of the state, there is a struggle between the Ardillos, the previously noted Carteles Unidos, Guerreros Unidos, and Tlacos. The “Big Coast” region to the northwest of Acapulco is contested between CJNG, LFM, the Granados, the Maldonados, and the Viagras. The “Little Coast” to the southeast is contested by the Ardillos, the previously noted Rusos, the Añorve, and the Carrillo group. The northwestern lowlands bordering Michoacan, known as “Tierra caliente” are contested by CJNG, LFM, the previously noted Rojos, and the Tequileros. The north of the state is contested between LFM, Guerreros Unidos, Los Tlacos, and La Bandera. The mountainous southeast region is contested between the Tlacos and the Ardillos. [36]

Guanajuato. The criminal dynamics of Guanajuato continue dominated for a struggle over the petroleum theft and smuggling industry (huachicol). The driver is the Salamanca refinery, operated in the state by the Mexican oil company PEMEX. Remnants of the Santa Rosa de Lima cartel, which became an early focus for the former administration of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (ALMO),[37] reportedly continue to work with a part of CJNG led by Tony Montana,[38] with the Sinaloa cartel trying to contest the space. [39]

Tabasco. The state of Tabasco, home of the ranch of former Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), “La Chingada,” has been the focus of an unusual increase in violence in the past year.[40] The violence in Tabasco reportedly reflects a struggle for migrant trafficking routes, which has impacted multiple states in the southern portion of Mexico. [41] In the case of Tabasco, the new groups have reportedly made inroads in what was traditionally dominance of the state by CJNG. [42]

Veracruz. Violence in the state of Veracruz has decreased somewhat since the end of the AMLO Sexenio, and has shifted from the Port and city of Veracruz, to more outlying areas within the state of Veracruz, such as the town of Jalapa. The port of Veracruz, once dominated by the Gulf Clan, became an object of struggle from representatives of the advancing CJNG. A 2024 study by the Mexican firm AC Consultants identifies at least seven groups continuing to operate in the state including CJNG, remnants of the Gulf Cartel such as Fuerzas Especiales Grupo Sombra, the Northeast Cartel (Zetas), and the Sinaloa cartel.[43]

Quintana Roo. In Quintana Roo and the rest of the Yucatan peninsula, the principal economic activity is tourism, with the focus of illicit activity on the associated businesses of extortion of resorts, and human trafficking. Such activity represents a wide range of groups, including Russian and Cuban mafias operating in the tourist zone, among others.[44] Mexican authorities register the presence of elements of CJNG, Sinaloa, the Gulf Clan and the Northeast Cartel (Zetas) there. [45] In recent years, several bloody incidents, including a July 2024 attack by gunmen on jet skis against targets at a Cancun resort,[46] serve as a reminder of the continuing contested and problematic nature of the area, although it is not plagued by regular large-scale violence.

Mexico State. The focus of the criminal dynamic in Mexico State is extortion of the businesses operating in the industrial zone around Toluca. The western part of Mexico state is reportedly dominated by La Familia Michoacana. Groups affiliated with CJNG are also reportedly present in the state. [47] The struggle between groups for control of parts of the state have made it the second most violent in Mexico.[48]

Mexico City. While Mexico's National capital district is generally not dominated by any of the major national cartel organizations, virtually all of the major groups have connections in the city, including to minor groups operating there. In May 2024, a report by the Mexico City Attorney General recognized at least seven major criminal groups operating in the city.[49]

The configuration of the groups are fluid, focused on contraband products, extortion and other criminal rackets, the most important ones include the Union of Tepito, the Cartel of Tlahuac, Ojos ("hand with eyes,") and the "Anti-Union" (principally focused on opposition to the Union of Tepito.[50] There is also reportedly an alliance between the Union of Tepito and CJNG.[51] Other groups include the Molinos, Catalinos, Rodolfos, and Ronda 88. [52]

Contraband, particularly involving Chinese goods and Chinese-owned retail establishments, has expanded in recent years beyond Tepito, famous for informal markets specializing in such goods. In July 2024, the Sheinbaum government symbolically cracked down on such trade, although acting against only one of the hundreds of stores dealing in such goods, China Mart in Plaza Izaga 89.[53]

The Mexican Government Response

Although President Claudia Sheinbaum has not substantially changed the policies of her predecessor and mentor, AMLO, she has taken a more aggressive stance toward crime in Mexico, including organizational and leadership changes.[54] Her actions represent reasonable, technocratic attempts to address problems manifested during the AMLO Seccenio, and to appease the Trump administration in the US regarding the Mexican government's will to act. It is not clear, however,

whether the magnitude of the criminal violence, and the corrupting penetration by organized crime at all levels of the Mexican government, will make her changes too little, too late.

President Sheinbaum has appointed her trusted security chief from her time as mayor of Mexico City, Omar Garcia Harfuch, as head of the Secretariat for Citizen and Public Security (SSPC) and given the entity expanded powers, including to some degree, over the military law enforcement operations of the Mexican Army (Defensa) and the Mexican Navy (Marina).[55] Harfuch, a former policeman, with a relatively good record supporting Sheinbaum in Mexico City, is generally well regarded in his qualifications for the position.[56] In its first months in office, under Harfuch's leadership, the Mexican security apparatus engaged in a number of high-profile operations against criminal groups that suggested an intention to take a more aggressive stance than had the processor administration of AMLO, including Operation Enjambre in November 2024 which arrested seven government functionaries tied to the cartels in the State of Mexico.[57]

Nonetheless, although Harfuch is capable, and has the confidence of Sheinbaum, some interviewed for this work expressed doubts regarding the degree to which he would be able to exercise security sector leadership, particularly over well-resourced and well-entrenched Mexican military, particularly insofar as the plurality of Mexico's police force, the National Guard, falls administratively under control of the Army and "SSPC has no troops of its own." [58]

In recognition of the lack of federal police criminal investigation capabilities, and possibly also reflecting the lack of personnel directly under the command of SSPC, as of April 2025, the organization was seeking to build an in-house criminal investigative capability within SSPC.[59]

Beyond SSPC itself, Harfuch is also seeking to build the capabilities of Mexico's new intelligence agency, the National Intelligence Center (CNI), and give it a more centralized role vis-à-vis military and other intelligence under Francisco Almazan Barocio. Part of those coordination efforts involve the use of five "fusion centers," run by CNI, but also leveraging inputs from the Army, Navy and other entities. These centers, established during earlier sexenios, have received substantial investments in new technology, although it is not clear to what degree that has actually improved collaboration among the agencies, and collective analytical performance. [60] The most important of these fusion centers is in Mexico City. The second most important facility, in Juarez, [61] covers the northern border sector, also of major strategic importance in the current struggle against the flow of drugs and migrants into the United States, and flows of arms and money back across that border into Mexico. [62]

With respect to Harfuch's work to rebuild and refocus CNI, its predecessor CISEN, had been regarded by many in Mexico as used as a political tool for intelligence against regime opponents. [63]

Currently, as a compliment to Harfuch's efforts to build up a police investigative capability within SSPC itself, the leader is reportedly dedicating significant effort to hiring persons within CNI with police backgrounds in the CNI, including many known to Harfuch from Mexico City, although some have complained that the focus on criminal investigation capabilities comes at the expense of the organization's capability as strategic intelligence organization. Others are concerned that the resources dedicated to building up the investigative powers of the CNI are coming at the expense of the Criminal Investigative Agency (AIC), the police investigation organization within the Attorney General's office that is the other major repository of

police intelligence capability following the dismantling of the national police by AMLO. Others consulted for this work suggest, however, that the prioritization of CNI over AFI was also necessary because AFI was also seen as too heavily focused under AMLO on criminally investigating opponents of the government. [64]

In matters of financial investigations against criminal groups, although Mexico's Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) is regarded as relatively capable, it has been subject to a number of recent scandals, including the November 2021 dismissal of its former head Santiago Nieto, involving corruption allegations.[65] Its current head, Pablo Gomez, appointed in the last months of the AMLO sexenio, is expected to be replaced soon.[66]

Within the Mexican military's support to the fight against the cartels and domestic insecurity, the recently-created National Guard has made progress in stabilizing itself as an institution. It has received priority within the military in receiving equipment, with new vehicles and equipment complimenting that inherited from its predecessor, the disbanded federal police. A National Guard career track has been established within the Mexican Army at both enlisted and officer levels, including training schools for both Guard related technical skills and career education. [67] The practice of "loaning" personnel from the military to fill guard personnel slots, practiced during the Guard's initial establishment, is now, reportedly, generally not necessary.

During the 2021-2024 period, the Mexican Navy withdrew key groups of its personnel from the Guard.[68] Nonetheless, those Mexican Navy personnel specifically contracted to serve in the Guard, have remained there as when the organization

was brought formally under control of the Army, creating some culture shock for some moving from the Navy culture to that of Army which now administers it. [69]

While the majority of such “transition challenges” involving the Guard have now been overcome, by design, the Guard continues to be focused on its role as a response force, focused on providing security and confronting criminal elements, rather than investigation and community policing, which was part of the competencies of the Federal Police that it replaces.

The culture of the National Guard, as part of the Army, is notably more military than police, with new National Guard members sent to Army basic training before being sent to training programs corresponding to their policing specialties. Although at higher levels, Defensa officers without Guard backgrounds, continue to supervise higher level units, and although in theory promotions from within the Guard ranks will eventually be the basis for senior National Guard leadership, one senior Defensa General consulted for this work told this author directly that, even though the Guard was formally one of the branches of Defensa, it was unthinkable that a National Guard General could ever become the Secretary of National Defense.[70]

Technical knowledge in some National Guard specialties such as highway policing, continue to be weak, with reported losses of intelligence collection opportunities because of deficiencies among some National Guard personnel in the knowledge of highway laws, instrumental for making legal inspections upon traffic stops, enabling the collection of evidence on suspects. [71]

With respect to investigative capabilities, while the National Guard has its own modest intelligence capabilities and theoretically gets intelligence from the Defensa intelligence (G2) organization, [72] in practice, such intelligence is more operational, rather than criminal in nature, creating a scarcity of the types of intelligence that might help Guard units anticipate and prevent violence in the communities they protect, or in the terrain they watch over. In a similar fashion, the providing of criminal relevant intelligence to the Guard through the CNI or AIC, or other sources, such as state and local entities, is reportedly very limited. [73]

While in theory, Mexico has state and federal police to perform community-focused policing, in practice, these entities at the state level, and particularly at the local level, have been substantially corrupted by interaction with criminal elements. [74] Those police organizations have also been partially defunded during the past sexenio, through reduced federal government transfers to state and local governments that traditionally helped to cover security costs. Nor is the current Sheinbaum government, with a more “centralist” orientation, arguably focused on decentralized police solutions at the state and local level. [75]

On the other hand, some consulted for this work argued that the current level of threats and bribery from criminal groups across the country make a more community-focused police approach unrealistic for the moment.

With respect to the traditional rivalry between Mexico’s independent Army (Defensa) and Navy (Marina), and despite formal incorporation of the Guard under Defensa in the previous sexenio, the fortunes of the Navy have improved under the Sheinbaum administration, by comparison to the AMLO sexenio when the Army, under General Luis Crecencio

Sandoval, had a very close relationship with the President, and received the lion's share of the privileges and influence as the role of the military in both security, and the administration of the national economy expanded. [76] According to some consulted for this work, the modest improvement in the Navy's situation reflects that fact that the current head of SSPC, Omar Garcia Harfuch, worked closely with the Navy while in Mexico City, including a role played by the Navy in responding to and investigating an attempt that was made on his life in June 2020.[77]

To date, the National Guard has been used not only to confront TOCs and provide security to zones in which conflict has erupted, but also to control transit routes to restrict the flow of migrants through the country. This has included the deployment of 10,000 National Guard personnel along the US border,[78] an important, but still small number given the 3,000-mile extension of that border. National Guard personnel have also been used to patrol Mexico's Southern border, and at key transportation nodes and routes throughout the country to control immigrant flows.

Both the Mexican Army and Navy have also been working to modernize capabilities, to support both traditional and internal security missions, as well missions they have been given to operate and protect transportation infrastructure and other facilities.

For both Defensa and Marina, combat with heavily armed criminal adversaries has made heavier armor a priority, as well as vehicles with more underbody armor and chasses more resistant to mines and improvised explosive devices.[79] For the Army, whose vehicles were targeted by explosive drones in Chihuahua in February 2025,[80] better top armor and anti-drone systems is a priority. [81]

National radar coverage also continues to be a challenge for the Mexican military. Different radars are operated by Defensa, Marina, and the civilian air control organization CENAVI, with a lack of an integrated air picture between the three. Defensa reportedly has TPS-70 radars and is looking to upgrade to TPS-78 but has not yet found the funds to install radars it has already purchased. [82]

With respect to aircraft, both Defensa and Marina have suffered difficulties due to the inability to obtain parts for and service their Russian helicopters, owing to the sanctions on Russia due to its ongoing war against Ukraine. The Navy has fared somewhat better, due to having constructed its own helicopter maintenance center in Veracruz with the capability of service Russian equipment.[83]

The Army, which lacks such a facility, and which has reportedly not wished to ask the Navy for help from its maintenance facility, must send its helicopter engines to a resupply facility in Kazakhstan for depot level maintenance, causing the helicopter being maintained to be down for a year or more at a time, while awaiting the engine to be repaired and returned.[84]

Both Defensa and Marina have also taken on a range of responsibilities during the AMLO administration, beyond traditional military missions, often of an economic nature. For the Army, this includes the running of 13 airports in the country,[85] as well as the Maya tourist train,[86] as well as a number of surrounding resorts.[87] It further includes responsibility for the Army to operate the Mexican national airline under an umbrella organization called GAFSACOMM.[88]

For the Navy, the expanded responsibilities include running and providing security to the nation's ports, running a different group of airports, including Mexico's main international airport

Benito Juarez,[89] and being responsible for port and route security in the Trans-sismic corridor,[90] a project of key importance for President Sheinbaum, with highway and train routes connecting ports in Veracruz and Salinas Cruz in Oaxaca, with plans to develop ten logistics development “poles” along the route with manufacturing, distribution, warehousing and other operations there.[91]

In all of the cases, some interviewed for this work expressed concern that the extra responsibilities were a distraction for the military from more traditional missions. Although both services have received additional resources, much of those have been dedicated to supporting the extra manpower and resources to administer those additional responsibilities, rather than to modernize their more traditional legacy capabilities of the military.[92]

In the case of Mexicana Airline, the obligation by the government for the Mexican Air Force (under Defensa) to operate it, including the use of their own planes to serve certain routes, and the decisions imposed by Mexico’s political leadership regarding how that was to be done, caused some frustration within the Air Force.[93]

With both Defensa and Marina, close security collaboration with the United States has continued under the AMLO and now Sheinbaum administration, although arguably that collaboration has been somewhat closer with Marina.[94] Mexico has 14 different coordinating officials across a range of US institutions and Commands, from NORTHCOM to Army North and NAVNORTH to JIATF-South to the 3rd Fleet, as well as students in the US Army and Navy War Colleges, among others. [95] The US, for its part, has a Colonel-level Student in Mexico’s highest

level war college, although the number of US officials in Mexican institutions for coordination has not been as many as the number of Mexicans in US institutions.

With respect to coordination, the head of NORTHCOM, General Guillot made an official visit to Mexico for their Independence Day in September 2024, addressing both the Mexican Army and Navy war colleges. His deputy, LTG Cardin, made a visit just three months later, in December. Mexico and the US also have regular annual national staff talks, the BMCR, and separate staff talks with each service for coordination. Defensa head General Trevilla Trejo visited General Guillot at NORTHCOM in February 2025.^[96] In recent negotiations, the US and Mexico have agreed to establish a bilateral security task force which will work together in four areas: securing the border, operations against cartels, controlling illicit flows of drugs, arms, persons and money, and controlling drug demand. ^[97] The new structure could form the basis of a future US-Mexico security cooperation framework.

Beyond such bilateral cooperation, Mexico and the US also work together in an array of bilateral and multilateral exercises, including RIMPAC, UNITAS, Tradewinds, Panamax, FENIX, and NAMSI (two exercises), among others. ^[98]

The respective militaries are also working together on the upcoming World Cup, which will include multiple events in both Mexico and the United States.^[99]

Conclusion

Under the new Sheinbaum government, Mexico, in coordination with the US, is taking steps to address the grave problems of transnational crime and corruption it faces, yet the complex, deeply entrenched nature of those problems will continue to

make their resolution a challenge. Mexico's ability to successfully address its security challenges will continue to be of vital importance to both its own future, and to that of its neighbor the United States.

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