Where Do We Go From Here?

Merida 2.0 and the Future of Mexico-United States Security Cooperation

Report Prepared By Eric L. Olson

Wilson Center

MEXICO INSTITUTE

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Introduction

The inauguration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador on December 1, 2018 as President of Mexico opens a new era in Mexico's security relationship with the United States. For the past 11 years, the United States and Mexico have anchored that relationship in a policy of *shared responsibility* where increased collaboration to address common security challenges has been the hallmark. Often referred to as the Merida Initiative, the content and particular focus of the strategy has evolved with successive presidential transitions but has remained true to a central agenda of dismantling transnational organized crime; strengthening the institutional capacity of Mexico's law enforcement and security forces; improving border security; and investing in communities to prevent crime and lower violence.

The arrival of a new Mexican government is a logical time to reflect on the experiences of the past 11 years, refine what has worked, and suggest new approaches to future security cooperation. Even before taking office, the president-elect announced his eight-point plan for restoring security in Mexico promising to reduce violence, fight corruption, pursue alternatives to the "war on drugs," and ultimately bring peace to a Mexico that has been hard-hit by escalating criminal violence.[1]

President López Obrador's eight-point security plan sets out important strategic directions but does not articulate specific steps to be taken, and does not address the future of the bilateral security relationship.

To begin to fill in some of these holes and suggest new directions in Mexico's security relationship with the United States, the **Wilson Center's Mexico Institute** along with **Chemonics International** hosted, on October 12, 2018, a one-day meeting with governmental and non-governmental security experts from Mexico and the United States to discuss the future of security cooperation. The discussion was rooted in an analysis of experiences over the past 11 years, and innovative new approaches that can shape future strategic directions for the security relationship. Throughout, there was strong consensus that working collaboratively was essential for success in both countries.

These discussions were broken into five areas: combating organized crime and rethinking drug policy; strengthening law enforcement institutions; reducing violence; refocusing on local challenges; and addressing challenges in Central America. The following is a brief summary of the ideas shared. We conclude with a number of policy options for the United States.

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[1] See a summary of AMLO's plan here: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/infographic-amlos-peace-and-security-plan.

AMLO'S PEACE & SECURITY PLAN

1 ANTI-CORRUPTION MEASURES AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Make charges of **corruption** a **felony without bail**
- Compulsory **disclosure** of **assets, finances, and interests** for **public servants**
- **Elimination of political immunity** for public servants

2 EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, AND SOCIAL WELFARE

- Guarantee **access** to **education, employment,** and **healthcare**

3 HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTIONS

- **Make** the **infringement of recommendations** of the **National Commission of Human Rights a felony**
- **Guarantee** the **independence of human rights commissions** at all levels of government
- **Guarantee** the proper **follow-through** on all **human rights violation complaints**

4 RENEWAL OF SOCIAL ETHICS

- Present a non-legally binding **Moral Constitution** with guidelines for societal coexistence based on shared values and ethical principles

5 PEACE BUILDING PROCESS

- **Legislation** to promote the **disarmament, demobilization, and social reintegration of criminal actors**
- Create a **Peace Building Council**
- **Legislation** to set the bases for a new **model of transitional justice**, which will be based on the principles of **truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition**

6 COUNTERNARCOTIC EFFORTS

- **Regulate** currently **prohibited narcotics**
- **Reorient** anti-drug trafficking resources to fund **reintegration and detoxification programs**

7 TAKING BACK & DIGNIFYING PRISONS

- **Guarantee** the protection of the f**undamental human rights** of inmates
- **Improve** the **accommodation, health, and dietary conditions** of prisoners
- **Protection** of **women's rights** within prisons

8 PUBLIC SECURITY PLAN

- **Rethink** the current **national security strategy** and **reorient the Armed Forces**
- **Create a National Guard**. The National Guard will be Navy, Army, and Federal Police, as well as of 50,000 new recruits.
- **Create** 266 **regional coordination zones**
- **New protocols** for **information sharing** between criminal and police intelligence units
- A new **unit to prosecute money laundering** (*Guardia de Finanzas*)

I. Combating Organized Crime and Rethinking Drug Policy

Context: Identifying national and transnational criminal organizations as a priority national security threat in Mexico and the United States has been widely supported in both countries since at least 2006 when then-President Felipe Calderon declared war on international criminal organization operating in Mexico and across the hemisphere. While the "war on drugs" enjoyed successes over the proceeding 11 years – most notably with the capture or death of multiple criminal leaders and the weakening, or disappearance, of several criminal networks - the overall criminal threat has persisted. As criminal leaders, or *capos* as they are referred to in Mexico, have left the scene their criminal networks have fractured and become unstable, often resulting in greater violence as competition among criminal groups has increased. Furthermore, criminal organizations have increasingly developed new business models focusing more on territorial control and diversifying their criminal activities to include illicit mining and trafficking in stolen petroleum, and human smuggling to name a few.

López Obrador: The new President has promised to change the logic of the war on drugs in three important ways: 1) by focusing on the underlying economic drivers (poverty and inequality) that encourage ordinary Mexicans to participate in the illicit drug trade; 2) by offering amnesty to a segment of those involved; and 3) moving away from a heavy reliance on the military for internal security.

The new President has argued that providing vulnerable populations with economic alternatives to the drug trade will result in fewer people depending on illicit activities to survive. Likewise, offering amnesty from prosecution to low level producers and traffickers will provide incentives for them to leave the illicit drug business thus allowing Mexican security forces to re-focus their efforts on more serious crime and violent criminals. Finally, he has endorsed the formation of a National Guard – a specialized military force with law enforcement training – as a transitional step away from the military's traditional counternarcotics role and a bridge towards a law enforcement focused approach to fighting criminal organizations.

New Directions: Future policy should take the following into consideration:

a) The risks of fragmentation: There is a growing consensus that simply pursuing the high valued targets is ineffective in dismantling criminal networks, and can result in greater violence. Greater sophistication in targeting and attacking the midlevel elements of a criminal organization – from logistics to finances – is more effective and could result in less violence.

b) Greater understanding of organized crime structures and business models: Organized criminal networks are not all alike. Some operate across international boundaries; others are national, and even locally focused. Some are specialized in logistics and transportation, extortion, illicit drugs, or human smuggling; and some

deal in multiple criminal activities. Some are focused on control of a particular territory, while others seek to control specific routes, port cities, or cross-border ports of entry. Greater understanding of a criminal organization's structure and business model can suggest better strategies for dismantling the criminal network rather than simply imprisoning the *capo*. Measures of success should go beyond a simple counting of *capos* killed or captured and should be based on reductions in violence and improved citizen security. Greater research and understanding of the differing models and strategies of organized crime is essential.

c) Attacking criminal financing: Billions of dollars are laundered through the Mexican financial system annually that are proceeds from drug, arms, and human trafficking, corruption, extortion, and oil and fuel theft. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reported in January 2018 that Mexico faces a significant risk of money laundering from activities associated with organized crime, corruption, and tax evasion. While Mexico has a solid legal framework, fewer than 20 percent of all 2016 money laundering investigations led to charges being filed. Moreover, from 2013 to 2016, 12,987 cases of corruption were investigated, 1,744 judicial actions were carried out, and only 51 convictions were rendered.

In this context, a number of steps should be considered.

Anti-money laundering efforts. Emphasize the importance of anti-money laundering (AML) measures to fight corruption (President López Obrador's top priority) as well as transnational organized crime (TCOs).

Exploit financial intelligence. Exploit financial intelligence in law enforcement operations against TCOs.

Target financiers. Aggressively pursue top financiers of TCOs since their main objective is to maximize profits and their financiers are difficult to replace.

Adequate resources. Push for more dedicated resources to investigate and prosecute financial crimes.

Identify beneficial owners.[2] Strengthen measures identifying *beneficial ownership* in financial transactions.

Improve coordination. Encourage improved coordination among prosecutors (particularly within Mexico's Attorney General's office), the FIU, banking regulators,

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[2] A beneficial owner is a person who enjoys the benefits of ownership even though title to some form of property is in another name. It also means any individual or group of individuals who, either directly or indirectly, has the power to vote or influence the transaction decisions regarding a specific security, such as shares in a company. Source: Investopedia https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/beneficialowner.asp.

and law enforcement agencies to increase the number of money laundering convictions and deter criminal activity.

Non-conviction-based forfeiture legislation. Advocate for the swift passage of non-conviction-based forfeiture legislation (which has been pending Mexican Congressional approval for months); this would allow law enforcement agencies to more easily seize illicit proceeds.

Training and technical assistance. Provide training and technical assistance for anti-money laundering-related agencies and promote better interagency and international cooperation and information sharing.

d) Intelligence sharing: Improved intelligence sharing between the United States and Mexico has been a major success of the Merida Initiative to date. While intelligence sharing should be continued, two important challenges remain: 1) Distrust among Mexican security and law enforcement institutions makes sharing U.S. intelligence with Mexican counterparts cumbersome and inefficient. Moving to a "task force" approach with multiple Mexican agencies consuming intelligence simultaneously and coordinating their actions may be a useful alternative. 2) Plans to reorganize Mexico's civilian intelligence force (CISEN) may create better criminal intelligence gathering and analysis, but may weaken Mexico's overall intelligence capacity to address concerns about international terrorism etc. (See Section II below on reforms to CISEN.)

e) Drug policy reform: President López Obrador has suggested reform of the nation's drug laws must be considered, allowing for the potential legalization and regulation of some illicit drugs and amnesty for an unspecified segment of the illicit drug trade. These reforms may be worth exploring, but they should not be viewed as a solution to Mexico's crime and violence problems. Legalization and regulation could have a potentially positive impact on crime and violence only if they are accompanied by efforts to strengthen the rule of law and improve regulatory capacity. Amnesties can be appropriate but must be targeted and balanced with the rights of victims, especially victims of violence.

f) Disrupting the flow of illegal firearms: Evidence suggests that Mexico is the main destination site for U.S.-sourced firearms trafficked to the region. From 2011 to 2016, of the 106,000 guns recovered by law enforcement agencies in Mexico and submitted for tracing, [70 percent](#) were originally purchased in the United States. Nearly half of the U.S.-sourced guns recovered in Mexico are considered long guns—semi-automatic rifles, such as the AK and AR variants.

The impact of gun trafficking to Mexico has been devastating. 2017 and 2018 saw the highest number of intentional homicides in Mexico's recorded history, and access to firearms is one important factor contributing to the violence. During 1997, 15 percent of Mexico's homicides were committed with a gun compared to 68 percent in 2017. Furthermore, information from Mexico's National Crime Victimization Survey

(ENVIPE) indicates that, from 2013 to 2017, close to 25 million robberies, or one every six seconds, were committed with a firearm, and an estimated 500,000 extortions and 300,000 kidnappings were committed with a firearm from 2013 to 2017.

The United States can and should take multiple steps to reduce and disrupt the illegal trafficking in firearms that impact Mexico in particular. Among these steps are: improve the amount and kind of information shared with Mexican authorities about firearms captured in Mexico and traced by ATF; institute universal background checks on all purchases in the United States; enforce stricter regulations on the purchase of long guns and semi-automatic firearms in the United States to reduce straw purchases and increase enforcement; establish a requirement to report multiple sales for long guns to an individual and short period of time; reduce the high number of firearms stolen each year; and increase prosecutions and penalties for straw purchasers, or third-party, purchases.

Additionally, there are several complementary actions the government of Mexico can take to reduce the threats posed by firearms trafficking. Among these are:

Prioritize firearms seizures at the border. A more balanced approach to security and customs enforcement would move beyond a narrow focus on drug seizures and would include a greater emphasis on firearms seizures.

Use federal agencies to compile information about gun trafficking and gun violence. Better data is needed to fully understand the problem of gun violence and gun trafficking in Mexico. Mexico's Secretary of Public Health could develop datasets that include details about gun homicides as well as gun injuries. INEGI could conduct surveys or extend existing ones to gather information about gun possession and gun movement within the country.

Create an agency in charge of addressing gun trafficking and gun violence. At present, several Mexican government agencies have a role to play in confiscating and securing illegal firearms, resulting in overlapping and redundant responsibilities. By establishing a primary agency responsible for this matter – not unlike the U.S. Bureau for Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in the United States - Mexico could cut down on redundancy and inefficiency and improve performance.

Increase oversight of legal firearm purchases for military and law enforcement agencies. Mexico imports more firearms from the United States than any other country in Latin America. Yet, these firearms are, at times, diverted from Mexican security agencies to criminal networks. From 2006 to 2017, close to 20,000 firearms that had been sold to state and federal police agencies were reported to SEDENA as lost or stolen.

II. Strengthening Security Institutions

Context: Central to any successful security strategy in Mexico is the capacity of its security institutions to operate in a professional, transparent, and accountable manner free of corruption and human rights abuses. Broadly speaking, Mexico's security institutions include the police, prosecutors and judges, the penitentiary system, a civilian intelligence agency, and the Mexican military – SEDENA (army) and SEMAR (navy).

Weaknesses within the country's police are well documented and range from low professional standards, corruption, lack of oversight, and lack of accountability for human rights abuses. Lack of political independence and technical capacity has, likewise, undermined the effectiveness of police, prosecutors, and judges at all levels of government. And in the absence of significant improvements among the country's federal police, the Mexican military has taken on significant civilian law enforcement duties since the late 1990s.

Crime is rarely reported in Mexico. According to the 2018 ENVIPE victimization survey, barely 7 percent of all crime was reported to government authorities in 2017. Many crimes —like extortion, fraud, and kidnapping—are less frequently reported than homicides. Two-thirds of surveyed victims attributed their decision to forego reporting to their lack of confidence in law enforcement agencies – primarily the public prosecutor or the police. Overall, approximately 5 percent of reported crimes result in an investigation and prosecution, and fewer still end in sentencing. Serious crimes like murder do slightly better, but only 10 percent or fewer homicide cases are solved.

Institutional reform and professionalizing law enforcement agencies has been on the agenda in Mexico for many years, and the United States has accompanied these processes with technical and financial assistance since 2009. Many of the reforms, such as the criminal justice reform begun in 2008, brought about a profound transformation of Mexico's law enforcement institutions introducing an adversarial justice system that has profound impacts on the police, prosecutors, and judges; as well as public expectations for justice. The transformation that comes with these reforms will take years, even decades, to take root, and may represent a generational change affecting the training of judges, prosecutors, and lawyers.

López Obrador: The new President has proposed a series of profound institutional reforms with significant strategic implications for the nation's security and law enforcement institutions. Among these, he has proposed the creation of an independent Public Security Secretariat (SSP in Mexico) to separate the federal police from the powerful Internal Affairs Secretariat (SEGOB in Mexico), presumably to shield it from SEGOB's other political functions. This is not a completely new idea but a return to the institutional arrangements forged during the Felipe Calderón Administration (2006-2012).

He has proposed dismantling the historic intelligence agency (CISEN in Mexico) and concentrating all criminal intelligence gathering and analysis within the SSP. Unclear in the proposed plan is what agency would assume responsibility for other intelligence gathering functions related, for example, to international terrorism, and what agency would assume responsibility for coordinating with international intelligence agencies. Additionally, concerns persist over the possible loss to Mexico's intelligence community of long-serving and professional public servants because of uncertainties over future employment and significant cuts in salary promised by the incoming government.

Finally, despite campaign promises to reduce the role of the country's military in public security functions, the new government has proposed the creation of a National Guard, a specialized military force with law enforcement and anti-crime functions. Much is still unknown about this new force, but it would appear to continue the military's role in a mission that has been mostly praised in Mexico, but that has also proven challenging at times, bringing both army and navy into potential peril because of limited legal authority, the risks of corruption associated with confronting organized crime, and accusations of human rights abuses.

What is noteworthy and potentially troubling is the absence of any specific proposals to strengthen the justice system in AMLO's proposed security strategy. The president has suggested that he supports the transformation of Mexico's criminal justice system to an adversarial system, but did not include this in his security strategy. Furthermore, he has not supported reforms intended to strengthen the political and professional independence of the country's Attorney General. Efforts to set professional standards for the Attorney General and create an open selection process have not be fully embraced by the president.

New Directions:

a) Police:

Force consolidation is insufficient. Professionalizing Mexico's federal police has been a top priority for the last two governments, and will be again in the López Obrador era. The United States has supported these efforts throughout. While professionalization entails many elements of change, two elements have been central to the discussion of late.

Creating a unified command structure among all three levels of government – federal, state, and local (municipal) – resulting in a single federal force has been widely discussed and was proposed by the last President, Enrique Peña Nieto, but never received the necessary political support. A proposed variant on the unified command structure proposal is now under consideration by the López Obrador administration. Under this proposal, the existing 32 state police forces would subsume the nearly 2,500 existing municipal police forces. These 32 state forces would be independent

from the federal police, but by consolidating the municipal police under state forces, coordination tasks between federal and state authorities would be vastly simplified.

Nevertheless, there are important questions about whether these reforms will have the desired impact on professionalization if other specific reforms do not accompany centralization of forces. Unifying commands without addressing these issues is no guarantee of success.

Transparency, accountability, and setting professional standards. Rather than focus on centralization as a vehicle for police reform, greater attention should be placed on building sound and sustainable mechanisms of accountability and establishing a professional career track for police. Problems of integrity and unprofessional conduct in police agencies across Mexico are a function of the lack of transparency, accountability, and professional standards. Issues of internal and external oversight and accountability for police should be central to the reform agenda, and could become more difficult in a centralized command structure.

Civil service reform, creation of a professional career track for police, and establishing merit-based promotions and opportunities for specialization are crucial. Currently, standards and procedures for deciding on promotions based on merit and professional qualifications are not standardized in many forces, although U.S. support, through the Merida Initiative, for civil service reform has led to reforms in a number of states.

A local approach. Finally, the public security problems Mexico faces are increasingly localized and thus require a more decentralized and locally focused approach. See section III for additional discussion on this matter.

b) Justice reform:

The transformation of Mexico's justice system to an adversarial model is one of the most profound yet vexing of all efforts to improve security in Mexico. After 10 years of reform, much progress has been made while many challenges remain. Some of the challenges faced include public perceptions that the reforms are allowing accused criminals to evade justice. Much blame is placed on weak prosecutors and/or judges who either lack the competencies necessary to manage the new criminal justice system, or have already become compromised by external and corrupting influences.

Key institutional areas that need to be addressed as the reform process moves forward include:

Formation of an intra-governmental coordination body with authority and sufficient resources to oversee the full implementation of the new adversarial criminal justice

system. Such a body (SETEC)[3] existed during the 10-year implementation phase for the new adversarial justice system. It provides a possible model for improved coordination across the federal government and between the three levels of government.

Address gaps in training, including continuing training throughout a public servant's career. Additionally, develop effective procedures and mechanisms to evaluate the outcomes of the training. U.S. support for training in Mexico should occur once these mechanisms are in place.

High profile cases. Progress by the justice system in addressing high profile cases such as human rights violations and corruption cases. The recent formation of a "truth commission" to reassess the Ayotzinapa case involving 42 missing students is a good first step.

Disappearances and strengthening forensic capacity. Strengthen the judicial bodies responsible for searching for disappeared persons and increasing forensic capacity to identify remains.

c) Intelligence:

Building and maintaining trust. Intelligence cooperation is based on trust. Given the potential upheaval in Mexico's intelligence community with the dismantling of CISEN, maintaining and reestablishing trust should be a priority for both countries going forward.

Building criminal intelligence capacity. Intelligence gathering to combat sophisticated criminal organizations should be a priority, and better integrating this function into the SSP and the Federal Police makes strategic sense. Intelligence gathering, analysis, and better integrating these products in law enforcement strategies and operations are urgently needed, so the reorganization of CISEN may have some benefits on the crime front.

Do not abandon other intelligence activities. In the context of CISEN's reorganization, it is important that Mexico not abandon other intelligence gathering activities such as monitoring possible terrorist activity or the presence of international terrorist organizations. Vitally important to this task is maintaining healthy coordination with international intelligence agencies. These relationships should go well beyond the gathering of criminal intelligence and should not be left solely to the SSP and Federal Police. Other institutional arrangements should be sought.

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[3] SETEC stands for the Secretaria Tecnica para la Implementacion del Sistema de Justicia Penal. SETEC was a specialized secretariat under the Interior Secretariat and was dismantled after 2016 when the implementation phase ended.

4) Military:

The relationship between the United States and Mexican militaries remains strong despite significant political fluctuations between both countries related to immigration and trade. Maintaining these ties, deepening them, and focusing on other regional and global security challenges are vital to continued good security cooperation between both countries and their militaries. Increasing the exchange of liaison officers in both countries, continuing training exchanges, planning bilateral and multilateral training exercises, and addressing regional and international security challenges together are positive steps that should be maintained and expanded.

The role of Mexico's military in law enforcement matters continues to be controversial in Mexico. A proposed legal reform that would have redefined the military's role in public security was recently struck down as unconstitutional by Mexico's Supreme Court of Justice. Adopting a legal framework to ensure legal protections for both the military and civilians is essential to ensuring there is a strong rule of law framework in place that would guide and limit the military's involvement in public security.

Even more urgent is the professionalization of civilian law enforcement institutions that render the military's role unnecessary.

Sustainability. An emphasis on the sustainability of institutional reforms is essential at all levels of government. This may require committing to reform and implementation plans that extend beyond each Administration's term. Additionally, improved data collection and shared access to and understanding of available data could improve the analysis of the security challenges faced. Finally, mobilizing public support for sustaining reforms and increasing accountability are important vehicles for building more resilient communities.

III. Refocusing on Local Challenges

Context: Efforts to address Mexico's priority security challenges have been largely the purview of federal authorities and institutions over the last 11 years. Deployments of the federal police, armed forces (army and navy), the federal attorney general, and federal social development programs have been the principle strategy employed by successive Mexican governments. As noted, the United States has supported this strategy and provided technical, strategic intelligence, and financial assistance, as well as equipment, to strengthen the capacities of federal authorities to pursue and dismantle powerful criminal networks.

With some exceptions, a broad consensus prevails that the majority of state and local institutions are weak, highly vulnerable to criminal influences, and the financial, human, and technical capacities do not exist to address the complex problems of

organized crime and violence at the local level. One of the principle rationales for mobilizing Mexico's military to engage in non-traditional public security functions is based on the assumption that existing institutions are incapable of addressing critical security needs. While municipal and state authorities are reluctant to give up control of their police and prosecutors, they are very happy to allow the federal authorities to take the lead on a problem that most believe is a federal responsibility – combating organized crime.

Federal mobilization of the military and police have a powerful dissuasive impact on criminal networks, often resulting in a short-term reduction in violence. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, federal action to dismantle criminal organizations often results in greater criminal fragmentation and may drive increases in violence.

One way previous Mexican governments have dealt with the problem of corrupt and ineffective local and state police forces is to propose a nationalization of all police forces. While numerous attempts have been made, and approaches tried, so far there has been no progress.

López Obrador: While the new President has promised to strengthen state and local governments, fighting corruption was the cornerstone of his presidential campaign, and his election mandate confirms that this will be a top priority for his presidency.

"Eradicate corruption and reactivate the justice system," is the number one priority in his announced security strategy.

Fundamental to his anti-corruption strategy is the "centralization" of authority. He has discussed this in terms of how he will organize federal expenditures at the state and local levels, which he plans to oversee directly by relying on "federal coordinators" that report directly to him.

He has also suggested that he may improve police capacity by eliminating the country's nearly 2,500 municipal police forces and centralizing their control in 32 state police forces. His rationale is that it would simplify the command and control structure and could elevate the professional standards of local, poorly prepared police.

Additionally, he promises to concentrate many civilian functions in the reconstituted Public Security Secretariat (SSP). In addition to the Federal Police, the SSP is slated to become the primary generator and consumer of intelligence for the country.

Finally, López Obrador promises an "austere government." He promises to lower government expenditures by reducing corruption, lowering salaries, as well as eliminating special bonuses and privileges enjoyed by many senior government officials, and their families, as a matter of routine.

New Directions:

A focus on anti-corruption measures and greater efficiency at the federal level are important, but many experts believe it is time to move beyond a federal-only approach. A federal approach to security may be appropriate when threats are particularly grave, but even when successful, this approach has resulted in fractured criminal organizations, sometimes referred to as disorganized organized crime. Breaking down major security threats is an important first step but limited capacity at the state and local level means that fractured criminal organizations will continue to operate, and even multiply, often resulting in greater violence.

Rebuild local and state capacity. Despite the challenges, numerous localities have demonstrated that improving local capacity is possible. Cities such as Morelia, Monterrey, and states like Morelos have undertaken interesting efforts to improve citizen security locally with limited support from federal authorities. The recent experience in Morelia, Michoacán may be particularly useful. There, local authorities were encouraged to re-establish relationships in city neighborhoods, inviting citizens to report crimes directly to them rather than traveling to the public ministry. Increased engagement with citizens helped to break down the distrust that undermines law enforcement efforts.

Do not overlook the importance of fighting local crime. While national and international attention may be more on transnational organized crime, approximately 95 percent of crime experienced by Mexicans is subject to local jurisdictions. Local crimes are far more likely to impact a person's life than transnational crime. This is not to suggest that transnational crime does not have a local manifestation, or that it is unimportant. Rather, it is to argue that by tackling local crime and restoring the states' capacity locally, citizen trust in the state will improve and will contribute to efforts to tackle major crime as well.

Establish an integrated approach – from local to international. While rebuilding the states' local capacity is important, it does not have to be strictly a local task. Success in major Colombian crime hubs like Medellín and Cali were the result of an integrated strategy that incorporate local actors (state and non-state) to federal, and international partners. By creating an integrated approach to address extreme violence locally, Ciudad Juárez was able to dramatically lessen its homicide rates after 2012. Establishing and maintaining policy coordination across all levels of government and among all agencies can have a significant impact on violence and criminality in a high crime area.

IV. Reducing Violence

Context: Mexico is experiencing a dramatic spike in violence and especially intentional homicides. By official statistics, 2017 saw over 31,000 homicides—a 27 percent increase— and set a record for the most murders in a single year. Sadly, that

record has already been broken in 2018, the most murderous year since such statistics have been gathered. According to Mexico's national crime victimization survey (ENVIPE 2018), other forms of predatory crime—such as extortion, theft, and assault—are also on the rise. Particularly troubling is the extent to which Mexico's violent crime problem involves organized crime groups, many of which operate with the knowledge, consent, protection, and even participation of corrupt officials operating within the Mexican government.

MEXICO'S HOMICIDE RATE
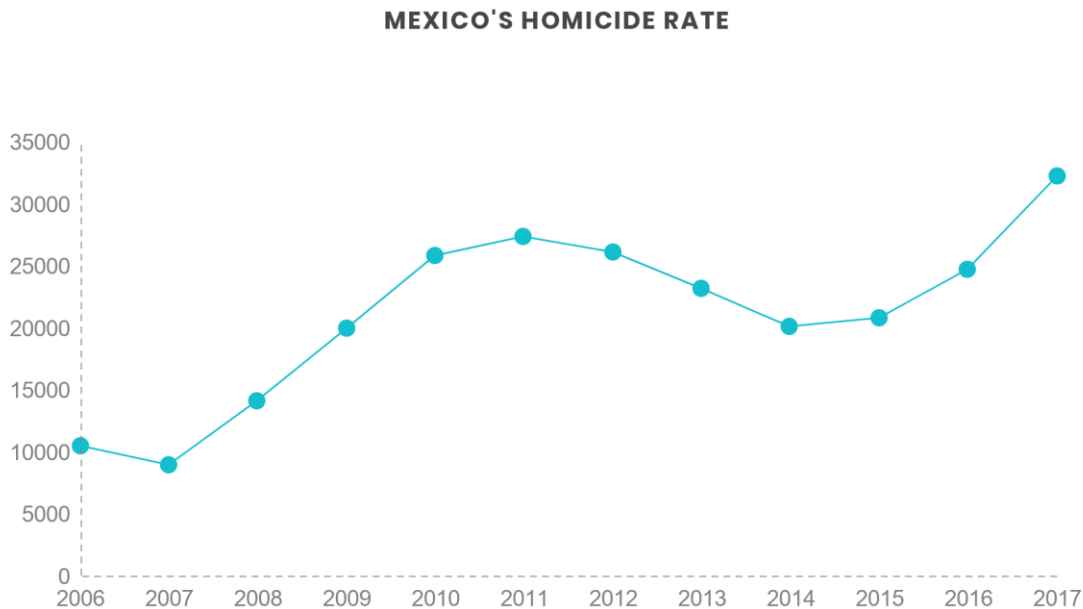
Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática

Violent crime also exacts an enormous cost on society. Victims experience trauma that can affect multiple generations. Violence disrupts economies, innovation can be stifled, investments withheld or withdrawn, workers killed, and businesses destroyed. Public services such as education, transportation, and healthcare can be dramatically skewed by violence. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that crime and violence can cost regional economies on average three percent of GDP, and roughly double that in Central America. Reducing crime and violence can give a boost to economic activity.

Law enforcement and security forces have an essential role to play in fighting crime and reducing violence, but programs specifically designed to reduce and prevent violence also have a place. Former President Peña Nieto's security strategy (2012-2018) planned to make prevention programs a hallmark of his administration. His government set aside an estimated $500 million for prevention programs between 2013 and 2016.

Nevertheless, the government program (PRONAPRED) responsible for overseeing these programs was suspended after an independent government audit conducted by the *Auditoría Superior de la Federación* found little evidence the programs where having an impact. One reason for the suspension was that PRONAPRED support programs confused development and charity efforts with evidence-based programs that could demonstrate a reduction in violence and crime prevention. According to one analyst, PRONAPRED defined its mission too broadly, confusing development issues with crime and violence prevention. In doing so, the program tried to address too many risk factors, leading it to subsidize programs such as providing eyeglasses for kids in school or Zumba classes for women in public spaces.

López Obrador: In addition to public outrage over rampant corruption, Mexicans were particularly concerned about the shocking rise in violence and lack of public safety when they voted in July 2018. Central to the President's strategy for reducing violence is an economic, or development approach. The President's proposed security plan lists creating jobs, education, healthcare, and welfare as its second-highest priority (behind fighting corruption), with public opinion polls suggesting it is still a top priority for Mexicans generally.

His rationale is that investments in these four strategic areas will "significantly reduce the social base created by criminals and will reestablish the public's confidence in the collective." To accomplish these goals, he proposes to promote economic and social programs such as reforestation and construction of a train through the southern, historically Mayan region of Mexico. He also plans to strengthen cooperatives, microenterprises, and family workshops to provide additional economic opportunities for poor and working class Mexicans.

It should be noted that the government's economic and development strategy for addressing crime does not include the more focused evidence informed crime prevention and violence reduction programs that have resulted in improvements in specific communities across Mexico. Furthermore, the López Obrador government has discontinued the PRONAPRED office, and there does not appear to be plans for a replacement.

New Directions: While fighting violent crime requires professional and effective security forces, security forces alone will not bring an end to the crime afflicting communities across Mexico. Likewise, economic investments to create jobs and opportunity are important elements of a long-term strategy, but they do not address the immediate crisis situations. Specific investments in targeted and evidenced based crime prevention and violence reduction programs are also needed to strengthen the social fabric of communities to build resilience. Reviews of numerous field experiences with crime and violence prevention programs suggest the following learnings:

Implement programs supported by strong evidence of impact. Adapting these experiences to the Mexican context is urgently needed, but the lack of Mexican

experiences should not be an obstacle of designing programs and testing for impact. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has important experience in developing evidenced based crime and violence prevention programs in the region, so their role should be enlarged.

Develop better diagnoses of local programs and design tailored solutions. Not all crime and violence problems are linked to national organized crime or drug trafficking. The solutions should respond to local problems and be tailor-made, starting at the municipal level. More research and local diagnoses are needed for this purpose.

Target people and places. There is evidence that crime and violence are concentrated in certain places and perpetrated by a very small group of people. Solutions then should be targeted at the highest risk individuals, behaviors, and places (e.g. focus on at-risk youth, develop tools to identify those individuals and places).

Promote an evidence generation agenda. Programs should have a strong design, informed by theory and evidence, and include an evaluation strategy to generate evidence on what works and why in the Mexican context. Implementors, such as governments and NGOs, should have the capacity to design solid programs (e.g. develop a theory of change and indicators) and include an evaluation strategy.

Coordination principle. Crime and violence prevention policy involves many actors, and this requires greater coordination efforts among them, including law enforcement agencies. One of the biggest mistakes that have been made in this field is to think that crime and violence prevention does not include law enforcement agencies, while they are a crucial actor in this field.

Conclusion. Prevention policies should be a priority in any security plan but should be one part of a broader and comprehensive security strategy, which should include institutional strengthening and reforms for all levels of law enforcement institutions.

V. Addressing Challenges in Central America

Context: Political instability, economic hardship and inequality, and increasing despair in Central America have been major challenges for decades. As a result, Mexico and the United States have experienced significant secondary effects such as increased migration and expanding criminal networks. In general, Mexico has been able to address these challenges either through diplomatic efforts, such as the Contadora Initiative during the 1980s, or by managing the challenges internally. In many instances, Mexico was content to allow migrants and drugs headed to the United States to simply pass through the country on their way north.

However, this policy has become increasingly risky and unsustainable for Mexico as the United States has hardened its border, and smuggling illicit drugs or

undocumented migrants has become more costly and risky. The resulting backlog has dramatically changed the criminal landscape along Mexico's northern border, where criminal organizations specialize in moving illicit drugs and humans into the United States.

More recently, worsening conditions in Central America, and particularly in the Northern Triangle, have resulted in marked increases in irregular Central America migration since 2014. For its own internal reasons, and as a result of pressure from the United States, Mexico dramatically increased its migration enforcement efforts, especially in its southern border states of Chiapas and Tabasco. During 2015 – 2017, Mexico detained and returned more Central American migrants than the United States.

The matter of immigration control and border security took center stage in the last half of 2018 when a so-called caravan of undocumented migrants formed in Honduras and began a very visible trek north to the United States in hopes of receiving asylum. The caravan elicited very strong statements of condemnation and accusations from President Trump with promises that the caravan members would not be allowed to enter the United States. Those seeking asylum would only be allowed to petition at the U.S. ports of entry and remain in Mexico while their claims were processed.

López Obrador: Mexico's new president has promised to deal with irregular migration from Central America in two ways. First, he proposes to continue to treat the accumulating migrant stream in Mexico as a humanitarian issue and not a criminal one.

Second, he will focus on the causes of migration from Central America. One of his first acts as President was to sign a joint statement with the Presidents of Guatemala and Honduras, and El Salvador's Vice President, to begin the process of defining an "Integrated Development Plan" for the region that will address the economic drivers of migration. The declaration acknowledges the need for a regional approach to migration and explicitly recognizes the links between the well-being of southern Mexico and the three countries of the Northern Triangle. He has also won the support of the United States for a $30 billion investment plan that would spur the economic growth in the region. These announcements are long on promises with little evidence of actual funding to be committed by either government.

New Directions:

The willingness of President López Obrador to address the economic drivers of migration by undertaking a major development initiative in southern Mexico is welcome news and may help address the nagging challenge of irregular migration for the country, the United States, and the sending countries of the Northern Triangle. Nearly a million Guatemalans enter Chiapas, Mexico every year to work, so greater investment in Mexico's south could produce more jobs and opportunities for all countries of the region.

However, with these opportunities also come challenges that should be addressed carefully. These include the following:

Move from promises to reality. At present, the various announcements by Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries, as well as the United States, hold great promise but do not include any resources to make these plans a reality. All countries need to work together to develop a realistic funding plan so the promises do not fade away, and dash people's hopes. The United States should consider increasing resources to support development initiatives that benefit southern Mexico as well as the Northern Triangle.

New resources have to be tied to concrete outcomes. The era of blank checks and unlimited resources are over. Public and private investments need to be tied to specific outcomes and criteria established for each step in the process. These criteria can be set collaboratively with buy-in from both the Mexican and U.S. government. They should not require unilateral certification, but adherence to an open and transparent process that leads to demonstrable outcomes is essential.

End abuse of migrants. Migrants from Central America are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by criminal groups specializing in smuggling and authorities that take advantage of their legal status. Addressing these vulnerabilities are essential to reducing criminal activities, fighting corruption among local, state, and federal authorities, and reducing impunity. Mexico needs to prioritize these issues, and the United States can collaborate in significant ways to end these abusive practices.

Establish better border management between Mexico and Guatemala. The Mexico-Guatemala border is vast, remote, and difficult to control. Mexico has invested significantly in rebuilding its southern border infrastructure, but these investments have not been matched by Guatemala. Concerns about transnational organized crime and irregular migration have driven U.S. and Mexican policies in the area since 2014, but a policy of control and retention has not succeeded in slowing the flow of migrants or illicit products. Both Mexico and Guatemala need to work together to improve border collaboration especially regarding infrastructure and in efforts to combat criminal organizations. The United States can play an important supporting role but should not attempt to impose the border control model it has championed on the U.S.-Mexico border.

What the United States and Mexico Should Do:

In addition to the multiple proposals for new directions in the bilateral security relationship discussed above, there are three underlying principles that the United States and Mexico should reaffirm as the underpinnings of a healthy security relationship:

We are in this together. The principles of *shared responsibility* and bilateral collaboration are fundamentally important to successful security cooperation. Illicit economies, whether smuggling drugs, humans, or other products, do not respect borders, so it is essential for both countries to work together to address these complex problems. The United States and Mexico should reaffirm their commitment to the framework of shared responsibility for addressing the security challenges that threaten both countries.

Addressing the complex nature of crime and violence cannot be reduced to one issue or one approach. Law enforcement efforts, prevention programs, and economic development initiatives all have a role to play and should be undertaken in an integrated fashion. Focusing on specific local challenges and rebuilding state capacity, especially locally, can have a profound impact on the criminal landscape and bring us a step closer to peace and prosperity.

Sustainability is key. Sustaining reforms is a major challenge in the context of political transitions. Success requires a sustained approach that transcends a particular administration. Each new government will rightly want to reevaluate what has come before, and propose new strategies. Nevertheless, institutional reforms, including the professionalization of police and prosecutors, require a long-term approach since these reforms are profound and require a change in culture and outlook. To aid this process, it is vitally important for reformers to build strong societal support for reforms that can help guarantee the sustainability of such reforms beyond a particular election.

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