

Mexico and the United States: Fighting a Common Enemy

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No two countries are as important to each other's well-being and security as Mexico and the United States. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 marked the beginning of a strategic partnership between our two nations, and over the past 15 years the relationship has become deeper and wider. However, the atmosphere today is anything but festive, as Mexico is being portrayed by a small but vocal group as a threat to the security of the United States.

A key factor that is fueling this perspective is the recent increase in drug-related violence. Over the past two years, financially powerful and well-armed drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have sought to fight back against the government of President Felipe Calderón through the use of violence and corruption. Their tactics have become more brutal, as the systematic and sustained campaign of law enforcement launched by the Mexican government has seriously dented their illegal operations.

The Government of Mexico does not deny the seriousness of the threat posed by organized crime, but this challenge needs to be analyzed in a broader context, as Mexico has not so much experienced an increase in the levels of violence, as it has witnessed a change in the nature of this violence.

In spite of the recent spike in drug-related murders, the general murder rate in Mexico has been on a downward trend for several years now, and remains significantly below regional levels. Thus, the current rate of violent deaths in Mexico per 100,000 inhabitants is 25 percent lower than it was in 1990, while it remains 60 percent lower than in Brazil, 72 percent lower than in Colombia, and just above the rate in the United States (five per 100,000 inhabitants vs. ten per 100,000 inhabitants). Moreover, drug-related deaths are overwhelmingly concentrated in five states—Chihuahua; Sinaloa; Baja California; Guerrero; and Michoacán—which together account for only 15 percent of the total population. And within these states the violence is also highly concentrated, with 55 percent of deaths taking place in only 11 municipalities (out of 2,492 nationwide). Indeed, a single city (Ciudad Juárez) was the scene of more than a fifth of all drug-related murders.

It is also important to underscore that the increase in drug-related murders is a direct response by drug-trafficking organizations to the Government's determination to shut them down, which has made it increasingly difficult for them to deliver narcotics to the consumer market in the United States. This, in turn, has led to an escalation of violence among these organizations as they fight for the remaining trafficking routes, turf and profits. According to recently released data from the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), from January 2007 through December 2008, the price per gram of cocaine increased 104.5 percent, while the purity decreased from 67 percent to 44 percent. During this same period of time, the price per gram of methamphetamine increased 20.4 percent. This snapshot of

the current situation provides concrete proof that the efforts of the Calderón Administration are having an impact on retail distribution in the United States. In fact, in the past 26 months, Mexican actions have neutralized 231 million personal doses from hitting the streets of American cities and towns.

At the same time, one should note that the fight against organized crime in Mexico today goes well beyond law enforcement operations. The Mexican government has implemented a comprehensive strategy that includes significant institutional reforms. In particular, the judicial system is undergoing a radical transformation, involving a shift from an inquisitorial system to an adversarial one that will fundamentally alter the work of prosecutors, judges and law enforcement as oral trials are introduced. These reforms will increase the transparency, accessibility and fairness of the system, while strengthening the investigative capabilities of the police, as well as their capacity to fight organized crime.

The progress achieved so far has not come without sweat, blood and tears for Mexico. There were over 6,000 deaths related to drug violence last year alone, out of which more than 800 were military and law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. Yet President Calderón is fully committed to continue this fight, and in this he has the support of the vast majority of Mexicans. However, the transnational nature of this phenomenon makes it difficult for our country to successfully confront this threat on its own. It was this fact that led President Calderón to invest considerable political capital to overcome taboos against enhanced bilateral cooperation on this issue and reach out to the United States through the Merida Initiative. The Initiative recognizes that we face a common transnational enemy and that we therefore need to work together to confront it, guided by the principles of mutual trust, shared responsibility and reciprocity. As a result of this program, Mexico has reaffirmed its commitment to fight and dismantle the drug syndicates that operate within its territory, while the United States has pledged to continue seeking to reduce drug consumption, as well as stem the flow of weapons and bulk cash to Mexico.

In this regard, and given the recent violence unleashed by drug traffickers, an issue that currently represents a critical bilateral challenge is the illegal flow of weapons from the United States into Mexico. The Mexican government, with the help of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, estimates that 90 percent of the weapons that have been seized from drug-traffickers in Mexico have entered our country illegally from the United States. This number is not surprising if one notes the abundance of Federal firearms licensed dealers (FFLs) and gun shows along the US-Mexico border. In 2007, there were approximately 7,600 FFLs in border states.

In light of this problem, there is much that the United States can do to help Mexico roll-back DTOs. For example, enforcing existent legislation, such as the Arms Export Control Act, would effectively criminalize the sale of weapons to individuals whose intent is to export these firearms to countries such as Mexico where they are deemed illegal. Furthermore, a return to the import ban on assault weapons in accordance with the 1968 Gun Control Act would prohibit the importation of assault weapons. Beyond the enforcement of existing legislation, the three main agencies that have authority over this

issue—the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—are all in dire need of the resources that would enhance their intelligence capabilities, increasing their capacity to interdict southbound weapons on the US side of our common border and enabling them to investigate, identify and detain individuals that are bundling weapons from gun shows and FFL dealers so as to introduce them illegally into Mexico.

In highlighting the issue of the illegal flow of weapons from the United States into Mexico, the Mexican government is in no way seeking to question or undermine the principles enshrined in the Second Amendment. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the Founding Fathers, when defending the right to keep and bear arms, surely did not have in mind drug traffickers from other countries illegally arming themselves in the United States.

The challenge at the end of the day with regard to transnational organized crime in general and the flow of weapons from the United States into Mexico in particular is the same as the overall challenge faced by the bilateral relationship, namely whether Mexico and the United States are able and willing to play chess instead of checkers. Can we ensure that we fully develop a strategic partnership? This is the ultimate question we need to address on both sides of the border. We need bold visions and statesmanship, and we need to confront tough issues in both countries. Mexico is ready and eager to play its part alongside its US partner.