



# MILITARIZATION A LA AMLO: HOW BAD CAN IT GET?

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## Introduction

The role of the armed forces in Mexico, in particular the army, has been present even prior to the birth of the nation. More than 2,000 years ago, small groups of indigenous peoples occupied lands in what is now recognized as the Southwest United States, the Republic of Mexico, and parts of Central America, where they lived, worked, and battled each other. These groups trained and conducted aggressive military-like operations. For their part, the Mayas had moved away from science and art to embrace militarism and “a glorification of war in all its aspects.”<sup>1</sup> When Hernán Cortés engaged with the Aztecs in 1519, they too had embraced warlike characteristics: “for religious reasons, militarism was elevated to virtue.”<sup>2</sup> Cortés and company imposed additional military influence atop of existing militarism, reinforcing the role of force and military authority in the foundation of the new social order. During the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule, the military played a key role in maintaining internal order, and the early years of the newly independent republic experienced significant levels of force as disparate groups vied for power and control at the local, regional, and national levels. As the new country – without any experience in democratic institutions or governance – attempted to learn how to govern itself, it also faced challenges of an external nature from Spain, the United States, France, and Britain. For these reasons (among many others), despite uneven levels of professionalization, the armed forces, especially the land component, constituted the most important governmental institution in Mexico during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Among the watershed events that Mexican society was subjected to included *la Revolución* of 1910-1917, the country’s civil war that affected the lives of every citizen. The legacy of *la Revolución* is enormous and difficult to synthesize or overstate. It was, without question, a defining event in Mexican history. There were four “armies” – all composed of Mexican “soldiers” – fighting against each other. Soldiers loyal to Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, “constitutionalist” forces led by Venustiano Carranza, and other forces fighting for General Álvaro Obregón were engaged in prolonged combat throughout the country. The period was highly dynamic, with shifting loyalties and alliances; fighting ebbed and flowed over time. This period affected the life of every Mexican citizen. To this day, no one is quite sure how many perished during this timeframe, with estimates in the range of one to two million deaths. Even low-level estimates note one million losses out of a population of approximately 15 million (according to the 1910 census), which far exceeds the rate of the U.S. Civil War.

As a result of these levels of violence endured by the people, for many years most citizens would choose virtually any solution other than war to achieve their objectives. The “victors” of the conflict were the constitutionalists, but as the new political regime began to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, New York: Praeger, 1966, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, 69.

emerge, the shadow of the revolution was omnipresent. It would take several years for some degree of stability to develop. In 1929, revolutionary general Plutarco Calles founded the *Partido Revolucionario Mexicano* (PRM -Mexican Revolutionary Party), which over time would morph into the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (the PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party). These parties ruled without interruption for more than 70 consecutive years. Importantly, every president subsequent to 1917 was a general officer during the revolution. This continued for almost 30 straight years; the change to this practice came in the 1940s, when the first civilian president in the post-*Revolución* period was “elected” in 1946. President Miguel Alemán was given the mantle of command; it was bequeathed to him by the generals of the revolution in 1946 in exchange for his absolute support for the military and its legal, judicial, and budgetary autonomy. The military would fully respect civilian power and defend it against any threat. The central element for this pact to work would be presidential control of the legislative branch and the judiciary branch so civilian government actions would never affect the armed forces in a detrimental manner.

### **Militarization a la Mexicana**

As established in the introduction, the use of force and the role of the armed forces in Mexico has been present from the very beginning. Given that reality, to describe what is happening under the direction of President Andres Manuel López Obrador requires a description of how Mexican presidents have utilized the armed forces in the context of what the literature broadly refers to as Civil-Military Relations. Civ-Mil relations is a very broad field, and deals with the age-old question of who guards the guardians, that is, how to exert control over forces strong enough to defend the country in case of war yet willing to remain subordinate to elected civilian authorities. Among the myriad questions addressed in the civ-mil field are not just the relationships between the military and the society in a given country, but also the relationship between the military and the political leadership in that country. In particular, we will examine the issue of the appropriate role of the armed forces within a country, keeping in the forefront Max Weber’s proposal that the state exercises the monopoly of the *legitimate* use of physical force. These questions have been analyzed by political scientists, sociologists, historians and policy analysts, each concerned with differing aspects of the issue writ large. Our primary interest here is from the policy perspective, but we will borrow some analytical findings from the other disciplines.

Among the reasons for studying civ-mil relations in Mexico include its unique geographical location between the most powerful military in the world and two much smaller neighbors. The classic civ-mil dilemma of a society spending too much on its military (and thus causing serious economic problems) or not spending enough (leaving itself vulnerable to external attack) doesn’t fit neatly into the Mexican case. For much of the past 50 years, total military spending has averaged less than 0.5% of GDP. This current reality is complicated, of course, by repeated U.S. interventions in Mexico, the most important of which is of course the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War. Mexican elites have struggled to find the balance on the size and strength of the armed forces given their unique geopolitical location and history.

Within the broader Latin American context, especially given the uneven development of democratic regimes throughout the region, a particular focus has been with regard to

understanding the presence (or absence) of the military takeover of the governmental role through the coup d'état. Although in a somewhat distant past from the 2021 vantage point, the fact that the majority of Latin American countries experienced military governments during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (most recently the 1960s through the 1980s) makes the Mexican circumstance of no successful coup attempts post-revolution an interesting case.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Mexican officers are quite proud of this reality.

The good news, then, is that there have been no successful coups in the post-*Revolución* period. However, the larger question of how much influence is exerted by the military over civilian decision makers is another important focus of civ-mil relations theory. It is within this realm that the essence of interest in the Mexican armed forces must focus. It is all well and good that the military is not in the business of conducting coups, but if it is able to exercise its influence over the decision makers, and in this fashion obtain what it wants, that may be an even more enviable position to hold. Why bother to stage a coup and have to actually govern if your needs are largely met? This is the realm for which those who are concerned with an outsized role for the military. Exactly what type of decisions being are made regarding the armed forces? Their budget, manpower, organizational structure, employment, rules of engagement, and so forth, are not exclusively military matters. And yet, since 1946 the military appears to have been left mostly to their own devices in these and other questions.

As noted previously, the Mexican military eventually acquiesced to having a non-revolutionary general officer as president in 1946. They did so, however, with the assurance that their parochial interests would not be interfered with. This contradicts one of the central tenets of civ-mil relations theory, which is that the civilian masters must effectively control and oversee the armed forces. In the Mexican case, the military appeared to be under the command and control of civilian authorities, in this case, the president as commander-in-chief. But there were, in essence, no other controls, either within the executive branch, and definitely not within the legislative branch. For a U.S. reader accustomed to the U.S. case and the critically important roles accorded to the legislature in the Constitution – in which Article I, Section 8 gives the legislature the power to “raise and support Armies,” to “provide and maintain a Navy,” and to “make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces” – the Mexican arrangement sounds quite strange. And yet given the history of the country, with the constant internal and external challenges it had faced, and in the aftermath of *la Revolución*, this arrangement appeared to be a step in the right direction.

In practice, the armed forces were permitted to write their internal legislation independently, the president would channel it to the legislature (which was under the absolute control of the governing party, the PRI), and it would pass without any scrutiny whatsoever. This process gave the appearance of democratic processes, when in fact it was not. In both chambers of the legislature, the defense-related committees included military men (general and flag officers on active duty but seconded to congress) as well as retirees. They were the mediators between the executive branch (the president, the secretary of treasury for budgetary

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<sup>3</sup> Efforts by revolutionary general Juan Andreu Almazán to attain the presidency in the late 1930s following Lázaro Cárdenas's expropriation of the oil sector and other socialist positions included plans for the use of violence. At the end of the day, however, no coup was even attempted by Almazán.

matters, and the two cabinet-level military ministries) and the legislators. The concept that the armed forces could be overseen by congress in any substantive way was not debated. Not simply for this reason but more broadly, the Mexican political system that evolved post-*Revolución* and post-World War II was what political scientist Howard Wiarda coined as a corporatist-bureaucratic-authoritarian regime:

The system is authoritarian in the sense that one party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), has monopolized the national political life for six decades. It is top-down and “democratic-centralist” almost in a Leninist sense. It is bureaucratic in that it is a machine and a system that governs Mexico, not any single individual. It is corporatist in that the PRI incorporates within its ranks the major corporate or functional groups in Mexican workers, peasants, and the so-called “popular” sector which is supposed to include all others.<sup>4</sup>

Although the military was only incorporated formally into the PRI for a short period of time, in practice they provided an important stabilizing function to the PRI in terms of providing a critical support role for the regime. This unwritten pact between the civilian political elite within the PRI and the military permitted the PRI to rule in exchange for their absolute respect for the military and its legal, judicial, and budgetary autonomy; in return, the military would fully respect civilian power (meaning the president) and defend it against any threat.

This relatively stable system began to undergo challenges from within during the late 1960s from an increasingly aggressive student movement and rural insurgent forces dissatisfied with the lack of attention and support from the political class. Between 1968 and 1976, several urban action groups appeared (mainly composed of students), not unlike the already existing rural guerrilla forces. In states like Guerrero, some peasant groups formed armed self-defense movements as a response to the marginalization and violence caused by local power structures enabled by the military.<sup>5</sup> Others were urban guerrillas acting as clandestine groups without popular support. The massacre of student activists in the plaza of Tlatelolco in October 1968 is perhaps the best-known single case of army repression, but their role supporting the PRI over these years was longstanding. Mexican journalist Jorge Luis Sierra provides this concise conclusion regarding the Mexican government’s “repressive response” over the years:

It is known that 1,700 Mexicans, the majority of them adolescents, took up arms and joined 32 different guerrilla groups over those two decades. Many were assassinated or were killed in engagement with security forces. In the three *sexenios* which cover this period, each president had at his personal discretion the entire strength of the security groups to exterminate the incipient growth of guerrilla groups throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

The tactics and techniques of the army during these operations was characterized as abusive and replete with human rights abuses, a period known as the *Guerra Sucia* (Dirty War). These actions in the late 1960s and early 1970s established a decidedly negative perception by much of the intellectual class and students of that period, and continue to influence those groups years later.

The *sexenios* of Luis Echeverría, José Lopez Portillo, and Miguel de la Madrid between 1970 and 1988 represented the continuation of the PRI political model, but each was confronted

<sup>4</sup> Howard J. Wiarda with the assistance of Carlos Guajardo, “Mexico: The Unraveling of a Corporatist Regime?,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1988): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Montemayor, *Guerra en el Paraíso*, Mexico City: Diana, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Sierra Guzmán, *El enemigo interno: Cntrainsurgencia y fuerzas armadas en México*, Universidad Iberoamericana, 2003, 19.

an ever more complex socio-economic environment on top of the difficulty of maintaining the political control. Mexico was at the beginning of an evolution of sorts – from rural to urban, from a closed to a more open economy, from internationally isolated to more engaged. Also occurring was the slow demise of the hegemonic power of the PRI, although not entirely clear how that was happening or what it might mean. What was becoming increasingly clear was a growing sense of frustration by the Mexican public with the continuing (and growing) instances of blatant electoral fraud in the political process. The army, less broadly though when required, continued with the tactics of the *Guerra Sucia* in loyal support of the PRI.

The PRI's vice-grip lock on the political machinery of the country had begun to weaken years earlier; the years of the 90% PRI vote no longer obtained. That said, de la Madrid won with a still comfortable margin of 68% in 1982, with the closest competitor with 16% from the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN, the National Action Party). But when Carlos Salinas ran for the presidency in 1988, the margin of victory for the PRI was barely above 50%...50.3% to be precise. The decade of the 1990s was full of challenges for the PRI – armed forces relationship: the first sacking of a military service secretary, Admiral Mauricio Schleske Sánchez; the emergence of the *Zapatistas*; the assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio and the secretary general of the

PRI (and Carlos Salinas' brother-in-law) José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, both in 1994. Salinas was succeeded by Ernesto Zedillo in 1994, and the PRI's defense challenges continued at a time where the party made attempts at strengthening the U.S. – Mexico defense relationship. The discovery that Mexico's Drug Czar equivalent, General Jose de Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, was heavily involved in narcotics trafficking; and allegations that Secretary of Defense Enrique Cervantes Aguirre was involved in money laundering for one of Mexico's key Drug Trafficking organizations particularly rocked the party's image. The cumulative effect of the gradual erosion of the PRI's political power over the years, combined with other societal, economic, and political pressures of the 1990s, contributed to the first election of a non-PRI presidential candidate in July 2000, former Governor of Guanajuato Vicente Fox Quezada. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a dynamic period in Mexico's evolution. For our purposes of assessing changes in the civ-mil relationship, and the associated role of the military in the security and defense realm, we witness the biggest shake-up to the status quo with the Fox *sexenio*.

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## **2000 and Beyond**

A member of the centrist PAN political party, Fox was perhaps the most non-traditional presidential candidate in Mexican history. Bringing a business background to the table, he attempted to use his leadership and organizational techniques in innovative ways. For a tradition bound institution such as the army (as well as the navy), this turned out to be quite a shock. The pact between the PRI and the army had been broken.

Without getting into too much detail, this excerpt from Fox's first foreign minister – Jorge Castaneda – shed some light on his views of the army:

We have an army in Mexico, the purpose of which is not to be a fighting army, but to participate in rescue efforts when some natural disaster strikes the country. Mexico's political system has, since the 1920s, deliberately ensured that the army is useless. There is a tremendous consensus in the country on this matter. We want an army that is corrupt, poorly trained, poorly equipped, and totally useless. Why? Because those armies don't overthrow their governments. We have not even had an attempted military coup in Mexico since 1938.<sup>7</sup>

For his part, Fox shared this perspective:

In the case of the Army, after 72 years of this authoritarian government, totally controlling and using the Army for whatever political situations and economic situations, and the Constitution says the President is the CEO of the Army, and they use it for any political intentions, that had to be cut. The Army would become an Institutional Army, and I would not exercise that right, and I wanted to ensure the Army is only for keeping national security within Mexico, not even for defense purposes from any attack from the exterior. Because we couldn't even fight the Nicaraguan Army, that would be stronger and maybe better equipped than ours. Our Army was and still is very very poor, we don't have one modern plane, modern weapons, our arms are produced in Mexico...they're not the very best.<sup>8</sup>

Fox understood the way in which the PRI had used the army, and rejected those actions outright. Perhaps in an effort to shake up the system significantly, Fox's first decisions regarding the army and navy were with regard to his secretaries of defense and navy, respectively. He broke with previous norms by reaching past the normal short list of the five most senior 3-star generals and selected the 21<sup>st</sup> on the list, General Ricardo Vega Garcia. In the case of the navy, Fox didn't even select from the available 3-star admirals; he promoted a 2-star to 3 stars on December 1<sup>st</sup>, and that same day selected Admiral Marco Antonio Peyrot González, promoting him to 4 stars and cabinet rank. It was a rather inauspicious beginning of his role vis-à-vis the armed forces.

Although Fox had more pressing matters on his plate than his relationship with the armed forces, both the army and the navy were more concerned with understanding the new rules of the game with the presidency. Fox's efforts to deal with public security issues attempted to minimize the role of the military; rather, he attempted to reform the internal security system by proposing to eliminate the *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR, loosely translated as the Attorney General's Office), creating the Secretariat of the Interior, and establishing a single Federal Police entity by the *Agencia Federal de Investigación* (AFI, the Federal Investigation Agency) and the *Policía Federal Preventiva* (PFP, the Federal Preventive Police). His proposals did not come to fruition during his *sexenio*. Despite the low esteem in which Fox indicated he held the army, he nonetheless continued to utilize them in a public security role. All in all, Fox had little interest in military related issues; his 355-page autobiography *Revolution of Hope* (Viking, 2007) does not mention the Mexican armed forces, General Vega García, or Admiral Peyrot a single time. The civ-mil relationship during this particular period was a clear outlier from previous times, and as it would turn out, from the future as well.

Fox was succeeded by another PAN candidate, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa. Calderón was a very different politician than Fox, having literally grown up in the party that his father co-founded and spending much of his life as a politician. While Fox had emphasized trade and immigration

<sup>7</sup> Jorge Castañeda, "Mexico's Failed Drug War," in *Economic Development Bulletin No.13*, Cato Institute, May 6, 2010, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Deare, op.cit, 199.



issues, Calderón campaigned on improving security for Mexican citizens. Upon assuming the presidency, Calderón not only reverted to form as the commander-in-chief, he doubled-down on relying on the military's support. Hours after the inauguration, Calderón participated in an event in *Campo Marte* (literally Mars Field), a parade ground contiguous to *Los Pinos*, returning to the practice of Presidents Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas of giving a speech as an integral part of the parade. The very next day, Calderón broke with tradition by presiding over a breakfast meeting with the senior leaders of both *Defensa* and *Marina* at the *Heróico Colegio Militar*, where he informed them that he was increasing their budgets by 23 and 14 percent, respectively...in the context of reduced spending for much of the rest of the federal bureaucracy. The following Tuesday he met with the chairmen of the armed forces committees from both chambers of congress at *los Pinos*, accompanied by General Galván and Admiral Saynez, to talk about increasing military spending (with a particular emphasis on increasing salaries). More than any other Mexican president in the previous several administrations, Calderón overtly and explicitly reached out to *SEDENA* and *SEMAR* to make them the focal point of his security agenda.

Kicking off what would come to be known as his war on drugs, on December 11<sup>th</sup> Calderón ordered the first large scale operation of his term with *Operación Conjunta Michoacán* (Joint Operation Michoacán), in which approximately 7,000 members of the Army, Navy, and Federal Police forces inspected thousands of persons, vehicles, and ships, as well as eradicated scores of marijuana fields. It was just the beginning move of what would evolve into a broad, intensive, and controversial six-year effort, led principally by *SEDENA* and *SEMAR*, to attempt to gain the upper hand on what Calderón perceived to be a weak and deteriorating condition of security throughout the country.

Assessing that he needed additional support, Calderón had reached out to George W. Bush even prior to his inauguration to propose greater collaboration between the intelligence, security, and defense agencies of both countries. The net effect was the Mérida Initiative (agreed upon in March 2007) and would turn into a multi-year, three-billion-dollar program supported by both the Bush and Obama administrations, increasing interactions between the two countries intelligence, law enforcement, and most notably defense institutions. Although the bilateral defense relationship had begun to improve marginally in the 1990s, the interactions were still rather distant in comparison with those the U.S. maintained with many other nations. The interesting civ-mil note here is that Calderón's decision required both *SEDENA* and *SEMAR* to engage much more closely with their partners to the north, a very notable shift for *SEDENA* in particular. Left to their own devices, the army would have continued to remain somewhat at arm's length, but in keeping with their tradition of strict obedience and subordination to the directives of the president, they complied. The Fox *sexenio* interrupted the civ-mil norm in Mexico, but with the return of a more traditional style of presidential authority – even though in the guise of the PAN and not the PRI – reverted to form with Calderón.

Calderón's national security strategy was focused on his efforts to win the war on drugs. The evolution and growth of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) in Mexico has taken decades to develop, with a notable spike in the 1980s as the introduction of cocaine from South America into the mix increased the profit margins over more traditional marijuana and heroin trafficking. It must be noted that during the years of PRI dominance, there was a degree of

tolerance and co-existence between DTOs and certain governmental actors. Mexican analyst Eduardo Guerrero Gutierrez described this *Gran Pacto* (Grand Pact) as follows:

During the period of the dominant party, the government and organized crime maintained a symbiotic relationship based on a non-aggression pact. The pact was possible due to the political centralization which existed in that period, in which the federal government or the governors could guarantee the fulfillment of deals made with criminal enterprises.<sup>9</sup>

Although the *Gran Pacto* had been disrupted with the arrival of Fox and the PAN, the DTOs adapted quickly to the new reality. By the time Calderón arrived on the scene, the DTOs had grown increasingly violent.

The PRI returned to power in 2012 with the election of Enrique Peña Nieto. Although Peña Nieto campaigned on a platform of reducing violence and changing the security strategy pursued by Calderón, he discovered that was easier said than done; after a relatively short period of time, Peña Nieto became aware that violence continued at significantly high levels. Both Calderón and Peña Nieto, in their own ways, attempted to strengthen federal police forces through organizational changes, but without great success. Given the continued lack of effective law enforcement capabilities, both presidents relied heavily on the armed forces in a largely public security role.

### **Doubling Down by AMLO**

During his third campaign for the presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador promised a fourth transformation (*Cuarta Transformación*), a profound change to rival the previous three watershed moments in Mexican history: independence from Spain in 1810-1821; *la Reforma* (the Reform) of 1858-1861 of Benito Juárez and the liberals' efforts to change the trajectory of Mexico; and of course, *la Revolución*. More mundanely, but perhaps of more immediate concern to most of Mexican society, he promised to end corruption and achieve a more just and peaceful country with his “*Abrazos no Balazos*” (Hugs, not Bullets) theme. Of particular note was AMLO's announced intentions to make significant changes to certain intelligence, security, and defense organizations. And in this regard, AMLO was true to his word. Beyond pandering to his base by flying commercial and attempting to sell the presidential airliner (delivered to President Peña Nieto in 2016 for around \$218 million), he in fact disbanded the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* and CISEN (the *Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional*, the national intelligence service).

During an interview with former Mexican Ambassador to the U.S. and supreme court justice Eduardo Medina Mora, he explained that former presidents Cárdenas, Ávila Camacho, and Alemán conceived of an “institutional design” to protect the presidency. They divided the “coercive power of the state” among four major actors – the army; the navy (Lázaro Cárdenas established this separate ministry in 1939, and its first secretary was an army general officer); the *Guardias Presidenciales* (Presidential Guard) and the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* (Presidential Staff); and the Mexico City police force. He noted that when the *Guardias Presidenciales* were

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<sup>9</sup> Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, “Narcotráfico, S.A.,” in *Nexos* en línea, <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=54>.

created by President Alemán, they were a significant force, well trained and equipped, and fully capable of protecting the president from any army uprising – no minor feat. Assigning the Mexico City police force (in place since the 1867 Constitution) under the direct command and control of the president – not the mayor of the capital city, but the president – served as an additional element to ensure that these four centers of physical force, all of whom reported directly to the president, would serve as a counterweight to the others. These moves all contributed to ensure no coups occurred in Mexico in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; as Medina Mora stated, “and it worked beautifully...the only country in Latin America that didn’t have a coup – no accident.”<sup>10</sup> AMLO’s disbanding of the *Guardias Presidenciales* and the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* simultaneously removed a counterbalance to the army, and by returning all those members to the army he actually strengthened it. At that early point in his presidency, it is

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**“AMLO’s disbanding of the *Guardias Presidenciales* and the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* simultaneously removed a counterbalance to the army, and by returning all those members to the army he actually strengthened it.”**

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possible that AMLO was unaware of the effect he was generating.

The commonly held assessment was that AMLO held a negative view of the military, due in part to the military’s treatment of AMLO over the years.<sup>11</sup> AMLO threw grease on the fire when he accused the army of active participation in the forced disappearance of 43 students in the 2014 massacre at Ayotzinapa during a March 2017 visit to the OAS. For their part, it was no secret that significant portions of the military opposed his presidency. Although not in official statements, those in the know were well aware of a *sotto voce* social media campaign against AMLO. More publicly, there was open sparring between AMLO and Secretary of Defense General Cienfuegos revolving around a proposed new Internal Security law which Cienfuegos supported in order to provide legal guarantees to soldiers currently performing police-like functions (see further comments on Cienfuegos below). For

his part, AMLO argued – and from the perspective of 2021, rather ironically – that the proposed law would amount to the militarization of the military, violated human rights, and gave too much power to the military. Also among the most direct and vocal voices challenging AMLO was recently retired three-star general, Sergio Aponte Polito, a former commander of the II Military Region in Baja California. In a rather unusual fashion for Mexico, General Polito actually penned an Op-Ed expressing his apprehensions and the reasons why he did not and would not support AMLO. Among those reasons, Polito included that he could not and would not support someone that “constantly reviled” the armed forces and wanted to reduce both the budget and size of the army.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Personal Interview with Mexican Ambassador to the United States Eduardo Medina Mora, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> The antagonistic relationship began in the 1990s when the army forcibly removed AMLO’s supporters who had taken over PEMEX facilities; a tense relationship with the Army during AMLO’s years as the mayor of Mexico City (2000-2005); and the army’s removal of AMLO’s supporters from a major Mexico City boulevard following the 2006 presidential election. AMLO subsequently characterized the army as part of the “mafia in power.”

<sup>12</sup> Sergio Aponte Polito, “No apoye ni apoyare a AMLO,” in zetatijuana.com, April 9, 2018. [No apoyé ni apoyaré a AMLO - ZETA \(zetatijuana.com\)](http://zetatijuana.com)

As he campaigned, the issues AMLO indicated he would address included the following:

- end the war on drugs, and the military's active role in it;
- remove the army from the streets and return them to their barracks;
- focus on the range of allegations regarding abuses committed by members of the armed forces including the infamous cases of Tlatlaya and Ayotzinapa;
- disband the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* (a form of militarized version of the U.S. Secret Service responsible for presidential protection)
- name retired general and flag officers to serve as the heads of *SEDENA* and *SEMAR* respectively, a move that would have generated tremendous friction with the two institutions.

For some segments of the Mexican society, these campaign promises held a certain appeal.

What is also true is that following AMLO's resounding election victory on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, the uncertainty and anxiety levels among members of the armed forces, in particular the senior ranks, was notable. And yet shortly after winning the election, AMLO appeared to change his tune. As early as July 10<sup>th</sup>, news reports noted that AMLO said that "it would be irresponsible to send the Army and the Navy to the barracks."<sup>13</sup> "Under current circumstances we could not stop using the Army and the Navy to address the problem of insecurity and violence. The Federal Police is not prepared to substitute what the soldiers and sailors are currently doing."<sup>14</sup> Three years subsequent to his election, and 30 months after his inauguration, AMLO has kept very few of his campaign pledges regarding the Mexican armed forces. In point of fact, far from removing the armed forces from these non-traditional military missions, AMLO has expanded the role of both the army and navy quite significantly. Curiously, despite expanding their roles, he has not supported soldiers and sailors at the tactical level. Both of these seemingly contradictory realities have generated significant levels of concern.

At the outset of his presidency, AMLO made clear his personal preferences regarding the complex issue of insecurity, reducing levels of violence, and achieving peace. In a fascinating interview with several journalists on the daily newspaper *La Jornada*, provided insights into his views on a range of challenges facing the country and his presidency.<sup>15</sup> AMLO blamed the "neoliberal era" of 36 years of poor governance for most of the contemporary problems which existed; in his view, the successive *sexenios* from Miguel de la Madrid through Enrique Peña Nieto were largely responsible for permitting the conditions in which levels of violence grew. Responding to repeated questioning regarding why he was turning his back on his campaign promises vis-à-vis the army, AMLO was direct:

<sup>13</sup> Julian German Molina Carrillo, "La difícil relación AMLO-Fuerzas Armadas," in *Milenio*, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://www.milenio.com/opinion/julian-german-molina-carrillo/sociedad-derechos-humanos/la-dificil-relacion-amlo-fuerzas-armadas>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, "Si por mi fuera, desaparecería al Ejército y declararía que México es un país pacifista": AMLO," interviewed by Roberto Gonzalez Amador, Luis Hernandez Navarro, Pedro Miguel, Alonso Urrutia, and Miguel Angel Velazquez. June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. *La Jornada Videos*.

If it was up to me, I would make the Army disappear and I would convert it into a National Guard; I would declare that Mexico is a pacifist country that does not need an Army, and that the defense of the nation, in the instance it should be necessary, all Mexicans would do it. The Army and the Navy would be converted into a National Guard to guarantee security to the Mexicans. But I cannot do so because there is resistance. One thing is what is desirable, and another is what is possible.<sup>16</sup>

A rather unambiguous statement of his views of the Mexican armed forces, in essence reinforcing Polito's apprehensions that AMLO intended to weaken or even eliminate the army. AMLO's recognition of what is possible is an interesting admission of the importance of the armed forces within the Mexican system.

AMLO moved forward with his long-held notion that the solution to these problems could not be provided by the armed forces. AMLO argued that the federal police were largely corrupt and inept, but that the military was overly aggressive and tended to abuse the rights of the citizenry. Taking a new tack from his three previous counterparts' efforts to strengthen national level law enforcement agencies, AMLO's innovative approach was to take a historical entity – *la Guardia Nacional* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and breathe new life into it. Although not a force in being subsequent to *la Revolución*, the *Guardia Nacional* was included in the 1917 Constitution, so the constitutional framework was already in place. AMLO's "big idea" was to operationalize the *Guardia Nacional*. Article 21 of the Constitution established that public security was a function under the purview of the governments at the national, federal district, individual states, and municipalities. Additionally, the Constitution states explicitly that "public security institutions shall be *de caracter civil* (civilian in nature)."<sup>17</sup>

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**“Although not a force in being subsequent to *la Revolución*, the *Guardia Nacional* was included in the 1917 Constitution, so the constitutional framework was already in place.”**

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AMLO's innovation was to give life to the National Guard, ostensibly to act as a new federal law enforcement agency under the auspices of the *Secretaria de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana* (Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection). With his party Morena's majorities in both chambers, the constitutional referendum required to establish and employ the National Guard passed easily in March 2019, including with some votes from opposition parties. Interestingly and ironically, AMLO's Morena party promoted the legislation under the guise of taking concrete steps toward peace and demilitarizing the country. However, two years on, the notion that the *Guardia Nacional* would be something akin to an intermediary force – along the lines of European Stability Police Forces such as the Spanish *Guardia Civil*, the Italian *Carabinieri*, or the French *Gendarmerie* – have proven to be illusory. Public security in Mexico continues to be handled exclusively by the armed forces – with the addition of *la Guardia Nacional* – at the national level, with civilian law enforcement agencies in place only at the state and local levels.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See the 1917 Mexican Constitution, Article 21, ninth paragraph. [CONSTITUCIÓN POLÍTICA DE LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS MEXICANOS | La Constitución Mexicana en tu Lengua - Lengua Español \(inali.gob.mx\), https://constitucionlenguas.inal.gob.mx/completa/lan1es-MX](https://constitucionlenguas.inal.gob.mx/completa/lan1es-MX)

AMLO tapped General Luis Rodriguez Bucio to serve as the first commander of the National Guard, immediately generating concerns from certain groups, such as the *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humano* (CNDH, the National Commission on Human Rights). Although Rodriguez Bucio was in the process of retiring, the fact that he was still on active duty was of concern, as well as the fact that even after retirement the National Guard it would be a retired general officer in charge generated anxiety from certain sectors. Of greater concern was that, despite assurances from AMLO that the National Guard would be a civilian police force, distinct from a strong military police presence already operating throughout the country, the initial composition of the 90,000 individuals in the National Guard was made up predominantly by military personnel, supplemented by only 26,000 personnel from the recently disbanded *Policia Federal*. Furthermore, although the army was ostensibly only to be responsible for training and not day-to-day operations, this decision begs the question why a military institution was responsible for training civilian law enforcement personnel in the first place. Importantly, as of this writing in September 2021, the *Guardia Nacional* continues to be comprised of predominantly army and navy personnel.

A series of interesting and troubling episodes occurred during the first years of the AMLO *sexenio* that created concerns in the ranks of the military regarding whether the President had their backs. Space precludes detailed treatment of these issues, but the following list is constructive:

- Angry groups of people attack soldiers/sailors – both on patrol and in their garrisons – who are directed to not defend themselves
- Roads are blocked by disgruntled civilians, and the military is not authorized to remove them
- Police stations are burned to the ground without a robust response authorized
- Extended problems with the *huachicol* phenomenon are evident (the theft of gasoline and other petroleum products from the state oil giant PEMEX, primarily from pipelines) which the army is handcuffed in addressing
- And of course, the granddaddy of them all, the ongoing reign of terror by criminal organizations engaged in the trafficking of a range of illicit goods, principal among with are fentanyl, cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin

What we observe is an environment in which the president gives the armed forces the responsibility to handle public security, but then ties their hands by not giving them the authority to actually perform the missions as assigned.

The most glaring and dangerous case occurred in October 2019, and is now infamously referred to as the *Culiacanazo*, given that the debacle that occurred in Culiacán, Sinaloa, the heart of the strength of Chapo's Sinaloa cartel. The short version is that on October 17<sup>th</sup> of that year, the *Secretaria de Seguridad y Proteccion Ciudadana* and *SEDENA* attempted to implement an operation to capture Ovidio Guzman Lopez (el Chapo's son) which failed due to myriad factors. A quick internet search will provide extensive reports on what actually took place, but a combination of shortcomings in intelligence, planning, and execution at the tactical level were further undercut by decisions at the policy level. After the special operations forces successfully managed to detain Ovidio, the extraction phase ran into a major snag- trying to actually remove

him from the city was met with a robust response by the cartel's gunmen. In what ironically could be characterized as a Mexican standoff, elements of the army and the cartel faced off as the cartel reacted more quickly and effectively than the government had anticipated, creating a situation that would have produced a very bloody engagement between federal forces and the cartel had an effort to take Ovidio out of the city been attempted. The cartel even threatened family members living in the military housing compound. The tactical decision to stand down was not made on scene, but back in Mexico City.

As bad as the events on the ground turned out, the handling of the situation from Mexico City was arguably worse. The national news cycle was immediately gripped with the sensational story. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and days immediately following, Alfonso Durazo (the head of *Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana*) and General Luis Sandoval provided contradictory versions of events; for his part, AMLO denied those versions and corrected both cabinet-level secretaries live on national TV. The country was consumed with this for days, and the net result was not pretty. It exposed the divisions between the philosophy of the president and the realities of the strength of criminal organizations; the lack of authority of the *Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana* vis-à-vis *SEDENA* and their coordination challenges; the relative weakness of the *Policia Federal* and *SEDENA* in their efforts to take on sizeable cartel organizations, especially without higher level backing; and numerous other minor details. Perhaps more importantly, it laid bare the reality that in many places around Mexico, the effective authority was not exercised by either the federal, state, or municipal governments, but rather a local, regional, or national criminal organization.<sup>18</sup> The federal government was defeated and embarrassed by the cartel at the tactical level, in the political sphere, and across the information space. Although AMLO indicated that he directed the release of Ovidio to avoid bloodshed, he may have determined that such a decision was superior to having the cartel kill/wound military, police, and non-combatants alike.

Not surprisingly, the military was quite displeased with numerous aspects of the failed raid on Ovidio. Although clearly responsible for the planning and execution errors, members of the army shared sentiments between being thrown under the bus by the president, or him not having their backs given some of his statements. In another unusual event given the conservative nature of the Mexican officer corps, retired General Carlos Gaytán Ochoa (the former Deputy Secretary of Defense and serious contender to have been the next Secretary of Defense until his retirement) gave a speech challenging the current commander-in-chief. During a breakfast organized by Secretary of Defense General Luis Sandoval for a group of more than 500 retired general officers on October 22<sup>nd</sup> (a routine event), Gaytán Ochoa spoke for his fellow retirees (and certainly for many still on active duty), a few highlights of which follow:

We are concerned about today's Mexico... We feel aggrieved as Mexicans and offended as soldiers... We live in a politically polarized society because the dominant ideology, which is not

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<sup>18</sup> It bears mention that General VanHeck, the Commander of U.S. Northern Command, stated recently that "transnational criminal organizations who are operating oftentimes in ungoverned areas -- 30 percent to 35 percent of Mexico." Mexican officials and analysts dispute this number, but the Culiacanazo is but one vivid example that organized crime does indeed control terrain in Mexico. USNORTHCOM-USSOUTHCOM Joint Press Briefing, March 16, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2539561/usnorthcom-ussouthcom-joint-press-briefing/>

the majority, is based on supposedly left-wing currents which accumulated great resentment for years...Who here doubts that the Army and Air Force are making the best effort? Who here is unaware that the high command faces, from an institutional point of view, a group of “hawks” who could lead Mexico into chaos and a true failed state?<sup>19</sup>

Gaytán Ochoa was essentially poking AMLO in the chest with these words, calling out the ideologically left-wing political views of the president and his administration attempting to impose their agenda on the rest of the country despite being in a minority position. The “high command” refers to General Sandoval, with Gaytán Ochoa arguing that he (and *SEDENA*) is facing a group of ideological hawks who are putting Mexico at risk. For a high-ranking Mexican general officer, despite being retired, to declare the possibility of a Mexico in chaos and becoming a failed state was striking; the Mexican armed forces see as their highest responsibility the maintenance of Mexican sovereignty. It is worth noting that Gaytán Ochoa received a standing ovation at the conclusion of his remarks.

News of this Gaytán Ochoa’s speech spread like wildfire across the country. Questions were raised about a possible change in *códigos* (literally translated as codes, but in this case meaning rules) among the military. AMLO himself characterized the general’s remarks as imprudent, and he himself raised and batted away the possibility of a coup. Independent of the firestorm the speech produced, the important point in the remarks by Gaytán Ochoa was to publicly express concerns held by a significant portion of the Mexican armed forces which otherwise may not have been widely known.<sup>20</sup> For the armed forces of Mexico, whose culture is to be devotedly obedient and subordinate to the commander-in-chief, to express such a sentiment so vocally and directly was an extraordinary moment.

As if that was not enough, a few weeks later there was a tragedy of a different style 70 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border. On November 4<sup>th</sup>, three women and six children from the LeBarón and Langford families were killed when gunmen from the criminal group La Linea opened fire on three separate vehicles between 9:40 am and 11:00 am. According to *Defensa*, two different criminal organizations – “La Linea” and “Los Salazar” – were in a dispute over territorial control in the region. It would appear that the women and children were caught in the crossfire between the two rival groups, both literally and figuratively, although members of the extended LeBarón dispute this. Predictably, the reaction in the U.S. was quick, with President Trump tweeting the next day, “This is the time for Mexico, with the help of the United States, to wage WAR on the drug cartels and wipe them off the face of the earth. We merely await a call from your great new president!”<sup>21</sup> The LeBarón family raised this issue of having the U.S. government designate the drug organizations as foreign terrorist organizations; AMLO and company rejected this idea as unnecessary. The LeBarón case certainly underscored the range, scope, and depravity of the criminal organizations operating across the country.

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<sup>19</sup> A copy of General Carlos Gaytán Ochoa’s speech can be found at the following link: <https://lasillarota.com/nacion/decisiones-del-ejecutivo-inquietan-y-eventualmente-nos-ofenden-general-en-retiro/331154>

<sup>20</sup> Months later, in March 2020, AMLO actually shook the hand of el Chapo’s mother.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Trump [@realDonaldTrump] (5 November 2019)



AMLO's decision to disband the *Policia Federal* rather than task them with the training mission reinforces the conclusion that a) AMLO trusted the military and distrusted civilian law enforcement, b) believed that the *Guardia Nacional* would be more military in nature than civilian at the outset, and c) that *SEDENA* would always retain operational control. The logical assumption is that what AMLO intended at the outset was an expanded Military Police organization in everything but name. Two years on, that certainly appears to have been confirmed. In June 2021, AMLO announced his desire for the *Guardia Nacional* to become a branch of *SEDENA*, similar to subordinate role played by the Mexican Air Force, indicating he would put the matter before Congress. And in July 2021, AMLO announced his intent to create a new customs entity (the *Agencia Nacional de Aduanas* (ANAM), or the National Customs Agency), ostensibly under the authority of the *Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público*, but in practice day-to-day operations under the control of *SEDENA* and *SEMAR*.

The formal assignment of the *Guardia Nacional* to *SEDENA* led to a somewhat significant change in *SEDENA* internal organization. In mid-August 2021, General Sandoval announced an

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**“The logical assumption is that what AMLO intended at the outset was an expanded Military Police organization in everything but name.”**

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administrative reorganization to *SEDENA* based upon the integration of the *Guardia Nacional*. Sandoval announced the establishment of a new role, the *Comandancia del Ejército Mexicano* (Mexican Army Command) and the *Comandancia de la Fuerza Aérea Mexicana* (Mexican Air Force Command). He also announced that the existing *Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional* (National Defense Staff) would perform the functions of a Joint Staff.<sup>22</sup> Although not publicly, *SEMAR* members informally noted that without the inclusion of the naval components, what Sandoval referred to as performing the functions of a Joint Staff was doctrinally incorrect. These changes were required because of the administrative, logistical, and operational responsibilities associated with the incorporation of the *Guardia Nacional*. As of this writing in early September 2021, the *Guardia Nacional* continued to be composed of primarily *SEDENA* personnel (61,708). The

remaining numbers are 23,818 from the old *Policia Federal*, 17,418 from *SEMAR*,<sup>23</sup>

Another important case bears mention in the context of strains on the civ-mil relationship between AMLO and the army. The abbreviated version of the story is that the defense secretary under Peña Nieto, General Salvador Cienfuegos, was arrested at LAX airport in October 2020. The U.S. Department of Justice claimed to have spent years investigating Cienfuegos and that they had compiled ample evidence that Cienfuegos was working with the H-2 cartel (curiously, not a top tier Mexican Drug Trafficking Organization). Obviously, a major bilateral crisis ensued given the apparent reality that the investigation of Cienfuegos and his arrest took place without consulting with or informing the AMLO administration. More importantly for our purposes here

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<sup>22</sup> “Crean Comandancia del Ejército Mexicano a cargo del general Eufemio Ibarra Flores,” in *El Universal*, August 13, 2021. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/sedena-crean-comandancia-del-ejercito-mexicano-cargo-de-eufemio-ibarra-flores>

<sup>23</sup> Arturo Angel, “Aun sin reforma, Sedena ya controla bases, dirección y reclutamiento de la Guardia Nacional,” in *Animal Político*, September 1, 2021. <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2021/09/sedena-reforma-guardia-nacional-bases-direccion/>

is the firestorm that ensued within Mexico itself. Members of the Mexican Army, both active (behind the scenes) and retired (more publicly) were outraged for two principal reasons: first, because of the affront to Mexican sovereignty and lack of respect to a key Mexican institution, and second due to the potential significant damage the army would suffer domestically in terms of its prestige and its image *vis-à-vis* both society and the political class.<sup>24</sup> The interesting point in the civ-mil debate is that AMLO appeared to move away from his initial position – one of surprise at the arrest, but appearing to accept the investigation and trial of the general in the Eastern District of New York. In a relative short period of time, AMLO and his cabinet began a full-court pressure campaign with their counterparts in the U.S. for Cienfuegos’s return.

This begs the question – why the change in tone and attitude by AMLO? There is no documented evidence to prove that AMLO changed his approach because of pressure by the Mexican Army, although many of us who have spoken with active and retired officers on background have confirmed this. Returning to the broad civ-mil question regarding if, and if so how, militaries exert influence within the political realm, I would argue that there were most likely two forms of influence exerted by the army to cause AMLO to change his mind. The first is the reality that AMLO had mortgaged the potential success of his 4T agenda on the shoulders of the military, predominantly the army. Recognizing that if they army were to lessen its extensive support for the president’s agenda, AMLO would be weakened politically. The second, however, is the probable direct lobbying by senior army officers – both active and retired – with AMLO and other senior administration officials to not stand for this affront to the Mexican state and its sovereignty.

The net result of the pressure by AMLO, his foreign minister, and attorney general (among others) was that a month after the Cienfuegos arrest in LA and his transfer New York City to stand trial, Attorney General William Barr dropped the case against Cienfuegos, pointing to “sensitive and important” considerations of foreign policy that superseded national interest in proceeding with the trial. This particular case represented a number of poor decisions by U.S. officials – arresting a former cabinet level official without proper coordination at the highest level of government and without adequate consultations with an important neighbor and partner – and the capacity of the Mexican government to exert pressure on a U.S. administration. After paying the political price of arresting Cienfuegos, returning him despite the evidence compiled by the DEA, the Trump administration’s decision to return him in exchange for precious little was the epitome of fecklessness.

Beyond the already questionable – albeit arguably justifiable, given the paucity of viable alternatives – outsized role of the armed forces in the public security realm, AMLO has gone beyond the previous norms in a number of ways. Three tasks given to *SEDENA* that have no possible justification are the construction of a new civilian aviation hub to replace Mexico City’s current Benito Juarez International, a private tourist railway/train system across the Yucatán peninsula known as the *Tren Maya* (which the army will operate at a profit), and building hundreds of state-owned bank outlets. For their part, *SEMAR* has been tasked with expanding

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<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this episode, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Cienfuegos and the US-Mexico Firestorm*, November 23, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/23/cienfuegos-and-the-us-mexico-firestorm/>

their already questionable role of security and customs functions for civilian ports, to include taking control of Mexico's merchant marine elements.<sup>25</sup> Each of these missions moves the military into increasingly illegitimate functions.

## Analysis and Conclusions

Prior to the assessment of this latest phase of militarization in Mexico, are a few remarks to paint the picture of violence and insecurity which continues to haunt Mexico in the summer of 2021. Despite the *Abrazos no Balazos* policy, homicides continue at very high levels. The increase in the homicide rate from 8 per 100,000 in 2007 began during the Calderon *sexenio* as a direct result of his declaration of war against narcotics traffickers and has grown ever since (despite a brief pause during the Peña Nieto administration), including an 84% increase since 2015. Despite a very small decrease of 1.3% in 2020 from 2019, the homicide rate continues at rates of 27.8 per 100,000 (ninth highest in the world), with more than 35,000 murders (prior to 2018, Mexico had not recorded numbers greater than 30,000). Although there has been a marginal reduction in violence from 2019 to 2020 (due in no small part to the Covid-19 pandemic), levels of violence appear to have been concentrated in fewer states; Guanajuato, Estado de Mexico, Baja California, Chihuahua, Michoacán, and Jalisco combined to produce more than 50% of all homicides, with an average of 64 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. The top five cities in the world in terms of murders per 100,000 are Mexican, with Tijuana as the worst offender with a homicide rate of 134 per 100,000 inhabitants. According to analysis produced by the *Índice de Paz en México 2021*, in 2020 violence in Mexico represented a cost equivalent to 22.5% of Mexican GDP.<sup>26</sup> This is all to say that in broad terms, the Mexican society continues to suffer from significant levels of insecurity and violence; this has been the reality for more than a decade now. Perhaps more troubling, this trend of ongoing insecurity and violence does not appear to have an end in sight.

With the facts established and evidence that the government of López Obrador does not appear to be prioritizing his efforts against organized crime (AMLO's priority is on *4<sup>a</sup> Transformacion*, of course), what does all of this new phase of militarization mean for civil-military relations in Mexico? Let us return to the three basic questions posited earlier: who controls the guardians, what is the nature of the relationship between the society and the military, and what is the relationship between the political class and the military?

The good news in this otherwise bleak picture is that the Mexican armed forces have been and remain clearly and firmly subordinate to the president, which is to say that the deal put in place in the 1940s continues to hold. That said, the lack of any additional oversight continues in place, and in fact the range of responsibilities delegated by the president to the armed forces has expanded significantly. There is no publicly available evidence that either *SEDENA* or *SEMAR* have sought out these expanded authorities; informal conversations with members of both institutions suggest that these additional missions were not requested, and they are not pleased to

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<sup>25</sup> Previously, the Communications and Transportation ministry was responsible for administrative functions at Mexican ports.

<sup>26</sup> *Índice de Paz Mexico 2021: Identificación y Medición de los Factores que Impulsan la Paz*, Instituto para la Economía y la Paz, Mexico City, 2021. [Mexico Peace Index \(indexedepazmexico.org\)](https://www.indexedepazmexico.org/)

have been tasked with other non-military functions. But as many also hasten to point out, they are obligated to follow the legal orders of the president. And yet, as we have suggested previously, although the orders may not be illegal, the tasks imposed on the military are often illegitimate.

A U.S. service member would be tempted to view this from the perspective of assessing whether the orders from the superior are “illegal, immoral, or unethical.” At his confirmation for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 2019, in response to a question regarding the conditions under which he would resign, General Mark Milley responded, “I think it would be a function of something that was illegal, unethical, or immoral. That is what I have been brought up with since I was a second lieutenant, and that would probably be cause for resignation.”<sup>27</sup> This view is pretty standard in the U.S., although refusing to obey orders in the gray areas of unethical or immoral orders is less clear and more problematic. The point here, of course, is that if President Lopez Obrador gives General Sandoval or Admiral Ortega the order to build an airport, administer the ports, or perform customs functions, what options do they have?

The civ-mil literature has an ongoing debate between those who argue about who makes decisions about military matters. The “military view must be adopted” camp argues that uninformed and inexperienced civilians must not be permitted to meddle in organizational, operational, and especially tactical matters. The case could be made that this model describes the Mexican case rather well. The “civilians should decide” camp says that despite the input of the military regarding what should take place, at the end of the day the elected civilian leaders must decide, *even if they are wrong*. In other words, even if the civilian leadership tasks the military with performing tasks that are inherently not military in nature, and even if the military recommends that they not be employed, the “civilians should decide” camp would argue that it is not the place of the military to refuse that order. Furthermore, even if the civilians do not have the requisite expertise, that is irrelevant. In democratic societies, so civ-mil relations theory goes, the military *must not* make the final decision.

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**“If senior Mexican military officers are given orders from the president that fall outside traditional missions of the armed forces, who is at fault for the growing militarization within the country?”**

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If senior Mexican military officers are given orders from the president that fall outside traditional missions of the armed forces, who is at fault for the growing militarization within the country? And given the absence of any other effective oversight capacity – such as that of congressional committees which authorize rules and appropriate funding – over the armed forces in Mexico, the responsibility lies entirely with the president. The evidence from all presidencies since that of the Miguel Aleman *sexenio* of 1946-1952 shows that campaign promises aside, every president has used the military in ways that would fall outside the primary roles traditionally ascribed for armed forces. AMLO has certainly continued that practice, but to a disturbing and concerning new level. The continued reliance of successive Mexican presidents

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<sup>27</sup> United States Senate Hearing to Consider the Nomination Of: General Mark A. Milley, USA, for Reappointment to the Grade of General and to be Chairman of The Joint Chiefs of Staff, Thursday, July 11, 2019 Washington, D.C., 36. [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-58\\_07-11-19.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-58_07-11-19.pdf)

on the armed forces to perform a wide range of missions for which they are not trained represents an indictment on the Mexican political system across all parties.

As we consider the matter of the relationship of the society with its military, the difference between what civ-mil relations theory suggests and the sentiment of the people emerge. For civ-mil scholars, civil libertarians, and human rights experts, there is significant concern about the continued (and now growing) role of the military in the public security space. Among these groups there is widespread agreement that public security is a police function, and that the military should not be involved. And yet, the Mexican society is largely supportive of the active role of the military in this regard. Official polling by INEGI shows society’s perception of the military as the most effective capability in preventing and fighting crime is statistically significantly superior to other elements over the past five years.<sup>28</sup>

Organization	Lowest Rating	Highest Rating	Average Rating
<i>SEMAR</i>	82.0%	87.5%	86.2%
<i>SEDENA</i>	79.5%	84.9%	83.1%
<i>Guardia Nacional*</i>	67.7%	73.1%	71.3%
<i>Policia Federal*</i>	61.7%	65.3%	63.7%
<i>Policia Estatal</i>	47.2%	53.8%	49.5%
<i>Policia Municipal</i>	37.3%	41.7%	44.6%

The statistics demonstrate a clear distinction between the armed forces and any civilian law enforcement organization. The relatively small difference in perceptions between the *Policía Federal* and the *Guardia Nacional* could raise questions regarding what might have happened had AMLO chosen to resource the *Policía Federal* as generously as he has the *Guardia Nacional*, and in this way attempted to strengthen civilian law enforcement. It would appear that AMLO’s perception that the federal police were largely corrupt and inept led him to conclude that they were beyond repair or redemption.

More importantly, Mexican society is making very clear their relative satisfaction with the military’s role in the public security arena. The polling was not a popularity contest, but was explicitly inquiring about the role of various institutions with regard to which was “very or somewhat effective” in their efforts to prevent and combat crime. The society cares little about the nuances of civ-mil relations theory; they do care about violence and insecurity, and are more comfortable with the navy, the army, and the national guard than they are with any civilian law enforcement agency. We can reach several tentative conclusions about this reality.

First, that policymakers across all political parties have failed to develop effective and efficient law enforcement entities at the federal, state, and local levels. There certainly are

<sup>28</sup> Encuesta Nacional de Seguridad Publica Urbana, Cifras durante junio de 2021. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/app/saladeprensa/noticia.html?id=6642> Data covers period from September 2016 through June 2021. \**Guardia Nacional* data from June 2019 through June 2021; \**Policia Federal* data from September 2016 through March 2020.

exceptions to the rule, but they are a decided minority. Second, that despite not wanting to play a major role in the public security space, the military has long done so for many years; indeed, Article 89 of the Mexican Constitution tasks the military with both external defense and *internal security*. Third, because of conclusions one and two, all presidents have employed the military in the public security mission. AMLO's use of the armed forces is simply the most recent instance of that public security tradition. Indeed, the operationalization of the *Guardia Nacional* is only the latest example of conclusion number one, in this case AMLO's belief that a militarized police force would be superior to a new or improved federal police force.

The final conclusion is that AMLO has determined that the most effective and trustworthy public security institution is the armed forces. This is the logical and unavoidable assessment given the range of tasks he has given to *SEDENA*, *MARINA*, and the *Guardia Nacional*. Campaign promises and personal prejudice notwithstanding, it is apparent that the performance of the armed forces – and by inference, the relatively less impressive performance of other public institutions – have demonstrated that they are the most trustworthy and reliable

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**“Put differently, the continued reliance on the Mexican military is due to civilian leadership failing to adequately build civilian staffed and civilian led institutions.”**

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asset at his disposal. Why task *SEDENA* to build an airport?

Because you distrust the private sector. Why task *SEMAR* to run the ports administratively? Because that is where precursor chemicals from China arrive, and endemic corruption of previous authorities ensured they were delivered to organized crime in an efficient way. Why take the *Guardia Nacional* away from the *Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana* and place it under the control of *SEDENA*? Because you believe that *SEDENA* is likely to perform more effectively.

All of this said, the fact that AMLO trusts the military to perform non-military functions does not detract from the fundamental illegitimacy of both AMLO's tasks and the military's performance of the missions required by those tasks. In addition, the fact that a wide majority of the population supports the military's continued role in the public security function – given the lack of any viable alternative – does not make AMLO's taskings of the military

any less illegitimate. What these realities make clear is that Mexico's continuing insecurity challenges are not being addressed effectively, and having to resort to the armed forces underscores the years of failure to develop more effective political, economic, justice, and law enforcement institutions.

This ties into the final civ-mil question, the relationship between the political class and the military. Put differently, the continued reliance on the Mexican military is due to civilian leadership failing to adequately build civilian staffed and civilian led institutions. The building blocks of a country's institutions all come from a common source – the country's society. Individuals chose whether to go into the private or public sector, and those who chose the public sector have a range of options as well. Even if one ascribes to the culture-explains-corruption argument, which might help explain the rampant corruption present throughout much of Mexican society and institutions, that begs the question of why a few institutions appear to have markedly lower levels of corruption. Nonetheless, the unique manner in which the Mexican military

ensured its relative autonomy and independence by promising its absolute loyalty and subordination to the president essentially isolated the armed forces from the rest of the political class. Unlike the U.S. where much of the political class is at least somewhat aware of the armed forces, the relative isolation of the Mexican military from both the broader society as well as the political class was well established from the 1940s through the 1990s (with key exceptions, of course). This relative isolation has lessened over the years, both by the military's strong presence in disaster relief efforts as well as the public security expansion post 2008, but the relationship between the broader political class and the military remains at arm's length.

## Final Thoughts

Years ago, while serving as a young military attaché in Mexico in the early 1990s, still learning about the complexity of the Mexican armed forces, I asked a general officer why they were the outlier among other military departments in a region where the majority were under the control of a civilian defense minister. He smiled knowingly and asked, me, "Deare, are you familiar with the PRI?" I replied that I was. He continued, "If that is true, then surely you wouldn't want to put this powerful instrument under the direct control of a PRI politician. You have seen what they have done with all the other country's institutions." A fair point, I thought at the time. Thirty years later I confess that given the nature of the reality of Mexican politics, the general's point remains valid.

The symbiotic relationship between the president and the Mexican armed forces might appear on the surface to give the preponderance of power to the commander-in-chief. He can task them with any number of missions, however illegitimate, and be confident that the military will obey. And yet the military retains almost complete independence and control over its internal affairs with scant external oversight. The argument could be made that over time – and AMLO has only exacerbated this reality – that the Mexican government is increasingly weak relative to the military, and the military's political power continues to grow. This is not to suggest that the military is seeking increased political power, yet it continues to accumulate nonetheless. Until the Mexican social, economic, and political elite begin a process to build effective, credible, and trustworthy civilian oversight mechanisms, this imbalance of power will continue.

Curiously enough, although Defense Secretary General Sandoval has become a very powerful individual as he leads *SEDENA*, precisely because of all the tasks that the army, the air force, and now the *Guardia Nacional* must do. And given that AMLO is disinterested in attacking organized crime, *SEDENA* may be held responsible for AMLO's failings. If violence and insecurity continue to hold at near record levels, and if AMLO does not allow the military to go after organized crime and drug trafficking organizations in a more effective fashion, the society may in fact hold *SEDENA* partly responsible for those failings.

A final comment. The equilibrium of the post-*Revolución* period, and in particular the post-1946 military pact with Miguel Alemán, has proven to be quite resilient for many years despite its imperfections. It survived the student protests and insurgency movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the Zapatista uprising, political assassinations, and even the indifference of Vicente Fox. All previous presidents understood the limits of what the armed forces could and should do,

and relied on other state institutions – including a federal police force, *Gobernación*, the *Estado Mayor Presidencial*, the intelligence services – to help keep things in check. AMLO has largely dismantled many of the other security related institutions, and simultaneously strengthened the military, primarily *SEDENA*. The previously established equilibrium has been upset; there are no guarantees that the current imbalance of power generated by AMLO’s own hubris can be sustained through the end of this *sexenio*. It remains to be seen how this ends.

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