

Strategic Questions for U.S.-Mexico Relations

*by John A. Cope*¹

Mexico is suffering a crisis of public safety that the United States cannot minimize. Murders, organized kidnappings, and corruption rates have reached some of the highest levels in the world. Mexico's government is locked in a violent struggle against powerful drug cartels that are also fighting each other for control of territory, resources, and manpower. The United States is the largest consumer of illegal drugs and the main source of the cartels' high-powered weapons and kit. It also is beginning to suffer some spillover from the violence. The Bush administration accepted some shared responsibility for Mexico's crisis and, in October 2007, jointly announced the 3-year, \$1.4-billion Mérida Initiative (including a small Central American portion) as a new kind of partnership to maximize the efforts against drug, human, and weapons trafficking.

As the level of violence along the U.S.-Mexico border has become sufficiently threatening, President Barack Obama has asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, to review how Washington might do more to help Mexico's forces. But by only looking south, we ignore the seeds of a future domestic problem that have been planted here. If Mexican and other Latin American narco-gangs continue to grow in scope and power within our country, they may become the next-generation irregular challenge to the joint force. The United States and Mexico must find ways to perfect cooperation in the near term and confront a shared security problem together.

Mexico's level of violence escalated in 2008 with nearly 6,300 people killed—many of them tortured and mutilated—up from 2,700 in 2007. The bloodshed and intimidation carried out with impunity suggest that the cartels have sometimes had the upper hand, particularly in the borderlands. In the United States, the gravity of Mexico's situation had little effect on the first tranche of the Mérida Initiative. The package of equipment, software, and technical assistance moved slowly through a reluctant U.S. Congress, where the funding request was reduced significantly and several conditions were imposed. There were few signs of urgency.

These circumstances raise several important questions. Should relations with Mexico be higher on President Obama's foreign policy agenda? How should the administration manifest its

¹ Colonel John A. Cope, USA (Ret.), is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. This essay appeared in *Joint Force Quarterly*, issue 54, 3d Quarter 2009, 71-73.

commitment to this neighbor, which not only shares intimate ties but also harbors memories of unfair treatment? Are there more meaningful and deeper ways to cooperate in addressing a common problem? Will Washington maintain status quo commitment to Mérida while concentrating on preventing drug-related violence from spilling across the border? Will Mexico be driven to a level of national desperation that will force it to undertake long-term reforms to improve government performance and ties with the general population?

The crisis has deep roots. In the 1980s and 1990s, successive governments tended to pursue a “live and let live” response to lucrative, brutal, and well-organized regional cartels. Because they provoked violence, jeopardizing public safety, direct confrontations were minimized. With the demise of Colombia’s main syndicates in the mid-1990s, Mexican “families,” which had worked for the Colombians, took control of domestic drug trafficking. By the end of the decade, higher cocaine flows from Colombia led President Ernesto Zedillo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party to collaborate more aggressively with the United States.

The historic presidential victory of Vicente Fox and his center-right National Action Party (PAN) coincided with dramatic increases in narcotics-related violence. During his administration, drug cartels added profitable methamphetamine and heroin to the more traditional cocaine and marijuana they smuggled in bulk into the United States. New markets appeared in Europe and Mexico itself. The expanding narcotics trade encountered stronger U.S. resistance in the post-9/11 era. Washington’s focus on securing the country from terrorists and illegal immigrants resulted in the construction of barriers along the 2,000-mile border with Mexico and more technology and law enforcement personnel to secure it.

Difficulty moving their product into the United States led to a vicious war within and among cartels for control of corridors and local domination of Mexican markets. This clash introduced ruthless militarized gunmen such as Los Zetas, manned with former members of the Mexican and Guatemalan army. President Fox tried unsuccessfully over 6 years to purge and reorganize federal police forces and rein in organized crime, extraditing captured kingpins to the United States. Urban and rural instability escalated sharply, and a general climate of lawlessness encouraged more kidnappings and other types of criminal enterprise.

Felipe Calderón, also from the PAN, succeeded Fox in 2006. Although Mexican military units lacked the necessary training, President Calderón declared war on drug traffickers by committing the loyal armed forces—using more than 45,000 soldiers—in a series of large scale operations intended initially to restore public order in murder-wracked Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and other cities in northern Mexico. It quickly became apparent that the president actually was fighting to reassert state control over cartel-dominated areas. His ability to sustain government presence will be crucial until programs to improve military capabilities and reform the police at all levels can be accomplished.

The Calderón administration faces formidable obstacles to ending Mexico’s fragmented sovereignty and regaining public confidence. The extent of drug-related corruption across government, especially in local police forces, far exceeds even pessimistic expectations. The sophistication of the criminal groups with their state-of-the-art military weapons and equipment—much of it smuggled from the United States—often outclasses the Mexican military.

Furthermore, the cartels use kidnapping, brutality, and other forms of psychological intimidation effectively. Some community political and business leaders have left their positions or moved their families to the United States.

The seriousness of Mexico's insecurity was captured in the February 2009 State Department travel advisory for Mexico:

Some recent Mexican army and police confrontations with drug cartels have resembled small-unit combat, with cartels employing automatic weapons and grenades. Large firefights have taken place in many towns and cities across Mexico, but most recently in northern Mexico. . . . During some of these incidents, U.S. citizens have been trapped.

Ironically, the advisory appeared as Mexico's tourism industry reported that in 2008, 22.6 million foreign visitors, the majority from the United States, spent \$13.3 billion, an increase of 3.4 percent over the previous year.

As the crisis intensifies in Mexico, Americans are not immune from cartel violence and corruption. Mexican ties to U.S. organized crime groups have long been established. Major Mexican syndicates are now thought to be present in at least 230 American cities. Over the last 2 years, U.S. multiagency counternarcotics task forces have arrested more than 750 members of the Sinaloa cartel's distribution network and 500 from the Gulf cartel. Police link recent assassinations and mass graves in Arizona and New Mexico to the cartels. Phoenix is now ranked the second worst place for kidnapping globally, after Mexico City: 359 kidnappings took place there in 2008, some of them linked to trafficking. The feared spillover of Mexican narcotics-related violence has, in fact, taken place—and is getting worse. Alarm bells are ringing, but a U.S. strategic game plan has yet to emerge.

Despite a prickly past and many differences, the United States and Mexico are interdependent, and they formalized that relationship with the North American Free Trade Agreement. Our border is the historic face of this complex relationship. With its network of power plants and transmission lines, gas and oil pipelines, and linked highway and rail systems, the borderland is strikingly vibrant and productive. There is a constant flow of people and vehicles in the millions. Beyond the border, the realization of greater mutual understanding, and an enhanced and trusting relationship, is a work in slow motion.

This raises additional and substantial strategic and policy questions. What are American objectives? The Mérida Initiative can be reduced to assistance and cooperation, but to what end? How far is Washington willing to go to reduce the American demand for drugs, curtail arms smuggling south, exchange intelligence, and work with Mexico (and Central American states) to attack the cartels' supply link to South America? Is integrated sea and air control over the approaches to North America feasible? In turn, how far is Mexico City willing to go to work intimately with its neighbor to the north, from whom Mexico traditionally has sought to remain independent?