

Security: Obama and Peña Nieto in 2013

Raúl Benítez Manaut*



REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

In this essay, I will deal with the state of the Mexico-U.S. bilateral cooperation program known as the Mérida Initiative, as well as its perspectives, given the changes in administration in both Mexico and the United States. The aim is to analyze the program: its design in 2007 and the way it has evolved during the administrations of George W. Bush (2007-2008) and Barack Obama (2009-2012), and see if the switch in parties in office in Mexico and the advent of Obama's second term in the United States will bring any changes in the initiative.

To analyze the scope of cooperation on security issues between the two countries, we must take into account the following elements: the balance sheet of the war against drug trafficking and its implications for Mexico's national security; the analysis of the increases in Mexico's federal security

budgets; the state of the process of professionalizing the federal police force and the implementation of justice system reforms, plus the role of U.S. cooperation in backing both these reforms; the debate on regulating weapons trafficking and money laundering in the United States, as well as their impact on Mexico; and the trends in cooperation on intelligence and defense issues between the two countries.

FROM SELF-SUFFICIENCY TO COOPERATION POLICIES

When the war on drug trafficking was declared in 2007, the Mexican government requested aid from the United States. As a concrete response, the two countries jointly designed the Mérida Initiative, based on four mainstays: destroying the criminal groups; strengthening Mexican government institutions;

*Researcher at CISAN.

From a list of 37 big criminal bosses, 25 were captured, killed in fighting or extradited to the United States (16 of them). However, it was not possible to detain the most important one, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

and building a twenty-first century border and strong, resistant communities.¹ In all, between fiscal year 2002 and 2012, that assistance for security matters came to US\$1 171 540 170 (see graph).

Today, we can say that all of Mexico’s public security, migration, administration of justice, and intelligence agencies have participated in those assistance programs. For example, to strengthen security and intelligence information exchange between Mexico and the United States, the Investigation and National Security Center (CISEN) cooperates with the National Intelligence Office to reinforce Mérida Initiative activities; with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); with the offices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); the Department of Homeland Security (DHS); the New Mexico office of the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas Program of the Office of National Drug

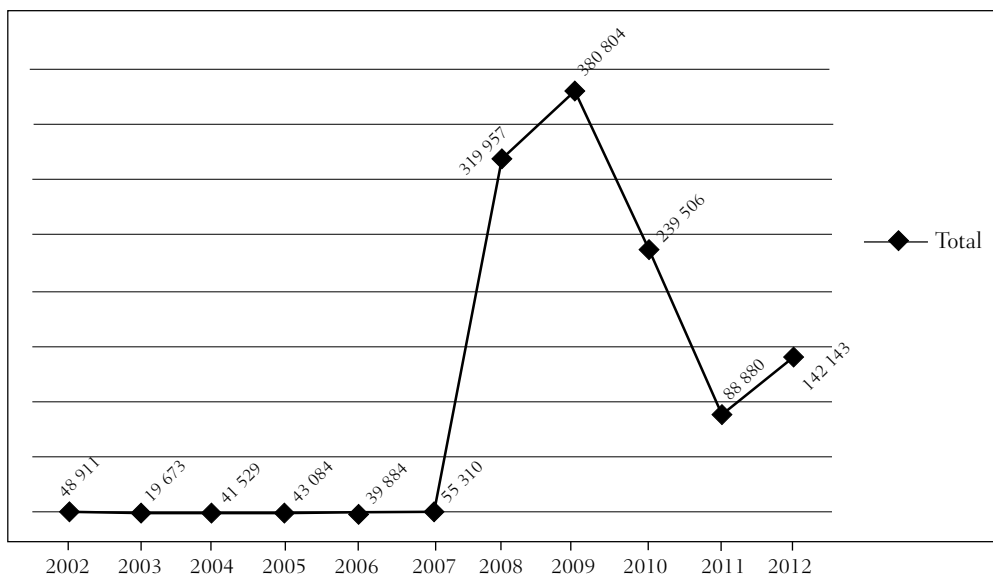
Control Policy; the Texas Department of Public Safety on issues of terrorism and organized crime; and with programs like Global Entry.²

THE LEGACY OF FELIPE CALDERÓN

Six years after Felipe Calderón began the war against drug trafficking in January 2007, the balance sheet is contradictory. On the one hand, the government proceeded to take on the criminal organizations frontally, attempting to strike at their structures vertically, like a pyramid. That is, the essence of the strategy was to cut off the heads of the cartels. From a list of 37 big criminal bosses, 25 were captured, killed in fighting or extradited to the United States (16 of them). However, it was not possible to detain the most important one, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

This strategy led to what some analysts dubbed the “cockroach effect,” that is, the dismemberment of the top structures and the appearance of more cartels, as well as their geographic expansion: they went from six in number to ten from 2006 to 2012, and after being concentrated in four states in 2006 (Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Baja California, and Tamaulipas), they spread geographically, mainly to Michoacán, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Guerrero, and Veracruz.³ However, the unexpected

MÉRIDA INITIATIVE
ASSIGNED RESOURCES BY YEAR (THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS)



Source: Center for International Policy, *Just the facts*.

consequence was the dispersion, and the war among the upper- and middle-level commands for control of the criminal organizations,⁴ and the unbridled increase in the activities of hit men. For example, from 2001 to 2006, crime-related deaths totaled 8 901 according to the National Human Rights Commission.⁵ Between 2007 and 2011, they came to 47 453; 2010 was the year with the largest number of organized-crime-related homicides: more than 15 000,⁶ and in 2012, they totaled 9 913.⁷ So, different sources estimate that during the Calderón administration, a minimum of 60 000 deaths were related to criminal activity, seven times more than the number under the administration of his predecessor Vicente Fox.

Taking into account the priority of the security system in the budget, the Mexican state has seen an unprecedented strengthening of its structures in recent years. Between 2006 and 2012, the budget of the Ministries of National Defense, of the Navy, and of Public Safety, as well as the Attorney General's Office and the CISEN more than doubled, rising from Mex\$55.09 billion in 2006 to Mex\$133.497 billion in 2012. At the same time, the gross domestic product (GDP) grew only 55 percent, increasing from Mex\$9.14 billion in 2006 to Mex\$15.62 billion in 2012. This makes it clear that security is the federal government's priority.⁸ However, doubling the budget for security did not improve the population's safety.

ARMS AND MONEY: U.S. DEFICIT IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME

Of all the weapons in circulation in Mexico, 90 percent come from the United States. Mexican criminal organizations bring them into the country through small-scale operations across land borders using private automobiles.⁹ These weapons are mainly destined for Michoacán, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, and Chihuahua.

According to the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC), of the 45 466 weapons confiscated by federal Mexican authorities between 2004 and 2008, almost 45 percent were registered with the ATF (about 20 800). This demonstrates the hypothesis that Mexico's cartels' main source for purchasing weapons is the United States (see table).¹⁰

The cultural and legal phenomenon that affects Mexicans' security has its origins in the United States, where the free sale of weapons and the self-defense culture, based on the Second Amendment to the Constitution, prevail. One example of how this happens and the difficulties governments

Of all the weapons in circulation
in Mexico, 90 percent come from the United States.
Mexican criminal organizations bring them
into the country through small-scale
operations across land borders.

face in their attempts to stop weapons trafficking was the ATF operation called Fast and Furious, which consisted of tracking arms sold to Mexican criminals in Arizona.

The operation and the failure to trace the weapons were made public, causing a major bilateral problem. Only 700 weapons out of a total of 1 960 were traced, and in Mexico it is argued that 150 civilians were killed with the weapons distributed in the operation.¹¹ The U.S. congressional report analyzing Fast and Furious pointed out that its secrecy and unilateral nature affected the Mérida Initiative's performance.¹²

Mexico maintains that the U.S. federal government should improve its ability to control weapons sales. President Obama, for his part, published his 23-point strategy for weapons control given events in his own country, mainly the massacres in schools. However, the main obstacle is the political clout of groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA). The other factor affecting Mérida Initiative implementation is the limits on controlling earnings from criminal activities whose beneficiaries are favored by the financial system's weak mechanisms for avoiding asset laundering. Cash movements continue to be the main form of this crime, and governments have had a very hard time controlling cash flows.

INTELLIGENCE AND DEFENSE, FUNDAMENTAL AXES OF THE WAR AGAINST DRUGS

In Mexico, the intelligence services were not prepared to fight the criminal organizations. It was an issue on the "risk agenda," but not a very important one. In most cases, these services had tactical and operational intelligence, but lacked what is called "strategic intelligence." In addition, the biggest limitation on the U.S. side to sharing intelligence information with Mexico is distrust, the fear that that information might fall into the hands of a Mexican official who collaborates with the criminal organizations. Despite this, the Mérida Initiative includes a specific budget item for intelligence activities, for

FIREARMS CONFISCATED IN MEXICO BY FEDERAL AUTHORITIES AND TOTAL OF WEAPONS WITH ATF REGISTRATION (2004-2008)				
Year	Individual Weapons	Assault Rifles	Total of Weapons	Total of Confiscated Weapons Registered with the ATF
2004	3 520	2 057	5 577	2 900
2005	3 156	1 959	5 115	5 000
2006	2 487	1 733	4 220	1 800
2007	4 978	4 549	9 527	3 900
2008	9 105	11 916	21 027	7 200
Total	23 246	22 214	45 466	20 800

Source: UNODC, *The Globalization of Crime. A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment 2010*, Vienna, p. 138, www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2010_low_res.pdf. The figures for weapons with ATF registration are UNODC estimates.

example, biometric equipment for the National Migration Institute; Casa planes turned over to Mexico’s navy, equipped with radar to intercept ships and planes coming from South America; data base and software projects for the CISEN; the Constanza project for the Attorney General’s Office (valued at US\$28 million); the postal inspection project for the Ministry of Communications and Transportation; x-ray and gamma-ray machines for customs stations; ion scanners for the Ministry of National Defense; support for building C-4 bunkers; support for the National Policy Registry; software and help for installing it for Platform Mexico (Ministry of Public Safety); polygraph equipment and personnel training; and projects for CISEN network security, among the most important.¹³

POLITICS AND DIPLOMACY IN THE
BILATERAL SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

The most noteworthy case of the way in which politics has affected the appropriate development of the Mérida Initiative came as a result of the information released through Wikileaks. A January 2010 telegram from the U.S. embassy points to a lack of coordination and mistrust of Mexican agencies in dealing with the war against drugs, saying that this is the reason these efforts are failing. It says that there is great tension between the Ministries of Defense and of the Navy and that the latter has made some successful hits, while the

Because of Fast and Furious, the political and diplomatic tensions went to the extreme of creating such anger and lack of communication between the United States and Mexico in 2010 and 2011 endangering the success of the Mérida Initiative.

army reacts slowly and has an “aversion” to taking risks. It also mentions that the entire military strategy implemented in Mexico is ineffective because the tactics used make it impossible to bring the cases to trial, thus benefitting the criminal organizations.¹⁴ Added to this, the political and diplomatic tensions went to the extreme of creating such anger and lack of communication between the United States and Mexico in 2010 and 2011 that they endangered the success of the Mérida Initiative. This even led to the resignation of the U.S. ambassador to Mexico. One of the reasons President Calderón requested that the State Department have him resign was that he had been “invasive and interventionist.”¹⁵

CONCLUSIONS

U.S. assistance has made important inroads, mainly in terms of professionalizing police and members of the justice system

as well as in defense and intelligence. However, the Mexican population does not perceive these benefits; on the contrary, it is frequently said that there is a great humanitarian crisis.

In summary, institutional weakness and corruption in Mexico, and the free sale of weapons and weak controls over money laundering in the United States are the fundamental obstacles to a program like the Mérida Initiative being successful. These factors outstrip the efforts of both governments and are rooted in the political culture of the population of the two countries, which is why the small effort at cooperation and assistance faces great barriers. Another achievement of the Mérida Initiative is that the government and an important part of the Mexican elites recognize the need for international cooperation. This is something new and is transforming the old nationalist ideology. ■■

NOTES

¹ Government Accountability Office, *Mérida Initiative. The United States Has Provided Counternarcotics and Anticrime Support but Needs Better Performance Measures*, Report to Congressional Requesters, Washington, D.C., July 2010, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10837.pdf>.

² Secretaría de Gobernación, *Cuarto informe de labores* (Mexico City: Segob, 2010), p. 21.

³ In Nuevo León, mainly Monterrey, practically no organized-crime-related activity could be detected in 2006, but by the end of 2012, the number of homicides surpassed those in the state of Chihuahua.

⁴ Eduardo Guerrero “La estrategia fallida,” *Nexos*, December 2012, www.nexos.com.mx.

⁵ Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, “Segundo informe especial de la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos sobre el ejercicio efectivo del derecho fundamental a la seguridad pública en nuestro país” (Mexico City: Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2008).

⁶ Presidencia de la República and Procuraduría General de la República, “Base de datos sobre fallecimientos por presunta rivalidad delincuencia,” <http://www.pgr.gob.mx/temas%20relevantes/estadistica/estadisticas.asp>.

⁷ “Ejecutómetro,” *Reforma* (Mexico City), www.reforma.com, accessed January 15, 2013.

⁸ Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, “Presupuesto de egresos de la federación,” several years. “Presupuesto del sector seguridad y defensa por dependencia 2000-2012,” *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2012* (Mexico City: Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia, 2012), p. 145.

⁹ Georgina Olson, “El tráfico de armas de Estados Unidos hacia México,” *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2012*, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁰ UNODC, *The Globalization of Crime. A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment 2010*, Vienna, p. 138, www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2010_low_res.pdf. The figures for weapons registered by the ATF are UNODC estimates.

¹¹ Katherine Eban, “The Truth about the Fast and Furious Scandal,” *Fortune*, June 27, 2012, http://features.blogs.fortune.cnn.com/2012/06/27/fast-and-furious-truth/?hpt=hp_t.

¹² See <http://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/7-31-12-FF-Part-I-FINAL-Appendix-III.pdf>, and Georgina Olson, op. cit.

¹³ *Just the Facts*, <http://justf.org/>.

¹⁴ Wikileaks, telegram 246329, January 20, 2010 (embassy in Mexico; classification: secret).

¹⁵ Wilbert Torre, *Narcoleaks. La alianza México-Estados Unidos en la guerra contra el crimen organizado* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2013), p. 267.