



More than Neighbors

New Developments in the Institutional Strengthening of Mexico's Armed Forces in the Context of U.S.-Mexican Military Cooperation

By Iñigo Guevara

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"With Mexico, very, very strong, quiet military-to-military relations" ... "This is a relationship that has been many decades in the making. Just go back - just for an example - go back to World War II. It doesn't start with us. It will not end with us."

-U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis¹

Strategic Reasoning for Closer U.S. -Mexico Military Ties

Despite the deep cultural and economic diversity of North America's 486+ million inhabitants, the interconnectedness of the three countries means that they all face, to various degrees, the same threats, which range from serious to existential. Existential threats have long been narrowed to a nuclear war with Russia, to a much lesser degree China, and the now aspiring North Korea. The lack of an existential threat from the south has meant that Mexico was not a priority for the U.S. defense community.

Mexico's non-interventionist interior-looking foreign policy, the lack of an external threat, and an extremely complex politico-military relationship also meant that the defense relationship with the United States was cordial, but distant over several decades. Since the 1980's, the Mexican Navy and Air Force did source their token conventional fighting capacity from the United States: a squadron of tactical jet fighters and a flotilla of second-hand destroyers and frigates; however, this was mainly out of convenience rather than a strategic decision to develop binational defense ties. The post-Cold War environment brought about an emphasis in the non-existential, yet serious threats to North America, including terrorism and drug trafficking, and this is where the relationship began to change.²

With strong commercial and economic ties cemented by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and fostered by strong bilateral political will, the U.S. and Mexican defense establishments have been drawn closer together in the past 10 years than ever before. This is a very young relationship which

¹ [Media Availability by Secretary Mattis en route to Mexico](#), DoD, 15 September 2017.

² For a deeper understanding of the changes in the relationship, the author highly recommends: Deare, Craig [A Tale of Two Eagles](#), Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

has matured extremely fast, mainly due to its strong institutional foundations. Gaining a deep understanding of cultural—including historic—Mexican sensitivities helped bring this relationship to an extremely resilient place, a place where the binational leadership has been able to withstand the current political statements emanating from the White House, which began with the sharp anti-Mexican rhetoric of the 2016 Trump Presidential campaign. The limits of that resilience, however, remain to be tested as the current administration of President Peña Nieto has exercised strategic patience in its response to the rhetoric. A less disciplined and more populist or nationalist Mexican response would likely have led to a deterioration of that relationship. The 2018 Mexican Presidential elections will be strong on emotions, and all political parties will be expected to take a strong position on Mexico's relationship with the United States.

The bilateral defense relationship has a chance to survive and continue to grow if it remains handled by career professionals that have a serious understanding of its importance. Greater collaboration between Mexico and the United States is emerging as part of a greater Mexican participation in regional security.

The Mexican military mindset has long focused on domestic operations, with little concern on the global stage; however this has begun to change, in the same manner in which Mexico is aspiring to be a more active player in the international arena and to transform into an emerging power. The following sections highlight a number of rationales for Mexico to adopt a more strategic international focus and strengthen military cooperation with the United States in particular.

Economic Interdependence

From January to November 2017, Mexico was the United States' third largest trading partner overall. Mexico sold goods worth USD 289 billion to the United States and bought goods worth USD 223 billion from the United States for a combined USD 512 billion figure over 11 months.³ Indeed, there is a USD 66 billion deficit—but let's remember that Mexico's much lower income population (127 million) is almost a third of the U.S. population (323 million), so Mexico imported USD 1,750 of U.S. goods per person, while the United States imported only USD 894 per person. As a 'customer', Mexico bought more U.S. goods than the next four largest trading partners (all close military allies): Japan, Germany, South Korea, and the United Kingdom combined, which in total bought USD 205 billion. If we add the next trading partner, France, the figure would be only slightly higher than what Mexico bought, at USD 235 billion. The trade deficits with that block of five U.S. allies sums USD 153 billion.⁴ It is an exercise in rigor to compare U.S. trade with China, which as of November 2017 was the United States' largest trading partner with USD 577 billion. Of these, China bought USD 116 billion from the United States (half of what Mexico bought) and sold USD 461 billion to the United States (twice of what Mexico sold), leading to a trade deficit of USD 310 billion in China's favor. Clearly overall trade alone is not reason enough to establish a bilateral military alliance, so other aspects need to be considered.

³ These were the latest figures available from the U.S. Census Bureau as of 14 January 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, [Top Trading Partners 2017](#), accessed 14 January 2018.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, [Top Trading Partners 2017](#), accessed 14 January 2018.

Target by Default

The threat of a nuclear attack on the United States impacting Mexico has long been ignored by the Mexican defense community, which has traditionally chosen a Chamberlain-style approach to that scenario. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to believe that Mexico's oilfields, border water supply, and aerospace supply-chain hubs would not be a strategic target for any serious U.S. adversary. Mexican defense planners should keep in mind that an attack against the United States would very likely also target Mexico's critical and economic infrastructure, therefore establishing joint defense plans should be on the horizon.

The Counter-Terrorism Filter

Terrorism remains a serious threat to the region, particularly the continental United States (CONUS). A non-state actor or hybrid dirty bomb, be that nuclear, biological, or chemical (NBC), smuggled into the United States using illegal migrant routes has long been a nightmarish scenario for doomsday planners. Mexico's security forces therefore are an indirect filter that protects the U.S. homeland. As of January 2018, there is no known open source evidence that indicates any type of successful terrorist infiltration of the United States via Mexico's immigrant smuggling routes; however, there is no guarantee that non-state armed groups will not keep trying.

Close military and security cooperation fosters easy intelligence sharing at all levels and, as such, is an invaluable tool for dealing with terrorism threats.

An NBC detonation anywhere in the CONUS, regardless of the delivery route or method, would also have a profound impact on Mexico either because of geographic proximity or resulting from environmental debacle which would lead to refugee displacements, along with severe economic and humanitarian repercussions. It would also directly affect the large number of Mexican and Mexican-American populations living in the CONUS. In such a case, as well as with major natural disasters that lead to humanitarian crisis, even the most prepared State will require immediate assistance, and in both countries, the armed forces are the only institutions trained, positioned, and equipped to carry out significant relief operations in times of national disaster.

The Expanding Demography

In 2015, there were 58 million Hispanics living in the United States. Of these, some 63 percent are of Mexican descent, which account for about 36 million people (32 percent of these where born in Mexico). The next largest group are Puerto Ricans, of which there are 5.4 million.⁵ Hispanics became the largest

⁵ Flores, Antonio, [How the U.S. Hispanic population is changing](#), Pew Research Center 18 September 2017.

racial groups in California⁶ and Texas,⁷ surpassing the Anglo population in the two largest states in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Likewise, there is a growing American-Mexican population in Mexico. Despite its deteriorated security situation, Mexico continues to be a preferred destination for American retirees (both legal and illegal) that seek the comfort of life, liberty, good weather, and the pursuit of affordable healthcare in their golden years. The last official figure (2010) reported that 738,000 Americans lived in Mexico, with current estimates ranging around 1 million.⁸ While plagued with the most violent year in the past two decades, Mexico still remains the second most desirable destination for Americans, after Costa Rica, according to 'The World's Best Places to retire in 2018.' In addition, some 600,000 U.S.-born children live in Mexico, with a large increase due to reverse migration by their parents, either through deportation or voluntary return after the U.S. economic downturn of 2008. These 600,000+ dual citizens may not grow-up speaking English or playing (American) football, but they are all U.S. citizens.⁹

With this strategic reasoning, Mexico and the United States have become conjoined twins whether the political leadership in either country like it or not. Separating them could be extremely dangerous for both.

Current Challenges for the Mexican Military

The Mexican military has begun a profound transformation process in an effort to respond to two very difficult challenges:

- 1) **Increase external engagement:** In accordance with a shift in Mexico's foreign policy, the armed forces have been ordered to transition from observer to active participant status seeking a leadership role in specific spaces within the international system. Spearheading Mexico's contribution to international security includes a myriad of new capabilities that need to be developed, from logistical to doctrinal, including a transformation of the institutional mindset.
- 2) **Improve internal presence:** the armed forces are required—by public necessity—to maintain and professionalize their contribution to internal security, continuing to support civilian law enforcement agencies, in specific cases leading operations against trans-national organized crime, and create an infrastructure designed to secure Mexico's ports and coasts.

Challenge No. 1: Increase External Engagement

The Mexican armed forces have long been an internally focused force. Mexico's foreign policy was guided by the non-interventionist Estrada Doctrine since 1923. This non-intervention policy meant that the armed forces were not required to participate in foreign operations, including peacekeeping. That policy took a sharp turn in 2014, when President Enrique Peña Nieto announced at the 69th UN General Assembly that Mexico would begin to participate with military forces in international peacekeeping operations.¹⁰

⁶ United States Census Bureau – [California](#), accessed 14 January 2018.

⁷ Texas Department of Health Services, [Texas Population 2017 \(Projections\)](#) accessed 14 January 2018.

⁸ [Casi un millón de estadounidenses vive indocumentado en México](#), El Diario, 5 March 2017.

⁹ [Niños ciudadanos Americanos que viven en Mexico](#), Pulso, 22 May 2015.

¹⁰ General Assembly of the United Nations, 24 September 2014.

Mexico's highly respected career diplomatic corps have been strong proponents of strength through multilateralism; therefore, it is not a surprise that Mexico's military diplomacy will try to balance—wherever possible—bilateral engagements with a heavy dose of multilateral activities.

As a brief introduction to the non-Mexico reader, Mexico's defense architecture is *sui generis* and complex in that its Army and Air Force report to a Ministry of National Defense (SEDENA – Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional) while the Navy reports to the Ministry of the Navy (SEMAR – Secretaria de Marina), both of which are led by a four star Army General or Navy Admiral who have equal cabinet-level ministerial positions and both report to the President, who is commander in Chief of all the armed forces. There is no Joint Chief of Staff-type of organization and each ministry functions independent of the other. Both secretaries are “defense” ministers and are the highest position in the military chain of command in their services, therefore they both chair defense (political/policy) and military (strategic-operational) levels. There is an increasing degree of inter-agency coordination and a recent move towards coordination – rather than jointness.

SEDENA's and SEMAR's approach to international cooperation remains in essence independent of each other as each ministry may have different objectives. While they now usually consult with one another and tend to coordinate their participation in international activities, this has been the result of a presidential order facilitated by good personal chemistry between the current SEDENA/SEMAR leadership and not necessarily a leap in the institutional framework. Coordination has proven successful on several issues and their combined international agenda during 2017-2018 has mostly adhered to the following objectives:

1. Maintain and where possible improve the invigorated relationship with the United States.
2. Increase presence in relevant multi-lateral organizations.
3. Strengthen influence in Central America and institutional ties with Colombia.
4. Contribute to UN peacekeeping commitments.
5. Strengthen bilateral cooperation with other countries within and outside the hemisphere.

The Mexican military will try to maintain foreign engagement that is balanced between its relationship with the United States and the rest of the world; however, much like Mexico's foreign trade, the large scale of the U.S. ‘market’—in this case market being the large U.S. defense establishment—, as well as the close geographic and increasing cultural proximity, and a U.S. willingness to cooperate, will make the U.S. relationship the most significant in Mexico's foreign military activities.

Love in Times of Cholera: The U.S.-Mexico Military Relationship

U.S.-Mexico military cooperation expanded significantly during the Felipe Calderón administration (2006-2012) and suffered a very brief pause in 2013 as the incoming administration of Enrique Peña Nieto took a breath to understand the depth and complexity of how the relationship had evolved. After a few adjustments, the Peña Nieto moved forward with a slightly different approach, initially more distanced from the United States, but very soon deepened even further.

While the Peña administration made a clear push towards increasing its engagement on the world stage, the newfound closeness with its very capable and willing U.S. military counterparts took a predominant space in the Mexican military's international outreach. This is far from a surprise, since in addition to its position as the most technologically advanced military force in the world, the U.S. armed forces are among the most advanced at effectively interacting and connecting culturally and logistically with others. The U.S. military is highly skilled at the 'plug-and-play with others' game or, at least, encourage others plug-in and play relatively easily.

In 2015, U.S. Army North and SEDENA launched a series of Regional Border Commander's Conferences (RBCC). This was a step up from the previous Border Commander's Conferences (BCC) which had been held regularly since 1987.¹¹ While the BCC are more tactical, involving representatives from multiple organizations, the RBCC's are focused on establishing links between U.S. Army North and Mexico's three norther-border Military Region Commanders:

- II Military Region with its HQ in Mexicali, Baja California
- IV Military Region with its HQ in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon
- XI Military Region with HQ in Torreon, Coahuila

Figure 1. Mexico's Military Region Organization

Región Militar	Cuartel General
I	Distrito Federal
II	Mexicali, Baja California
III	Mazatlán, Sinaloa
IV	Monterrey, Nuevo León
V	La Mojonera, Jalisco
VI	La Boticaria, Veracruz
VII	Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas
VIII	Ixcotel, Oaxaca
IX	Cumbres de Llano Largo, Guerrero
X	Mérida, Yucatán
XI	Torreón, Coahuila
XII	Irapuato, Guanajuato



Source: [SEDENA](#)

¹¹ [U.S. Army North hosts Regional Border Commanders Conference](#), U.S. Army North Public Affairs, 4 March 2016.

The RBCCs serve to engage at a strategic level with the exchange of information on common threats - weapons trafficking, drug trafficking, and response to natural disasters- and propose joint solutions that can be undertaken at the regional level.¹²

The mutual trust further improved as a result, and in July 2016, Mexican and U.S. paratroopers from the Fusileros Paracaidistas Brigade (FUSPAR-Paratroop Riflemen) and the 82nd Airborne conducted a series of combined jumps at Mexico's Santa Gertrudis National Training Center as well as Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Just a month after that, both armies undertook the first simultaneous battalion-level training exchange with elements from the U.S. 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team from the 4th Infantry Division (1st SBCT 4th ID) training in Santa Gertrudis, Chihuahua, and Mexican troops training with the 1st SBCT 4th ID at Fort Carson, Colorado.¹³

Coinciding with the U.S. 2016 Presidential Elections, U.S. NORTHCOM hosted a round table discussion on bilateral military cooperation with its SEDENA and SEMAR counterparts on November 8-10, 2016.¹⁴ The meeting was followed up with the regular RBCCs between ARNORTH in late November 2016, January, and March 2017.

The U.S.-Mexico military relationship has been maintained at a high-tempo despite the Oval office's threats of NAFTA collapsing or a border wall being erected. To a large degree, this has been due to the efforts of all the relevant stakeholders, including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. NORTHCOM, ARNORTH and other components for the United States, and a very clear response in kind from SEDENA and SEMAR. The relationship has been nurtured at several levels, including

- High-level trust building
- New and continued bilateral agenda-setting meetings
- Information and intelligence sharing
- Procurement

The Difficult Art of Maintaining Trust

Within weeks of assuming office, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis clearly stressed the importance of the U.S.-Mexico defense relationship and his willingness to improve cooperation during his introductory phone call with Secretary of National Defense, General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, and Secretary of the Navy Admiral Vidal Soberón Sanz on February 7, 2017.¹⁵

The March 2017 RBCC was the first meeting to take place during the Trump administration and both sides where clearly keen to salvage the bond despite the upheavals of the U.S.-Mexico relationship at the political level, which had turned from serious statements to Twitter comments as the main means of

¹² [U.S. Army North hosts Regional Border Commanders Conference](#), U.S. Army North Public Affairs, 4 March 2016.

¹³ Buchanan, Jeffrey, [In-depth defense of the homeland](#), US Army, 8 September 2016.

¹⁴ Quinto Informe de Labores, SEDENA, P.105.

¹⁵ [Readout of Secretary Mattis' Call with Mexico Secretary of National Defense General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda and Secretary of the Navy Admiral Vidal Soberón Sanz](#), DoD, 7 February 2017.

expression. President Peña Nieto canceled a planned meeting with President Trump on January 26 after President Trump announced a plan to move forward with building a wall between both countries and suggested that if Mexico was not willing to pay for the wall it would be better to cancel the meeting.¹⁶ The goal of the RBCCs thus became “to maintain interoperability between the two nations and continue to build a strong partnership.”¹⁷

Secretary Mattis followed up by hosting the SEDENA and SEMAR secretaries on May 19-23, 2017, along with Canada’s Defense Minister Harjit Singh, for the Tri-lateral Defense Ministers of North America Conference, which included a full honors parade.¹⁸ Joint military exercises were also preserved and the 82nd Airborne’s/FUSPAR July 2017 jump took place as planned.¹⁹ In September 2017, Mattis attended Mexico’s Independence Day celebrations in Mexico City. This was the first time that a U.S. Secretary of Defense attended Mexico’s September 15 national festivity commonly known as El Grito (The Shout – of Independence).²⁰

¹⁶ [Mexican president cancels meeting with Trump](#), CNN, 27 January 2017.

¹⁷ [Border Conference Strengthens Partnerships, US Army North](#), 9 March 2017.

¹⁸ [Honors Parade](#), DoD 22 May 2017.

¹⁹ [American, Mexican armies train together](#), The Fayetteville Observer, 12 July 2017.

²⁰ [Media Availability by Secretary Mattis en route to Mexico](#), DoD, 15 September 2017.

Chart: Mexico Participation in Bilateral and U.S.-led Multi-Lateral Exercises 2001-2017

Exercise:	Description:	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
UNITAS-P	Combined multi-national task force (Pacific)	Observer Status	Full Participant	Observer Status	Observer Status	Observer Status	Observer Status	Observer Status	Observer Status	Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant	Observer Status	Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant
UNITAS-A	Combined multi-national task force (Amphibious)									Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant			Full Participant		Full Participant
UNITAS-C	Combined multi-national task force (Caribbean)			Full Participant										Observer Status				
Trade winds	Caribbean cooperation														Observer Status	Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant
BOLD ALIGATOR	Joint Amphibious Operations											Full Participant	Full Participant		Full Participant	Full Participant		Full Participant
Dawn Blitz	Amphibious Operations															Full Participant		Observer Status
RIMPAC	Bi-annual Maritime Security												Full Participant		Full Participant		Full Participant	
PANAMAX	Panama Security										Observer Status	Full Participant	Full Participant		Full Participant	Full Participant		Full Participant
Navaja	Special Forces Training																	Full Participant
Amalgam Eagle	Bi-annual airspace security															Full Participant		Full Participant
Ardent Sentry	Natural disaster												Full Participant	Full Participant				Full Participant
82 nd / FUSPAR	Airborne troop jump																Full Participant	Full Participant
RBCC	Regional Border Commander Conference															Full Participant	Full Participant	Full Participant
SAREX USA/MEX	Binational SAR exercise												Full Participant					Full Participant
QUICKDRAW PACIFIC-EX	Exercise in support of NAMSI													Full Participant				Full Participant

Key:

Observer Status	Full Participant
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New points of interaction were also established. Both nation's Army academy's soccer and sprint football teams faced off against each other in what was described as a "unique military cooperation event" in Mexico City on December 1, 2017. The sporting event "was intended to build esprit de corps and promote comradery between future military leaders and defense partners" according to Lt. Gen. Jeffrey S. Buchanan, Commander of the San Antonio-headquartered U.S. Army North.²¹

On the naval front, SEMAR and the U.S. Coast Guard began a series of meetings to strengthen cooperation on information sharing and training related to maritime law enforcement, maritime security and protection in November 2016.²² The contact between both forces has traditionally been close, but it has intensified as SEMAR began to prepare to create its own Coast Guard-style organization, the Dirección General de Capitanías de Puerto y Asuntos Marítimos (Harbor Masters and Maritime Affairs General Directorate).

After several coordination exchanges between the USCG and SEMAR, on July 11, 2017 Admiral Soberon and USCG Admiral Paul Zukunft signed the revised MEXUS pollution response contingency plan. The MEXUS plan has last updated in 2000 and the signing was meant to demonstrate both countries commitment to cooperate in a time of crisis.²³

The direct link to the USCG further strengthened U.S.-Mexican naval cooperation. Over the past few years SEMAR fully embraced U.S. military cooperation and established liaison officers to NORTHCOM's HQ in Colorado, SOUTHCOM's HQ in Florida, Joint Inter-Agency Task Force South (JITFS) in Key West, Florida, U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet in San Diego, California and Atlantic Fleet HQs in Norfolk, Virginia.

From Aid Recipient to Paying Customer

Mexico's defense procurement increased conservatively during the administration of President Peña Nieto, Mexico's goal was to address issues of obsolescence as well as to create new capabilities. While Mexico's procurement sources have been traditionally sparse and relatively inconsistent, the Peña administration continued and strengthened a trend—which began in the previous Calderón administration—that sought to align SEDENA and SEMAR on specific equipment acquisitions. The idea was to eventually standardize procurement of equipment, including aircraft and land vehicles, so that both institutions could obtain cost-benefit synergies and efficiencies on logistics and training. While the United States donated equipment during the Calderón administration as part of the Mérida Initiative, the Peña Nieto administration rapidly sought to transform Mexico's status from aid recipient to full paying customer.

²¹ [United States, Mexico to Engage in Unique Military Cooperation Event](#), U.S. NORTHCOM, 30 November 2017.

²² Quinto Informe de Labores, SEMAR p.15.

²³ [Coast Guard, Mexican navy sign joint pollution response contingency plan](#), USCG 3 August 2017.

U.S.-sourced systems, which were ordered or continued to be delivered during the 2016-2018 period, include:

- **Sikorsky UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters:** 26 were procured by both SEDENA (18) and SEMAR (8). Delivery of the last six for SEDENA is pending delivery in 2018 while SEMAR received the last five of its complement during 2017. The UH-60M is the standard U.S. Army Aviation transport.
 - **USD 1+ billion**
- **AM General HMMWVs tactical vehicles:** The Mexican Army continues to receive top-up batches of Humvees from a significant 3,500+ order placed in 2015. SEMAR has also procured a smaller quantity (50) of up-armored versions to equip its Special Operations Forces. Although it will eventually be replaced by the Oshkosh JLTV, the HMMWV will remain the standard U.S. military light tactical vehicle for several years to come.
 - **USD 500+ million**
- **Beechcraft T-6C Texan:** Both SEDENA and SEMAR continue to take deliveries of close to 80 of these light turboprop aircraft which serve in the U.S. Air Force and Navy as the Joint Primary Trainer Aircraft System (JPTAS). Both SEDENA (60) and SEMAR (17) employ the “T-6C+” version in a close air support and armed interdiction role as they are well suited to undertake interceptions of the type of light aircraft employed by smugglers.
 - **USD 750+ million**
- **Beechcraft King Air 350ER:** Used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, communications and maritime patrol, SEDENA (8) and SEMAR (8) continue to take delivery of at least 16 of these twin-turboprop aircraft which are fitted with satellite communications and forward-looking infra-red (FLIR) systems. The Mexican examples are similar to the MC-21W Liberty tactical intelligence gathering aircraft flown by the USAF and the Multi-role Enforcement Aircraft (MEA) flown by the U.S. Customs and Border patrol.²⁴
 - **USD 140+ million**

Interestingly, the procurement of non-U.S. sourced systems also coincide with those adopted by U.S. military and security agencies:

- **Airbus CN235MP Persuader maritime surveillance aircraft (Spain),** of which six have been delivered and a further four remain on order pending delivery for 2018, are Spanish-built maritime patrol aircraft similar to the HC-144 Ocean Sentry medium-range surveillance aircraft operated by the U.S. Coast Guard.²⁵
- **Airbus AS565MBe Panther helicopter (France):** The latest naval version of the French-built AS565 Panther twin engine military helicopter of which 10 were ordered in 2014 and deliveries concluded during 2017 is a newer version of the same helicopter operated by the U.S. Coast Guard, where it is known as the MH-65 Dolphin Short-range recovery helicopter.²⁶

²⁴ [Air and Marine Operations Assets](#), CBP, accessed 27 January 2018.

²⁵ [HC-144 Medium Range Surveillance Aircraft, USCG Acquisition Directorate](#), accessed 27 January 2018.

²⁶ [MH-65 Short Range Recovery Helicopter](#), USCG Acquisition Directorate, accessed 27 January 2018.

- **Grob G120TP trainers (Germany):** The Mexican Air Force selected the Grob G120TP as its basic trainer and procured 25 which have been delivered to the Military Aviation School in Zapopan, Jalisco. The U.S. Army and USAF subsequently selected the G120TP to provide initial-entry fixed wing training via an external contractor in 2015.²⁷
- **Damen Stan Patrol 4207 coastal patrol vessel (Netherlands):** The Mexican Navy continued to take delivery of pending orders for up to 14 Tenochtitlan-class coastal patrol vessels from Mexican Navy shipyards; although slightly smaller than their Sentinel-class USCG counterparts, the Dutch-designed Bollinger-built Damen Stan Patrol 4708 Coast Guard cutters, both vessels have a similar design.

Operating similar equipment allows both countries to increase their interoperability which in turn leads to additional opportunities for cooperation in several sectors, from joint training, maintenance support, doctrine development, lessons learned sharing, and easier exercise connectivity to eventually combined deployments. Mexico is not likely to standardize entirely based on U.S. equipment, given a host of considerations, including the need for lower-tier systems—particularly naval and aerospace—which are not necessarily offered by the U.S. defense industry—the CN235MPA and AS565MBE’s are good examples—but rather seek a U.S.-NATO-interoperable concept in which its systems are compatible allowing for easy(er) integration.

While Mexico has so far not launched procurement of much needed higher-tier systems, such as fighter, medium transport, and airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft, radars, armored fighting vehicles, and artillery systems, it has launched development of the much needed frigates to replace its ageing fleet of second hand ex-U.S. Navy frigates and destroyers through the Patrulla Oceanica de Largo Alcance (POLA-long-range ocean patrol vessels) program. What is interesting to note, is that while the design and combat systems have been sourced from the Netherlands and other mostly European contractors, its weapons systems will be of U.S.-origin.

The launch of the first of an eventual total of eight frigates from the Salina Cruz shipyard in Oaxaca during 2018 will allow the modernization of Mexico’s blue water component. The SIGMA 10514, 2,570-ton light frigate is expected to be commissioned in April 2020²⁸ at which point it will be armed with the US-sourced Mk.54 torpedoes, Block 2 Rolling Airframe Missile (RAM) self-defense missiles and RGM-84L Harpoon Block II surface-launched missiles.²⁹ What is noteworthy, is that the U.S. policy justification on the authorized export of these weapons states: “A determination has been made that the Government of Mexico can provide substantially the same degree of protection for the sensitive technology being released as the US Government.”³⁰ This last statement is a vote of confidence and a turning point as to the US government’s perception of Mexico as a military partner.

²⁷ [Grob to train U.S. Army Fixed-wing aircrew](#), AIN online, 17 June 2015.

²⁸ [La Secretaría de Marina - Armada de México impulsa la Industria Naval con la Patrulla Oceánica de Largo Alcance \(Pola\)](#), SEMAR, 17 August 2017.

²⁹ [Mexico –Harpoon Block II Missiles, RAM Missiles and MK 54 Torpedoes](#), DSCA News Release, 5 January 2018.

³⁰ [Congressional Record Volume 164, Number 5](#) (Tuesday, January 9, 2018).

An eight-frigate fleet would potentially allow for five ships to be deployed in the Pacific and the remaining three ships in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean to equip the Pacific and Gulf Destroyer Flotillas, which are currently equipped with ships that have surpassed their operational life. These more capable longer-range systems will allow the Mexican Navy to push its patrol boundary significantly, appropriately contributing to surveillance of North American sea lanes and approaches. It also provides Mexico with the ability to deter a potentially hostile vessel on the periphery of its perimeters as well as to deploy a modern conventional warship to contribute to an international maritime-security task force around the globe, signaling a significant contribution to international security.

Embracing Multilateralism

The Mexican military's multi-lateral agenda includes increased participation in regional organizations and conferences: Mexico joined the System of Cooperation among American Air Forces (SICOFAA) in 2013 and in 2014 joined the Central American Armed Forces Conference (CFAC) with observer status. It also increased its participation, significantly, at the Washington DC-based Inter-American Defense Board and Inter-American Defense College. As a result, Mexican personnel assigned to these institutions increased from 11 in 2013 to 23 by 2018.³¹

Mexico participates in the tri-lateral Defense Ministers of North America Conference since it was established along with the United States and Canada in 2012,³² and the Presidency of the multi-lateral Conference of Defense Ministries of the Americas (CMDA) for 2017-2018³³ In April 2017, Mexico co-hosted along with NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, the Central American Security Conference (CENTSEC) in Cozumel.³⁴

The Mexican armed forces deploy military officers to the following international institutions:

- Military advisor to the United Nations mission in the United States since 2008 (New York).
- Military advisor to the United Nations missions in Switzerland since 2008 (Geneva).
- Read Admiral deployed to the SOUTHCOM-sponsored/Colombia-hosted International Counter-Narcotics Maritime Analysis Center CIMCON (Cartagena)
- Brigadier General as Program Manager of the Cyber Security program at the OAS Inter-American Committee against Terrorism (CICTE) since April 2017(Washington DC)
- Major General who was elected as President of the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) for the period June 2017-May 2019 (Washington DC)³⁵
- Brigadier General as Chief of Studies at the Inter-American Defense College (IADC) from July 2017 (Washington DC)

³¹ General Cienfuegos address to the XXIX Meeting of Mexican Ambassador and Consuls 2018, 8 January 2018.

³² [North American defense ministers launch joint security forum](#), Reuters, 27 March 2012.

³³ [XIII Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas](#), SRE, accessed 13 January 2018.

³⁴ Ommanti, Marco, [Mexico Co-Hosts Central American Security Conference for the First Time](#), Dialogo, 27 April 2017.

³⁵ Junta Interamericana de Defensa, [Biografia del Presdiente](#), accessed 7 January 2018.

- Military advisor to the Mexican mission to the Organization of American States (Washington DC)³⁶

Coincidentally, the United States is either a host or a major supporter of most multi-lateral military organizations in which Mexico is increasing its participation; therefore, increased participation in multi-lateral organizations will also reinforce Mexico position in its bilateral relationship with the United States.

UN Peacekeeping: From Defense Diplomacy to Troops on the Ground

While Mexico has sought to increase its defense diplomacy by filling key positions in multi-lateral organizations, participating, hosting and chairing conferences and forums in the short term, it will need to actually contribute ground troops and assets to multi-national operations if it plans to raise its profile as a serious contributor. Mexico has so far deployed a limited number of observers and is in the process of establishing a Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) training center. Mexico's approach to peacekeeping has been a phased engagement:

Phase 1 involved the deployment of officers as observers on multiple missions. From 2015 and up to January 2018, SEDENA and SEMAR had deployed about 60 SEDENA and SEMAR personnel to support the Mission Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), United Nations Stabilization Mission In Haiti (MINUSTAH), United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)³⁷, and the UN-backed Special Political Mission to Colombia, to monitor the Peace process. That phase is ongoing.

Phase 2 includes the establishment of a Peacekeeping Operations Joint Training Center (CECOPAM), which is expected to begin training in 2018-2019.³⁸ That phase will launch with the inauguration of CECOPAM, expected in 2018. CECOPMA will also be able to train civilian government personnel and foreign students.

Phase 3 is expected to see the deployment of a joint SEDENA/SEMAR battalion-sized peacekeeping unit as early as 2020.³⁹

Increased Global footprint: expanding bilateral relationships

As part of significantly increasing its external presence SEDENA and SEMAR have increased the number of Defense Attaché Offices (DAO) abroad. Since 2014, SEDENA opened DAO's in Australia, Belgium, Egypt, Dominican Republic, India, Indonesia, Japan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turkey. As of January 2018, it is analyzing opening DAO's in the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Vietnam.⁴⁰ SEMAR for its part fields 22 Naval Attaché Offices with the latest opening in Turkey.

³⁶ OAS Permanent Mission delegation, accessed 9 January 2018.

³⁷ [México renueva personal militar de operaciones de paz](#), Excelsior, 28 May 2016.

³⁸ [México desea ampliar su participación en operaciones de mantenimiento de la paz de la ONU de manera gradual](#), CINU, 15 March 2017.

³⁹ [México incrementará su presencia en las operaciones de mantenimiento de paz](#), United Nations, 1 December 2016.

⁴⁰ General Cienfuegos address to the XXIX Meeting of Mexican Ambassador and Consuls 2018, 8 January 2018.

Towards a Compact Blue Water Force

Mexico's Navy has had a cabinet-level ministerial position since 1942. That was an institutional response to a then severely underdeveloped naval force. Having its own (albeit limited) budget and direct access to the Commander in Chief has allowed the Navy to develop as a relatively efficient, yet compact force. Its conventional military capabilities are very limited, mostly from a lack of direct external military threats and from a foreign policy legacy that has restrained its infrastructure and activities. Unlike every other large -or even medium- navy in the hemisphere, it lacks a submarine component. It also lacks any type of significant power projection capability such as a landing platform dock or a large amphibious ship. Its larger ships, all former Bronstein and Knox-class ex-U.S. Navy frigates, are devoid of missiles and employed mostly as large patrol ships. The POLA program seeks to alleviate that concern and provide the long-term life that new custom built ships deliver.

For its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) patrol role, the Mexican Navy did develop a modern and efficient surveillance capability and even a relatively successful shipbuilding capacity. Astilleros de Marina (ASTIMAR-Navy Shipyards) in Tampico, Guaymas, Coatzacoalcos, and Salina Cruz build modern interceptor craft, logistics and coastal patrol vessels under license from Swedish and Dutch shipbuilders, and they have also designed and developed the 1,680-ton Oaxaca-class Ocean Patrol Vessel (OPV) equipped with onboard helicopters and interdiction boats.

In practical terms, the Mexican Navy remains a large EEZ patrol force with some very limited blue water capacity. However, change is in the air; Mexico's increasing maritime security requirements –both at home and abroad- are forcing its Navy to evolve. The current plan foresees SEMAR developing a compact, but modern, Blue Water Navy composed of current-technology light frigates supported by a replenishment ship on each coast by 2030; along with a much more efficient Coast Guard force that can undertake port security, naval policing, and maritime law enforcement duties.

Challenge No. 2: Improving its Internal Presence

Creating a Coast Guard

Illegal activities in Mexico's ports have spiraled upward as violence intensified in-land. SEMAR took over control of the Port of Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan, in November 2013 to guarantee security and continuity of operations. The port had become a hotbed of corruption and illegal operations from drug smuggling of cocaine and methamphetamines to the unsanctioned export of minerals and import of heavy machinery—mainly to and from China.⁴¹ The Navy's port presence was almost immediately announced as “indefinite” as investigations led to further evidence of deep corruption and cartel activity including a 10% informal tax on all legal commercial deals.⁴²

A similar situation was identified in other ports and SEMAR took over control of all operations in Manzanillo during April 2014, and began to consider the need to undertake similar actions in the Pacific-coast ports of Ensenada, La Paz, Guaymas, Mazatlan, Puerto Vallarta, Acapulco, and Manzanillo.⁴³

SEMAR along with the Secretariat of the Treasury and Public Finances (SHCP) developed “Operation Control”⁴⁴ which involved a phased plan to take over control of the ports:

1. Replacing the Integral Port Administrator and Harbormaster
2. Substituting the Tax Administration Service (SAT) personnel with new SAT personnel
3. Increasing security with the establishment of a marine garrison
4. Maintaining continuity of commercial operations
5. Creating a unified Maritime Authority

The operation yielded a 30 percent increase in tax collection by the SAT; a 12 percent increase in commercial volume in Lazaro Cardenas; 57 percent increase in taxes; 31 percent volume in Manzanillo within the next twelve months of SEMAR taking over control of the ports.⁴⁵ The operation required that SEMAR create the Unidades Navales de Protección Portuaria (UNAPROP-Naval Port security Units), which are Marine infantry units tasked with maritime police functions.⁴⁶

The road to transfer to SEMAR the legal authorities to become the sole National Maritime Authority began in April 2014 and culminated on 18 June 2017, when SEMAR assumed Coast Guard functions, absorbing the responsibilities previously held by the Secretariat of Communication and Transportation.⁴⁷

SEMAR had formally created the Dirección General de Capitanías de Puerto y Asuntos Marítimos (DIGECAPAM- General Directorate of Harbor Masters and Maritime Affairs) on 1 March 2017 to take over

⁴¹ [Michoaca: golpe al negocio minero ilegal](#), Milenio, 4 March 2014.

⁴² [Lázaro Cárdenas: tocado, no hundido](#), El País, 7 November 2013.

⁴³ [La Secretaría de Marina toma el control del puerto de Manzanillo](#), La Jornada, 2 April 2014.

⁴⁴ [SEMAR, en coordinación con Aduana Marítima de Manzanillo, asegura más de 58.77 kilogramos de cocaína en Manzanillo, Col.](#), SEMAR, 6 December 2015.

⁴⁵ Senado de la Republica, Presentacion a Integrantes de la Camara de Senadores, February 2016.

⁴⁶ [ACUERDO SECRETARIAL NÚM.039](#), DOF, 31 March 2014.

⁴⁷ Quinto Informe de Labores, SEMAR, p.8.

SCT's attributions as well as undertake all Coast Guard functions and establish control over all Mexican ports.⁴⁸ By September 2017, SEMAR had created 15 UNAPROPs; however, it will require a significant amount of resources over the next six years to improve security and port management in the 103 ports throughout Mexico.

The Internal Security Debacle

In the most ideal scenario, public security in Mexico should be handled by a multi-tiered policing system composed of municipal, state, and federal law enforcement agencies and backed up by a robust judicial system. In this ideal scenario the military would maintain a minor role in supporting police forces with specific counter terrorist and homeland defense activities, and deploy, in coordination with law enforcement agencies, at the three levels under specific legal mandates.

In that ideal scenario, municipal police would be trained and equipped for community-focused policing; their main activities would be dealing with traffic infractions, accidents, and neighborhood patrols, usually on foot. They would serve mainly as mediators, problem solvers, and of course would become the first line of protection for citizens that may be victims of violent crimes. As a result, they will enjoy their community's trust, enabling them to coordinate with state and federal police to provide up-to-date information and first-hand knowledge of developments in neighborhoods where security deteriorates and requires specific engagement. Municipal police patrol usually on foot, horseback, bikes, motorbikes, and of course patrol cars. Besides sworn officers, they employ sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, engineers, architects, even artists and historians, to understand how their communities develop and can become more secure.

State Police, on the other hand, are trained and equipped to patrol state highways, and, when needed, will deploy to support municipal police that have been overrun by local criminal activity. A separate state-level investigative police force will be available to investigate major crimes, particularly murder, kidnapping, extortion, and armed robberies. They are robust forces with constant vetting and ongoing training. State police deploy small specialized units such as SWAT teams, K9, tactical and strategic analytical units.

Federal Police are trained and equipped to solve federal crimes, patrol federal highways, protect critical infrastructure, and when needed, supplement state and local forces with intelligence-led operations. They fly drones and helicopters, deploy much more specialized teams, and have robust intelligence capabilities that include cyber and scientific departments. Like their state and local peers, they employ a broad number of professions to understand security needs from a holistic approach. They combat large organized crime, international drugs, arms, and human trafficking organizations. These police forces are led by career officers, which have had decades of experience in their respective organizations, they are fully vetted, well paid, and constantly scrutinized for their actions.

⁴⁸ ACUERDO SECRETARIAL NÚM. 14, DOF, 3 March 2017.

The main enabler for all of these police forces is trust from the population they serve. Unfortunately, this ideal scenario is not aligned with Mexico's reality—not by a long shot. Mexico's reality is completely different.

Creating an Intermediate Force (or failing to)

Countries around the world operate intermediate forces. These are military-trained forces that support law enforcement operations under civilian control during peace time, but convert to a military role in case of war. The Spanish Guardia Civil, Italian Carabinieri, Chilean Carabineros, French Gendarmerie, Colombian National Police and the US National Guard are all examples of these. In the case of the United States, the state-level National Guards serve mostly as an additional military reserve, but in cases of a disaster, public necessity, or major internal civil unrest may be called in as a subsidiary security component.

In 2006, the Mexican Federal Police numbered 7,000 and was deemed undermanned, underequipped and incapable of sustaining significant national operations. Hence the need for the Army, and eventually the Navy—mostly through its reformed marine infantry battalions and Naval Intelligence units soon became involved as well. Attempts to create a specialized Federal Support Forces Corps made up of 10,000 elite troops were blocked by Mexico's Congress citing the concern that the new force would become a Pretorian Guard.⁴⁹

As part of the 2012 presidential political campaigns, then candidate Enrique Peña Nieto announced that his administration would create a National Gendarmerie. The original idea of the National Gendarmerie comprised creating an initial 10,000-strong force composed of roughly 7,500 army troops and 2,500 marines which would become the nucleus of what would be a 40,000-strong force by 2018.⁵⁰ That force, would add to a 50,000-strong Federal Police and that 90,000-strong force would allow it to gradually replace regular army and marine units deployed on counter-organized crime operations.

The design soon ran into trouble as the chain of command for the new force was far from clear. SEDENA preferred a joint SEDENA/SEMAR command to operate under Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB)—a civilian institution—mandates. For its part, SEGOB, or more specifically the recently reorganized National Commission for Security (CNS), preferred a model in which SEDENA and SEMAR transferred the 10,000 troops to a Federal Police-run force. SEDENA and SEMAR remained hesitant and as there were no orders issued by the President to comply, the end result was that the Gendarmerie was absorbed by the CNS.⁵¹

Three years into the Peña administration, the idea of moving the center of gravity of internal security operations to SEGOB—specifically with the creation of the Gendarmerie and the expansion of the Federal Police—had been diluted. The federal government's efforts to strengthen and professionalize civilian police forces had lapsed. There was little to no move to support the nationwide strengthening of the state police forces and the Gendarmerie remained in very early stages of formation.

⁴⁹ [Riesgo de que el cuerpo de fuerza especial se use para reprimir: experto](#), La Jornada, 20 September 2007.

⁵⁰ [Mexico's New Gendarmerie: Security Game Changer or Window Dressing?](#) Insight Crime, 29 July 2014.

⁵¹ Fracasada la Gendarmería Nacional, ahora una policía fronteriza, Proceso 1970.

The exact operational model for the new Gendarmerie underwent several revisions. The 5,000-strong force which had been stood up in August 2014 experienced severe growing pains,⁵² mainly as its mandate drifted from an initial focus on providing protection for Mexico’s economic cycles—rural and highway deployments—, to shifting towards a “social proximity police,” and eventually adopting an environmental protection role.⁵³ The new force suffered from a lack of funding and general attention, with its manpower remaining under 5,000 as of 2018.

The Federal Police’s expansion—which had grown from under 8,000 to more than 40,000 during the 2006-2012 period and created new specialized units- stagnated. If we add the recruitment of the 5,000 gendarmes to the Federal Police, then its manpower had negative growth during the 2012-2018 administration; the 45,000 or so Federal Police and gendarmes are only half of the original 90,000 target.

The federal agencies are not the only ones to have stagnated; a SEGOB diagnosis of State-level police forces published in December 2017 determined that Mexico has 51 percent of the minimum state police manpower recommended by UN standards, which means that state police forces require recruiting and training an additional 115,000 officers.⁵⁴

Institutional Trust: A Numbers Game

In Mexico, the most trusted ‘public’ security force is the Navy, followed closely by the Army, and they have become the main, or rather, last line of defense for the population they serve. The need for the Armed Forces to remain in the streets, in a public security function is not ideal...it is reality.

Institution	2014	2017
Navy	84%	87%
Army	81%	85%
Federal Police	58%	65%
Attorney General	51%	57%
State Police	44%	55%
Judges	47%	54%
Municipal Police	38%	50%
State Investigations Police	42%	50%
State AG	42%	50%
Transit Police	36%	43%

Level of trust in security institutions 2014-2017 Source: INEGI ENVIPE survey 2014-2017⁵⁵

⁵² [Segundo Aniversario de la División de Gendarmería](#), Policía Federal, 22 August 2016.

⁵³ Carrasco, Jorge, Fracasada la Gendarmería Nacional, ahora una policía fronteriza, Proceso 1970.

⁵⁴ [México tiene la mitad de policías que necesita y con malos salarios, reconoce Gobernación](#), Animal Politico 26 December 2017.

⁵⁵ [Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública \(ENVIPE\)](#), INEGI, accessed 28 January 2018.

In the last three years, the population's level of trust in all security and judicial institutions has increased, with the military continuing at the top by a significant margin. This does not mean that the military should be in charge of all security, but given the security situation, the state of police reform, and simply police manpower SEDENA and SEMAR will likely remain for several years to come as a subsidiary component.

As of January 2018, there are 52,000 army troops conducting security operations, plus several thousand of Marine and Navy Special Forces undertaking similar activities, from the Naval Police operating in Veracruz to intelligence-led Special Forces units undertaking high-value targeting operations.⁵⁶ Pulling them out without a proper replacement would leave a large void which will likely be filled by either crime or vigilantes.

The Military Police Model

From 2014, SEDENA planners began to devise a model to replace regular army units with a military force that is properly trained and equipped to conduct public security operations. The Army's Military Police was viewed as the most compatible existing type of unit that could be adapted to undertake security operations. Up to then, MPs were charged with the traditional maintaining internal discipline within SEDENA, policing army bases and installations, directing military traffic and providing base perimeter security. By 2014, there were three MP brigades, all of them in or around Mexico City:

- 1st Military Police Brigade in Campo Militar No.1A, Mexico City
- 2nd Military Police Brigade in Base Aerea Militar No.1 (Santa Lucia), Mexico State
- 3rd Military Police Brigade in San Miguel de los Jagüeyes, Mexico State

The initial experiment began in the Northeast, where SEDENA launched what it called a "shared responsibility model" that included a tripartite approach to setting up a new regionally-focused Military Police unit. Thus, began the construction of a base for the 4th Military Police Brigade in Escobedo, Nuevo Leon. The base would be able to host three military police units and a special operations battalion comprising some 3,200 personnel. The brigade would be able to deploy on counter-crime operations in Nuevo Leon as well as neighboring Coahuila, San Luis Potosi, and Tamaulipas. The model envisioned that for the new force to be effective, it needed to include direct participation of public and private stakeholders. Construction of the new base would cost over MXP\$600 million of which the Nuevo Leon business-sector financed MXP\$150 million, the four state governments financed MXP\$220 million and SEDENA financed the remaining MXP\$234 million.⁵⁷

In May 2016, the 21st MP battalion the first unit of the newly formed 7th MP Brigade arrived in Guachochi, Chihuahua an area hard hit by cartel activity.⁵⁸ That same month Coahuila and Durango requested the establishment of a similar unit in the Comarca Lagunera, a region which has been a hotbed of cartel activity, including inter- and intra-cartel wars for control of the La Laguna metro area that includes the

⁵⁶ Quinto Informe de Labores, SEMAR, p.26.

⁵⁷ [Cuartel para el ejercito, con avance de 65%](#), Milenio, 16 August 2015.

⁵⁸ [Ceremonia de arribo al personal del 21/o. Batallón de Policía Militar a Guachochi, Chih.](#), SEDENA, 27 May 2016.

municipalities of Torreon and Matamoros (Coahuila) and Gomez Palacio and Lerdo (Durango). The Coahuila state government donated 300 hectares for construction of a new base in San Pedro de las Colonias.⁵⁹

In June 2016, SEDENA undertook an internal reorganization creating the Military Police General Directorate and therefore significantly raising its status within the armed forces.⁶⁰ By September 2016 the amount of total MP personnel had increased from 6,145 (2012) to 14,319 and more states were requesting to speed up the establishment of MP brigades.⁶¹ As of November 2017, the following MP units had been established or were in the process of creation:

- 4th Military Police Brigade in Escobedo, Nuevo Leon
- 6th Military Police Brigade in Puebla
- 7th Military Police Brigade in Chihuahua
- 11th Military Police Brigade in San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila⁶²
- 12th Military Police Brigade in Irapuato, Guanajuato⁶³

Personnel from regular army units are being re-trained to create new MP brigades, to eventually create at least one MP brigade per military region. The target will be 12 MP brigades each with around 3,200 troops, which closely resembles the 40,000 figure originally mentioned for the National Gendarmerie.⁶⁴ However, the formation of these MP brigades has not been aligned with additional resources or recruitment and has resulted in the cannibalization of regular infantry, artillery, cavalry, and Special Forces units to re-train them for the law enforcement support role. The Military Police Special Corps therefore will be in a position to evolve into an intermediate force similar to the Colombian National Police or the Italian Carabinieri—military-run law enforcement services that report directly to the Ministry of Defense.

⁵⁹ [Construirán Brigada de Policía Militar en San Pedro, Coahuila](#), Fronte net, 12 May 2016.

⁶⁰ [DECRETO por el que se reforman, adicionan y derogan diversas disposiciones del Reglamento Interior de la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional](#), DOF, 15 June 2016.

⁶¹ [La Policía Militar asumirá tareas de seguridad pública](#), La Jornada, 10 October 2016.

⁶² [Inauguración de la 11/a. Brigada de Policía Militar](#), SEDENA, 29 November 2017.

⁶³ [Avanza proyecto de la Brigada de la Policía Militar en Irapuato](#). 54 por ciento de avance en su construcción, Guanajuato State Government, 27 September 2017.

⁶⁴ [La Policía Militar asumirá tareas de seguridad pública](#), La Jornada, 10 October 2016.

Strategic Challenges Ahead

The Mexican armed forces will face significant challenges ahead as they face growing pressure to increase their external footprint as well as significantly improve its internal security operations. Budget allocation has traditionally not been aligned with the number and variety of roles it has been entrusted, therefore it has been left to develop multi-role forces out of necessity. Its expanded mandate, however, including a new legal framework deepening its internal security role requires ever more specialized and professional forces instead of the flexible, adaptive 'jack of all trades' model it has been forced to develop.

Secretary Cienfuegos outlined the need for SEDENA to develop the following capabilities:⁶⁵

- Increase troop mobility
- Strengthen the Air Surveillance System
- Develop technologies in cyberspace; and
- Re-organize and extend the military's regional footprint
- Consolidate the National Defense Policy

While not specifically stated, SEMAR's force development needs include:

- Recapitalize its Pacific and Gulf of Mexico long-range patrol POLA flotillas
- Consolidate on all ports as the National Maritime Authority

Operational needs are therefore vast and will likely surpass budget availability unless there is a significant policy shift in that direction. Increasing troop mobility requires a constant upgrade of its land vehicle fleet as well as expansion of its airlift capacity. Replacement of its medium transport squadron with a new generation of aircraft with long reach and medium cargo will be required to replace its tired C-130's as well as an expansion of its tactical transport fleet, which is in relative good shape due to recent procurement of C295M/W and C-27J transports. Rotary-wing assets will also need to be addressed as the legacy fleet of Mi-17, Bell 206 and Bell 212 helicopters reaches the end of their operational life.

As to strengthening its air surveillance, SEDENA will need to invest in expanding its radar network, which is currently only effective in the southeast of the country, covering the airspace approach from Central America. The need for five 3-D long-range radars and a new command and control system on its northern border has been acknowledged but has failed to materialize during the 2012-2018 administration. The availability of modern combat and surveillance aircraft also remains relatively low and with the sole squadron of F-5E/F supersonic fighters' readiness is reduced due to obsolescence. SEDENA needs to begin to plan for replacement with a modern multi-role fighter, or tier of fighters, that can adequately defend its portion of North America's airspace from any potential foe for the next 30 to 40 years. The same goes for SEMAR's frigate program, which will require continuity and a clear message on the number of ships requested so that the initial capital investments needed to create the local shipyard and shipyard supply infrastructure translates into cost benefit impacting the program in the medium to long-term. Besides missiles, these frigates will require embarked multi-role helicopters.

⁶⁵ General Cienfuegos address to the XXIX Meeting of Mexican Ambassador and Consuls 2018, 8 January 2018.

Cyber capabilities have progressed slightly, with SEMAR creating the Unidad de Ciberseguridad (UNICIBER- Cyber security Unit) in March 2017,⁶⁶ while SEDENA continues a multi-phase program to establish a Cyber Operations Center⁶⁷ and both forces are engaged in developing a joint vision on cyber defense and cyber security. Nevertheless these remain in their infancy.

These basic modern defense capabilities –radars, frigates, C4, cyber, helicopters, and transport and fighter aircraft- require very large investments and are therefore subject to public scrutiny as well as internal and external political pressure. Implementing modern procurement practices that link defense spending to national development are practices that use defense procurement to create local jobs, establish international industrial supply chains, and promote technology and knowledge transfer programs that will directly strengthen Mexico’s labor, economy, and education sectors.

Mexico has traditionally allocated a very small portion of its GDP to the armed forces, with the 2018 combined defense budget—that included a USD 750 million boost for financing infrastructure and delayed procurement programs still not taking defense spending beyond 0.6 percent of GDP, compared to 3.4 percent for the United States, 0.9 percent for Canada and a Latin American average above 1.1 percent.⁶⁸

SEDENA and SEMAR therefore need to effectively and transparently communicate their equipment and infrastructure needs and how these align with the country’s foreign and domestic security missions.

As to the need to reorganizing its regional footprint, SEDENA will need to consolidate and significantly improve its Military Police model. Replace or recruit replacements for the troops commissioned from regular units and launch a comprehensive outreach campaign to effectively communicate -domestically and internationally—the distance and limitations of its internal security role. Under no circumstance should the Military Police be used—ever—to clash or disperse any type of political or social protest. SEDENA will need to open up and promote the external design and development of the appropriate democratic oversight mechanisms for its internal security role.

SEMAR will face a similar situation as it will require a manpower expansion and a specialization of functions, technology-savvy rapid response units, and robust surveillance, cyber, and communications networks to establish a credible port security infrastructure.

What is important to note is that all of these challenges, including the internal and port security roles have a direct or indirect impact on U.S. National Security.

While resources may be scarce, requirements vast, manpower short there are some positives: public opinion and leadership qualities are high. Mexico’s armed forces enjoy one of the hemisphere’s highest degrees of trust from their citizens and this has been the product of an institutional mindset that has distanced itself—as much as possible—from politics and politicians and maintained close to the common

⁶⁶ Quinto Informe de Labores, SEMAR p.46.

⁶⁷ Quinto Informe de Labores, SEDENA p.102.

⁶⁸ Jane’s Defence Budgets 2017-2018.

citizen. The high level of trust will remain only if this bond is intact, hence the need to maintain very strong accountability mechanisms.

In sharp contrast, civilian security institutions have seen their development interrupted and low levels of trust due to leadership instability, caused mainly by political affiliations. For example, the Federal Police saw significant growth during 2006-2012, during which its leadership was stable; since then it has been under the command of three different commissioners, each with a different vision. In even sharper contrast, the Attorney General's Office, which should be the cornerstone of the fight against organized crime and corruption, has been headed by no less than seven AGs between 2006 and 2018–19 month average.

Last but not least, there is a new generation of Generals and Admirals that is now taking its place within the senior leadership ranks that have developed their entire professional military career through a thorough meritocratic-based promotions system and have witnessed democratic transition over the past two decades. This generation holds post-graduate studies from public and private universities and has a deep understanding of global affairs. What is more hopeful is that the generation below them is even better prepared. These are generations of military officers that have seen their institutions used as antibiotics to fight most of Mexico's serious illnesses. They have seen organized crime rise to unseen levels infiltrating Mexico's security agencies, political parties, and at times even their own ranks. They have also witnessed deep changes in their institutional mindset and therefore understand the value and opportunities of international cooperation, of Mexico's geopolitical location, and what it means to be more than good neighbors.

The biggest challenge ahead for the U.S. defense establishment will be to maintain and continue to grow this increasingly important relationship despite a potential adverse political scenario in which Mexico's political leadership's strategic restraint ends.

“...the biggest hurdle is establishing trust, not only with the Mexican government, but with the people.”⁶⁹

- Admiral Mike Mullen

⁶⁹ [CJCS addresses homeland defense, Mexico at chairman's call](#), NORAD, 27 May 2010