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# Security in Mexico

Implications for U.S. Policy Options

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Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Benjamin Bahney, K. Jack Riley

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## Summary

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Against the backdrop of a deteriorating security situation in Mexico and the recent change in administration in the United States, this study assessed the security situation in Mexico and its impact on the United States. Drawing from the study's findings, this monograph outlines a range of policy options that the U.S. government can use to assist the Mexican government in improving Mexico's internal security. Its release is particularly timely because the new U.S. administration is beginning to address the security situation in Mexico and formulate strategies to prevent violence from spilling farther into the United States.

### **Mexico's Security Structure**

Since its first opposition president was elected in 2000, Mexico has struggled to articulate a cohesive national security strategy. This lack of a cohesive security strategy has led to shifting responsibilities, the duplication of services in a number of agencies, and general instability in Mexico's security structure. These ambiguous, shifting, and overlapping responsibilities have led, in turn, to uncoordinated efforts (and often animosity) across federal, state, and local security forces (particularly among police forces).

While trust in Mexican public institutions has historically been low, confidence in the police is particularly low. According to opinion polls, the police are considered corrupt by 80 percent of Mexico's population, while the armed forces are the most highly respected public

institution in that country.<sup>1</sup> With crime and distrust of officials such widespread phenomena, bribery is a part of daily life in Mexico.

## The Deteriorating Security Situation in Mexico

The security situation in Mexico began to deteriorate in 2005 and became precipitously worse in 2008, when drug-related killings more than doubled from 2,275 in 2007 to 6,290 in 2008.<sup>2</sup> One of the major drivers of this decline in security is increased violence associated with the drug trade. According to the Mexican daily *Reforma*, in 2007 and 2008, more than 8,000 people died from drug violence, including more than 500 police officers in 2008 alone.<sup>3</sup> While Mexico has experienced occasional spikes in drug violence over the past two decades, this recent uptick in violence differs from previous episodes of drug violence. First, the drug cartels are deliberately targeting high-level police forces in unprecedented numbers because government forces are focusing law enforcement efforts on the cartels like never before. Second, violence is more public than it has been, and citizens are sometimes caught in the cross fire between cartels or between the cartels and the police or military. Third, drug cartels have access to more sophisticated weaponry (mostly smuggled from the United States) and are now enlisting the protection of special operations forces, such as the Zetas (former Mexican military special operations forces) and Kaibiles (former Guatemalan special operations forces). The security situation in Northern Mexico has deteriorated so precipitously that President Felipe Calderón's government has deployed more than 40,000 troops to fight the drug cartels and bring order to areas that are dominated by the cartels.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Diego Cevallos, "Police Caught Between Low Wages, Threats, and Bribes," Inter Press Services, June 7, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Justice in Mexico Project, "New Report, January 2009," Transborder Institute, January 2009; "Mexican President: We're Not Losing Drug War," MSNBC, February 26, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Justice in Mexico Project, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> "Mexican Troops Swoop on Police HQ," BBC News, February 10, 2009.

In addition to traditional threats to national security, issues of “personal insecurity” (such as crime and lawlessness, police corruption and abuse, and transnational street gangs) are also currently major concerns in Mexico. In one large survey conducted by the Citizens’ Institute for Security Studies (Instituto Ciudadano de Estudio Sobre la Inseguridad, or ICESI), 71 percent of respondents reported not feeling safe in their homes and 72 percent reported not feeling safe in the city in which they live.<sup>5</sup> Improving personal security was a cornerstone of Calderón’s presidential campaign and continues to be a high priority for his administration.

## Security in Three U.S. Priority Areas

While the overall internal security situation in Mexico has deteriorated over the past few years, our analysis of the literature and our interviews with U.S. government officials and nongovernmental experts indicate that three areas are priorities for the United States: (1) organized crime (including drug trafficking and arms trafficking), (2) illegal migration and human trafficking, and (3) terrorism and rebel insurgencies. These three areas are intertwined, making them difficult to assess individually.

### Organized Crime

Almost all of the U.S. government officials, academics, and nongovernmental organization representatives with whom we spoke agreed that organized crime (including drug trafficking and arms trafficking) is the primary security threat to the United States from Mexico. Organized crime has infiltrated all levels of government and the police forces in Mexico. Organized criminal elements are also involved in a variety of illegal activities, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and arms trafficking. Thousands of citizens have been killed each year, and

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<sup>5</sup> Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios Sobre la Inseguridad [Citizen’s Institute for Security Studies], *Cuarto Encuesta Nacional Sobre Inseguridad/Urbana* [Fourth National Security Survey, Urban Areas], Mexico City, 2006.

the targeting of police and military officers has increased over the past two years.

**Drug Trafficking.** It is estimated that \$25 billion–\$30 billion worth of illegal drugs comes into the United States through Mexico each year. According to the U.S. State Department’s 2009 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, about 90 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States is trafficked through Mexico.<sup>6</sup> According to U.S. government estimates, approximately 15,500 metric tons of marijuana were produced in Mexico in 2007, primarily for export to the United States, making it the United States’ primary foreign supplier. In addition, the vast majority of methamphetamine produced in Mexico is exported to the United States.<sup>7</sup> Drug trafficking in Mexico has historically been dominated by four major drug trafficking organizations (DTOs): the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juárez Cartel, and the Tijuana Cartel. However, the constellation of DTOs in Mexico is changing as these larger cartels break into atomized units. These smaller, decentralized DTOs have waged an increasingly violent turf war over key trafficking routes and “plazas” (border crossings for trafficking drugs into the United States), ports of entry, and territory. In response, Calderón has deployed an estimated 40,000 troops since 2006.<sup>8</sup> However, this unprecedented use of the military has raised concerns from both domestic and international human rights organizations.

Violence associated with drug trafficking is increasingly affecting the United States. While border cities bear the brunt of the spillover effects of drug violence, the U.S. government has found the footprints of Mexican smuggling operations in all but two states: Vermont and West Virginia. These operations include kidnappings and murders.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, Washington, D.C., February 2009.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2009*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December 2008.

<sup>8</sup> “Mexican Troops Swoop on Police HQ” 2009.

In addition, the number of corruption investigations involving U.S. border patrol agents is increasing.<sup>9</sup>

**Arms Trafficking.** Mexican authorities are increasingly outgunned by well-armed traffickers, and nearly all illegal guns seized in Mexico have been smuggled from the United States. In many ways, the characteristics of the arms trade mirror the dynamics of the drug market. Drugs flow north from Mexico to the United States and guns flow south from the United States to Mexico. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives indicate that 90 to 95 percent of the guns used in drug-related violent crimes in Mexico enter illegally from the United States.<sup>10</sup> As with drug smuggling or kidnapping, it is not unusual to find police officers, military personnel, and customs agents involved in the illegal arms trade. Over the past few years, several government officials have been arrested on both sides of the border for participating in the arms trade.

### **Illegal Migration and Human Trafficking**

Illegal movement into the United States from Mexico is clearly a threat to U.S. national security. Terrorists could use human trafficking networks to gain entry into the United States; however, the likelihood that terrorists might use the U.S.-Mexico border is highly contested. There has not been a single report of a terrorist entering the United States from Mexico. More generally, human smuggling and human trafficking feed into crime in the United States. In 2003, it was estimated that there were at least 100 human smuggling organizations and gangs active in Mexico. Like other facets of organized crime, there have been credible reports that police, immigration, and customs officials are involved in human trafficking.

### **Terrorism and Rebel Insurgencies**

Since September 11, 2001, there has been speculation about al-Qaeda's interest in using Mexico as a gateway for entry into the United States

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<sup>9</sup> Randal C. Archibold and Andrew Becker, "Border Agents, Lured by the Other Side," *New York Times*, May 27, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2009.

or as a launching point for an attack on the United States. This view is extremely controversial but has received significant media attention, though there have been no reports of known or suspected terrorists arrested along the U.S.-Mexico border. However, operatives detained elsewhere have reported that Mexico has been considered by terrorist organizations as a staging and entry point to the United States. While most U.S. government officials with whom we spoke indicated that there was no current evidence of strong al-Qaeda ties to Mexico, we include the possibility in our list of priority areas because it remains a continuing area of potential concern.

Within Mexico, the Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejército Popular Revolucionario, or EPR), a Marxist guerrilla group formed in the mid-1990s, could cause disruptions and challenge the Mexican government. On July 6 and July 10, 2007, the EPR blew up natural-gas pipelines belonging to state oil giant *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX), cutting off gas supplies across central Mexico. On September 10 of that year, the EPR struck again, setting off 12 simultaneous explosions on gas pipelines. According to Mexico's leading manufacturers' association, the estimated lost economic output was about \$1.6 billion. While the insurgents have thus far operated independently of the DTOs, a concern is that the insurgents either align with one another or become one and the same. Other insurgency groups in Latin America have become involved in the drug trade to fund their activities, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the National Liberation Army in Colombia, and Shining Path in Peru.

## **Mexican Domestic Concerns: Crime, Corruption, and Street Gangs**

In addition to the U.S. concerns already discussed, our research also identified broader domestic concerns within Mexico, including crime, corruption, and street gangs. These issues have a direct impact on many Mexicans' everyday lives and can erode their trust in public institutions, such as the police and the judicial system. In deciding how it might move forward in assisting Mexico, the United States should con-

sider issues beyond those outlined in the prior section and ask how it can also support Mexico's efforts to address the following domestic concerns.

### **Crime**

According to an August 2007 Mexican congressional report, in the first half of 2007, the rates of major federal crimes, which include homicides, kidnappings, and arms trafficking, rose 25 percent above the rates of the same period of the previous year. From 2005 to 2006, the rates of these same crimes had risen 22 percent. Gangland-style executions have risen 155 percent since 2001.<sup>11</sup> On August 30, 2008, public concern over crime spilled into the streets when at least 13 anti-crime groups planned demonstrations in all 31 Mexican states. The protests were inspired by the abduction and murder of Alejandro Marti, the 14-year-old son of a wealthy businessman.<sup>12</sup> The case provoked public outcry when it was learned that a police detective was a key participant in the kidnapping for ransom.

### **Corruption**

Police corruption is widespread in Mexico at all levels of the police forces—federal, state, and local. In fact, President Calderón has, at times, ordered the federal police to take over entire municipal police forces in an attempt to weed out corruption. Such takeovers once again highlight the lack of a cohesive national security strategy and the failure to delineate responsibility and authority across police forces.

### **Transnational Gangs (*Maras*)**

The United States is becoming increasingly concerned about the transnational impact of gangs. However, reliable data on the extent of the gang activity in Mexico are extremely difficult to find. According to interviews conducted by the U.S. Agency for International Develop-

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<sup>11</sup> Jay Root, "Mexico Crime Continues to Surge," McClatchy Newspapers, September 22, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> There was a similar anticrime demonstration in Mexico in 2004 in which 250,000 people marched.

ment (USAID), in October 2005, it was estimated that 17,000 gang members (predominantly members of the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, and 18th Street gangs) operated in the border city of Juárez in Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Mexico's attorney general has said that nearly 1,100 gang members were arrested in Mexico in 2004 and 2005.<sup>14</sup> The Secretaria de Seguridad Publica, Mexico's public security ministry, has a permanent antigang operation called Operación Acero that dates back to 2003. However, to date, it does not appear that Mexico has adopted national anti-*mara* legislation as some other counties have.

## Potential Priorities for the New U.S. Administration

Given the impacts of organized crime, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal migration, and human trafficking and the threat of terrorism, the new U.S. administration will have to address the deteriorating security situation in Mexico. In addition, it will need to decide which security issues should be addressed when allocating U.S. aid to Mexico and how U.S. aid should be prioritized. Four potential priorities emerged from our study:

- Help the Mexican government streamline and rationalize the delivery of security services.
- Encourage the Mexican government to bridge the coordination gap between federal and local security.
- Support Mexico's efforts to address domestic concerns, such as ordinary crime and personal insecurity.
- Focus less on technology transfer and more on building trust in institutions.

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<sup>13</sup> USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, April 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Sullivan, "Mexico Battles Influx of Violent Gangs," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2005.

## U.S. Policy Options for Improving Security in Mexico

The future of U.S.-Mexico relations will depend largely on the approach that the new U.S. administration chooses to take. While some, including the former deputy foreign minister of Mexico, Andrés Rozental, advocate the legalization of drugs in the United States as a solution to the violence in Mexico, we have not included a discussion of this option because it is not broadly supported, especially with respect to cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine.

Based on how much the new administration wants to prioritize long-term reform in Mexico, we have identified three policy options that the administration can use to address security issues in Mexico:

- Engage in a strategic partnership with Mexico that emphasizes reform and longer-term institution building.
- Maintain the status quo approach, which focuses on ad hoc, issue-specific cooperation but does not emphasize reform or longer-term institution building.
- Institute a retrenchment approach by focusing on U.S. domestic efforts to combat security threats from Mexico and disengage from any partnerships with Mexico.

As Table S.1 indicates, the strategic partnership option places the greatest demands on the U.S. government, the status quo option places medium degrees of demand on the U.S. government, and the retrenchment option places the fewest burdens on the U.S. government.

The three policy options address the four potential priority areas in different ways. As shown in Table S.2, the strategic partnership option is the only option that has a high level of impact on all four potential priority areas. On the other side of the spectrum, the retrenchment option is the only option that has a low level of impact on all four potential priority areas. The status quo option has varying degrees of impact on the potential priority areas, depending on the particular issue or area of cooperation that is being examined.

**Table S.1**  
**Demands Created by the Three Policy Options**

Area of Demand	Policy Option		
	Strategic Partnership	Status Quo	Retrenchment
U.S. institutional commitment	High	Medium	Low
U.S. interagency cooperation and planning	High	Low	Low
Domestic U.S. support for reform in Mexico	High	Medium	Low
Need for metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of U.S. aid	High	Medium	Low

NOTE: High, medium, and low indicate degree of demand for U.S. government resources, personnel, and time.

**Table S.2**  
**Impact of the Three Policy Options**

Priority Area	Policy Option		
	Strategic Partnership	Status Quo	Retrenchment
Develop cohesive security strategy and reform the security structure to meet that strategy	High	Low	Low
Bridge the gap between federal and local security forces	High	Low	Low
Support Mexico's efforts to address domestic concerns	High	Low	Low
Focus aid less on technology and equipment and more on increasing transparency in government institutions	High	Medium	Low

NOTE: High, medium, and low indicate degree of impact on the four priority areas.

In assessing which policy option to pursue, the U.S. government should also be sensitive to the potential reactions of the Mexican government. The United States and Mexico have had a unique relationship that has given rise to unique historical sensitivities. For instance,

the Mexican government has always been wary of U.S. involvement in Mexican internal affairs. These Mexican sensitivities could result in barriers to the implementation of the policy options. The strategic partnership option asks the most of both the United States and Mexico, whereas the retrenchment option is the most potentially damaging option to U.S.-Mexico relations. The status quo option is the safest option for both countries.

Ultimately, whichever policy option the United States pursues, its success will hinge on whether or not the United States can demonstrate that Mexico's sovereignty will be respected. As our research indicates, the stakes are high and none of the issues examined can be resolved without cooperation from across the border. The new U.S. administration should take advantage of this historic window of opportunity and further engage the Calderón government in a deeper and broader relationship that strives to establish a long-term strategic partnership.