

Obama and Mexico, Security Forever! Why Not?

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde*



Mexico is having a very hard time trying to deal with its insecurity problems, and President Obama will certainly find it difficult to deal with the serious security threats coming out of Mexico. We can accept the fact that the current administration has taken on what may be the most titanic task in the history of the Mexican state in its fight against the scourge of organized crime. However, faced with the historic danger that the impunity and complicity of those formerly and currently responsible for lending a blind eye to the aims, actions and instincts of the lowest individuals and organizations in the country has put us in, now the state is forced to race against time to show that its sovereignty has not failed, and that as a result, we can, as a nation, aspire to be taken seriously as a partner on the bilateral agenda and in the global arena. The question is not yet whether we are a failed state or not, but if ours is a success-

ful or failed national project. We have before us evidence that in Mexico a viable, sustainable national project has not finished solidifying. Despite their very possible exaggeration, and even the blunders of recent U.S. government reports—see, among others, the Justice Department’s National Drug Intelligence Center’s National Drug Threat Assessment and the CRS Report for Congress: Mexico’s Drug Cartels—they tell us that the prevailing perception among both the U.S. public and decision-makers is that Mexico has gone off the rails in many of the vital areas of national life. And as a result, our mutual security is in danger.

And this is precisely what may reduce the maneuvering room of any well-intentioned politician in Washington who wants to support some kind of way out of the Mexican mess—which is also the United States’ mess. Mexico matters, and it matters even more because its situation represents a real threat to U.S. and Canadian security. And it is here that we find a paradoxical contrast if we consider the recent US\$100-million reduction in the financial assistance provided by the Merida Initiative. Thus, if the Obama administra-

* Director of the UNAM Center for Research on North America (CISAN).



The prevailing perception among both the U.S. public and decision-makers is that Mexico has gone off the rails in many of the vital areas of national life. And as a result, our mutual security is in danger.

tion wants to preserve its national security perimeter—not to mention managing border security—it will have to ask itself with no dissimulation whatsoever to what extent Mexico is a risk for U.S. security. It will have to urgently take both the domestic and external measures needed to prevent a greater escalation of the organized crime threat. These measures cover everything including detecting and dealing with what 2007 estimates put at more than 35 million people who use illicit drugs or abuse medications. Also it will have to confront at home the violent crime plaguing the big U.S. cities, perpetrated by bands of criminals, many of whose members are representatives of the Mexican cartels. And of course a clever strategy will be needed to fight the possession and trafficking of high-powered weapons. There is no need to say that in light of the aforementioned reduction of funds, any initiative has to be optimized on all fronts, including the financial front. Thus the Mérida Initiative's less than US\$1.4 billion offers a poor financial and political solution if we just compare it to the US\$11 billion the United States spends monthly on its failed war in Iraq.

The Mexican government, for its part, far from hunkering down into a defensive, paranoid position as seems to be happening, will have to truly accept the gravity of our crisis and begin to vigorously attack and punish the complicity and corruption of mayors, governors, police and other local authorities on a national level, but mainly on a regional level, which is where the cartels' power breeds. This includes thinking seriously and responsibly about founding a strong, professionalized national police system. Together with this, it is also necessary, of course, to accept the urgency of seriously and thoroughly cleaning up the state institutions today penetrated by the cartels. All this demands that Mexico have an efficient political intelligence unit, since today it has not been proven that the enormous budget that has been earmarked for it is justified. Lastly—and this is truly a towering task awaiting the Mexican state—our government must propose a security and integration agenda debated nationally and as a result of a national consensus that, while its own, must be constructed jointly with and with reference to the United

States, and must be profoundly multidimensional. In that sense, it is very probable that the Merida Initiative has already been surpassed by current events, as can be seen in the aforementioned Washington reports. I think that this will be the only way of responding to the narrative and cutting off in practice the U.S. government's regrettable conclusion—not so very far from our reality—that says, "Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone."¹ It is Obama's task to inform Calderón very soon to exactly which response they are referring.

Now, the Mexican government may not have heard about this yet, but the Obama administration may well be waiting to act toward Mexico until the latter comes up with its own constructive, comprehensive, relatively serious agenda that makes sense and bypasses the usual Mexican lamentations. We cannot deny in this area the luxuries Mexico has given itself every time it has a chance to reshuffle its bilateral agenda with Washington. Now is when it must be done. Los Pinos and Tlatelolco need to invert their priorities and move ahead of Obama in proposing a coherent bilateral framework of cooperation to exert pressure on the new president for him to act in a coordinated way to deal with this grim common problem.² It is no exaggeration to argue that the urgent need for an efficient response is the result of what is perhaps the greatest crisis in public life since the Mexican Revolution.

It should also be mentioned that this urgent situation becomes even more pressing when we see how differently Canada and the United States figure out their common positions on common problems. At the end of his short visit to Ottawa last February 19, President Obama and Prime Minister Harper held a joint news conference which showed a clear empathy between the two leaders. It was significant how fast their reflexes were when they talked about the future of their societies in the framework of their belonging to NAFTA: with few mentions of Mexico, both were pleased to have so many points in common. For example, the Canadian government emphasized that "more than 7 million American jobs directly depend on trade with Canada."³ Also noteworthy was Harper's strong statement that "threats to the United States are threats to Canada. There is no such thing as a threat to the national security of the United States which does not represent a direct threat to this country."⁴ That is, they posed the defense of security as a common issue intimately linked to their different domestic situations, and they looked to the future in an affirmative way, proposing viable

solutions to each other. If the U.S. and Canada apparently forgot about Mexico in their stands on security, perhaps they should be reminded that Mexico is central to the equation for guaranteeing regional security.

This visit makes us reformulate the questions we have always asked of Mexico in the context of the fact that the bilateralization of the trilateral relationship occurs especially at moments of crisis, and that Canada takes better advantage of it in its relationship with the United States: is this the result of Mexico's passiveness because of its inability to explain its viability as a credible participant in the dialogue? Or, on the contrary, is it Ottawa's opportune handling of its relative advantages in its relationship with Washington when it realizes Mexico's weakness and uses it in its favor? Or, finally, is it just evidence of the continuation of the overall asymmetry that has characterized the three partners' relationship?

In any case, it would seem that we cannot save ourselves from the periodic curse of bilateralism when Mexico needs it least, but also when it is most difficult to defend the trilat-

eral character of the North American Free Trade Agreement using convincing arguments. If this is going to be the eternal fate of our trade partnership with the United States and Canada, Obama probably does not need to review NAFTA and marginalize Mexico to third place, strengthening his alliance with Canada. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ United States Joint Forces Command, *The Joint Operating Environment. Challenges and Implications for the Future Joint Force*, available on line at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2008/joe2008_ifcom.pdf.
- ² Los Pinos is the name of the Mexican president's official residence and offices, and Tlatelolco is the area where Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations has its offices. [Editor's Note.]
- ³ "Obama tackles thorny economic, military issues in Canada trip," *CNN International*, February 19, 2009, available on line at <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/19/obama.canada/?iref=hpmostpop>.
- ⁴ "Harper reassures U.S. over border security," *Toronto Star*, February 19, 2009, on line, available at <http://www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/590482>.