

# Re-Building a Complex Partnership:

The Outlook for U.S.-Mexico  
Relations under the Biden  
Administration



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## Putting Citizens' Security First:

Towards a New Chapter in U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation



**On January 20, 2021, the inauguration of President Joseph Biden has potential to open a new chapter in U.S.-Mexico security cooperation.**

### Key Policy Recommendations

- Transition from an all-out war approach to more strategic and sustainable deterrence policies.
- Implement both preventative and law enforcement programs centered on the many other threats that, beyond DTOs and TCOs, impact citizens' wellbeing.
- Address the socioeconomic roots driving migration from Mexico and Central America.
- Develop a more humane and health-centered approach to the drug problem.
- Tackle corruption and impunity in Mexico by strengthening the rule of law and institutions.

## Introduction

On January 20, 2021, the inauguration of President Joseph Biden has the potential to open a new chapter in U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. Over the last fifteen years, collaboration between the two countries on matters of security has significantly evolved. After a long period characterized by mutual distrust and lack of alignment in the priorities and strategies promoted by these countries, Mexico and the United States reached an unprecedented level of cooperation with the Mérida Initiative (2007-present). This initiative signaled both countries' willingness to recognize security as a shared responsibility that demanded coordinated efforts centered on law enforcement, institution building, and the prevention of violence. Although collaboration has failed to achieve the more ambitious and integral aspects of the initiative, particularly in light of the more defensive and nationalist attitudes advanced by both countries over the past four years, the evolution of the Mérida Initiative points to the importance of working towards a common understanding of security that puts citizens' security at the center.

Recent events, including the arrest and subsequent release of Mexico's former minister of defense, General Salvador Cienfuegos, suggest the need to rebuild bilateral trust and to work towards a framework of collaboration that can address questions of corruption and impunity in ways that are agreeable to both countries. Although several irritants will likely persist during the coming years, including U.S. concerns regarding the rule of law and human rights violations in Mexico and Mexico's strong rejection of U.S. unilateralism, there are several areas that offer far more positive prospects of collaboration. These areas include both countries' interest in addressing the socioeconomic roots of violence and crime as well as in developing a more humane and health-centered approach to the drug problem. If taken seriously by the two governments, these areas may actually present a unique opportunity to advance towards a new chapter in U.S.-Mexico security cooperation that will put violence-reduction and the protection of citizens' security at the center of bilateral efforts.

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The aim of this chapter is to examine the challenges and opportunities faced by U.S.-Mexico security cooperation under President Biden and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). The chapter will first present a brief overview of the main collaboration efforts promoted by Mexico and the United States in the recent past, paying particular attention to the Mérida Initiative and its institutional and programmatic ramifications. This section will discuss the pitfalls and unintended consequences of some of the main security strategies promoted by the Mérida Initiative, especially in regards to the effect that militarized and repressive policies had on the levels of violence and corruption characterizing Mexico's context of insecurity. It will also point at the evolution of this initiative and to the key lessons that its transformation can offer for the future of the relationship. In a second section, the chapter will explore both the irritants and potential areas of collaboration that the new Biden administration presents for the security agenda shared by both countries. It will also offer specific policy recommendations to improve U.S.-Mexico security cooperation in terms of both countries' ability to address the levels of violence, harm, and impunity experienced by citizens on both sides of the border.

## U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: An Overview

Implemented in 2007, the Mérida Initiative represents the most significant security cooperation effort between Mexico and the United States to date. When compared with previous efforts, the initiative stands out in terms of its truly bilateral character, its emphasis on shared responsibility, and the levels of trust and collaboration promoted by both governments. In 1969, for instance, the U.S. government launched Operation Intercept, a unilateral measure that had the explicit aim of shutting down the border with Mexico in order to stop the flow of drugs coming from the south. Although subsequent operations involved more concerted efforts, including operations Canador (1970-1975), Trizo (1975-1976), and Condor (1977-1987), the goals and priorities of these anti-drug policies were by and large determined by the United States.<sup>1,2</sup> With their emphasis on large-scale drug crop eradication programs, especially opium and marijuana, these operations reflected the United States' proclivity to privilege a "supply-side" approach in order to deal with drug consumption and drug-related crimes at the domestic level.<sup>3</sup> This approach contrasted with Mexico's position regarding the drug question. For Mexican authorities, the drug problem was primarily the result of U.S. demand for drugs as well as of the United States' incapacity or unwillingness to control the traffic of arms.<sup>4</sup>

U.S.-Mexico security cooperation remained hindered during subsequent decades. Mutual distrust and the persistent misalignment between these countries' security priorities limited collaboration. More so, U.S. concerns regarding corruption and criminal collusion amongst Mexican authorities constituted a central irritant of the relationship during the 1980s and 1990s. Events such as the 1985 kidnapping and brutal murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena at the hands of Mexican drug traffickers and police, together with the arrest in 1997 of General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, Mexico's anti-narcotics czar in connection to drug charges, contributed to the undermining of U.S.-Mexico collaboration during these decades. For U.S. drug and intelligence officials, it became clear that sharing sensitive information with Mexico could come at a high price, given drug trafficking organizations' penetration of the highest levels of government. For Mexico, U.S. unilateral efforts to decertify Mexico as a trustable "anti-drug ally" were seen as an imposition that illustrated the northern neighbor's arrogance as well as its unwillingness to recognize the "real problem": U.S. insatiable demand for drugs.<sup>5,6</sup>

From its inception, the Mérida Initiative marked a significant evolution in terms of the levels of understanding and collaboration it enabled between the United States and Mexico. Whereas previous anti-narcotic efforts had been primarily promoted by the United States, in this case the initiative resulted from the Mexican government's request to promote greater security cooperation between the two countries. In March 2007, during a meeting with President George W. Bush (2001-2009), President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) expressed Mexico's determination to fight against organized criminal organizations but stated that, in order to be successful, the country needed the United States' collaboration and support. The United States responded to Mexico's demands by authorizing an anti-drug and rule of law assistance package for Mexico, the Mérida Initiative, set to begin in October of 2007.<sup>7</sup> Although launched under Bush's presidency, the initiative continued and was further expanded under President Obama. The initiative also outlasted Calderón as President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) endorsed the basic tenets of the initiative.

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In a clear departure from the defensive and nationalist attitudes of the past, both governments acknowledged that the drug problem constituted a “shared responsibility.” The U.S. government pledged to increase efforts to address the demand of drugs at home, stem the flow of illegal guns coming to Mexico, and tackle money laundering and its connection to organized crime.<sup>8</sup> Mexico, on its part, recognized corruption as a key driver of drug trafficking and insecurity, and fully acknowledged the need to tackle the supply of drugs by dismantling drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) operating in Mexican territory. Although both countries fell short of fulfilling their initial promises, the fact that they were able to find a common ground contributed to overcoming the tensions of the recent past and facilitated bilateral dialogue and understanding.

During the first three years, the initiative focused mainly on combating drug-trafficking organizations and buttressing Mexico’s security and justice institutions through intelligence sharing, technical assistance, and the provision of equipment. The so-called kingpin strategy, centered on the capturing and extradition of DTOs top leaders, became the most visible area of collaboration between the two countries during this first phase.<sup>9</sup> This strategy, which went hand in hand with Mexico’s increasing reliance on militarized operations, reflected both governments’ view that the most effective way to tackle the drug problem was to dismantle the structure of DTOs by neutralizing their main leaders. The underlying assumption was that, by fragmenting and destabilizing their structures, Mexican security forces would have better chances to confront DTOs’ armed power and regain control over the territories that had fallen under the grip of these criminal organizations. Measured in terms of the number of extraditions from Mexico to the United States, kingpin targeting was effective: from a total of 211 individuals extradited under Vicente Fox (2000-2006), the number went up to a total of 587 under Calderón’s administration.<sup>10</sup> However, other indicators, including the flow of drugs entering the United States, the levels of criminal violence in Mexico, and the geographical presence and influence of these criminal organizations, cast a long shadow over this strategy’s effectiveness.

By 2011, both countries agreed to revise the goals of the Mérida Initiative based on the negative consequences that the kingpin strategy and Mexico’s emphasis on militarized and repressive strategies to combat DTOs had yielded. The consequences were manifold. Mexico’s levels of lethal violence increased dramatically. The country’s homicide rate went from a total of 8 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in the year 2007 to a total of 24 in 2011.<sup>11</sup> Although homicide rates decreased between 2011 and 2015, they surged again in the years 2016 and 2017. The upward trend in levels of homicide has persisted, with the total number of people murdered per year reaching record highs between 2018 and 2020.<sup>12</sup> In addition to homicides, violence became more pervasive as high-impact crimes such as extortions, kidnappings, forced disappearances, and massacres escalated in several regions of Mexico. The surge in these criminal activities signalled DTOs’ capacity to diversify and expand their criminal activities as well as to retaliate against the state’s anti-crime efforts.

In March of 2011, for instance, dozens of people were murdered and disappeared in the town of Allende, Coahuila, just a few miles away from Eagle Pass, Texas. The massacre was orchestrated by the Zetas cartel and was driven by rumours that claimed one of its members had snitched information to U.S. authorities. According to a ProPublica investigation, a Mexican federal police unit leaked the information to the criminal organization. Despite having been trained and vetted by the U.S. agency, the unit was compromised.<sup>13</sup>

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This and other incidents shed light on the ongoing networks of collaboration and complicity connecting DTOs and state actors in Mexico, including police and military personnel. As a result of this, U.S. authorities became increasingly concerned with the effectiveness of evaluation and vetting processes that had been implemented with U.S. assistance. As U.S. concerns augmented, so did Mexico's uneasiness with U.S. scrutiny over the integrity of the country's security and justice apparatus. Human rights violations also became a key source of concern and tension between the two countries as incidents of violence and abuse of force perpetrated by the military surged under the context of Mexico's war on drugs.<sup>14</sup> In addition to violence directed against civilians and suspected criminals, targeted attacks against journalists, human rights defenders, and religious leaders suggested a complex web of complicity involving corrupt officials and criminal organizations. Journalists exposing the potential collusion of mayors and state governors have become particularly susceptible to acts of intimidation and violence. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, since 2000, at least 133 journalists have been murdered in Mexico, with 99 percent of these cases remaining unpunished.<sup>15, 16</sup>

As mentioned before, both countries agreed to reformulate the goals of the Mérida Initiative in 2011. Under the new schema, the initiative was organized according to four pillars. Taken together, these pillars reflected a more integral approach to tackle insecurity that accounted for both the structural and institutional determinants of violence and crime. The new four pillars of the initiative were: "1) Combating transnational criminal organizations through intelligence sharing and law enforcement operations; 2) Institutionalizing the rule of law while protecting human rights through justice sector reform, forensic equipment and training, and federal and state-level police and corrections reform; 3) Creating a 21st-century U.S.-Mexican border while improving immigration enforcement in Mexico and security along Mexico's southern borders; and, 4) Building strong and resilient communities by piloting approaches to address root causes of violence and supporting efforts to reduce drug demand and build a "culture of lawfulness" through education programs.<sup>17</sup> Of all these pillars, the last one was perhaps the most significant in that it marked a clear departure from the short-term and repressive strategies of the initiative. This fourth pillar resulted in the implementation of several prevention programs carried out in a number of cities affected by high-levels of violence, including Tijuana, Monterrey, and Ciudad Juárez. Centered on at-risk populations, these programs promoted the creation of jobs, social integration activities, and after-school programs.<sup>18</sup>

The decision to reorient the Mérida Initiative in order to foster institutional reform and targeted prevention was a step in the right direction. It reflected both countries' ability to recognize the pitfalls of the initiative's original scope and the need to adjust its goals accordingly. However, the implementation of the more integral aspects of the

initiative remained feeble. For instance, during the fiscal years 2012-2017, most of the initiative's assistance was directed towards "international narcotics and law enforcement" with only a small fraction of the resources being allocated to the area of "economic support fund."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as of 2017, the U.S. Department of State continued to consider the capture and extradition of top criminal leaders as well as Mexico's apprehension of undocumented immigrants as part of the top indicators of success regarding U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. Beyond these financial considerations, the continuance of security responses based on repressive and short-term strategies reflects both countries' ongoing support for these measures.

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In Mexico, support for an all-out war approach to combat DTOs and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) has remained unabated, despite the promises made by both Peña Nieto and AMLO at the beginning of their terms. President Peña Nieto, for instance, pledged to foster a security policy centered on prevention programs and the protection of victims. In practice, however, he continued to prioritize militarized strategies and kingpin targeting. Peña Nieto's reliance on repressive policies persisted throughout his term, despite the occurrence of high-profile massacres that pointed at the complicity and active participation of the military and other security forces in the commission of human rights violations.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, López Obrador's promises to end the war on drugs by taking the military off the streets, legalizing certain drugs, and offering amnesties for eligible criminals, have remained unfulfilled. Instead, his government has continued to rely on militarized operations and the targeting and extradition of suspected drug cartel leaders. For instance, in 2019, Mexico extradited a total of 58 people and, by February of 2020, it had already completed a total of 30 extraditions.<sup>21</sup> Although these extradition numbers pale in comparison to those reached under the previous two administrations, they show the continuance of a policy (e.g. leadership decapitation) that has shown poor results in terms of its capacity to disrupt the flow of drugs to the United States or homicide levels in Mexico. Most significantly, AMLO's newly created National Guard constitutes a clear indication of the government's intention to secure the military's participation in public security functions.<sup>22</sup> Even though this institution was supposed to operate under civilian control, as of August of 2020, 80 percent lacked training and certification as police officers, and there appears to be little impetus to change this.<sup>23</sup>

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Under the presidency of Donald J. Trump (2016-2020), the emphasis on militarized and short-term strategies became even more acute. Throughout his term, Trump limited the scope of U.S.-Mexico security cooperation by prioritizing two goals: combating transnational criminal organizations and enhancing border security.<sup>24</sup> While the first goal required the continuing implementation of the kingpin strategy, the second demanded the Mexican

government take concrete steps to reduce the flow of migrants coming to the United States. Following U.S. diplomatic and economic pressure, Mexico agreed to step up the control of its southern border and, in what remains a controversial decision, sent the National Guard to prevent migrants from entering the country. According to recent reports, members of the National Guard have been involved in the commission of acts of torture and sexual violence against migrants and asylum seekers, thus going against AMLO's pledge to create a guard that would "guarantee peace, but without excesses."<sup>25</sup>

Trump's plans to defend the U.S. border also included the building of a wall between the United States and Mexico. Although the wall was not finalized and is far from the 2000-mile length wall he promised during his 2016 campaign, it represents the clearest expression of American unilateralism under the Trump administration. The wall, experts agree, would have a marginal effect on reducing illegal drugs and undocumented migration and, instead, is causing severe environmental damage.<sup>26</sup> President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to bring the construction of the wall to an end. In these and other matters, Biden's vision of the bilateral relationship and of how to strengthen security on both sides of the border suggests the possibility of a new era of bilateral collaboration.

## The Future of U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation

On December 15, 2020, the Mexican Congress passed a new security law that will regulate, monitor, and potentially limit the presence and activities of any foreign agent working in Mexico, including U.S. law enforcement officers from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The law, which was criticized by U.S. Attorney General William Barr as a measure that “can only benefit the violent transnational criminal organizations and other criminals that we are jointly fighting,” removes the diplomatic immunity of foreign agents and establishes that any activity performed by such agents in Mexican territory needs to be approved by Mexico’s Foreign Ministry.<sup>27, 28</sup>

The approval of this law happened only a few weeks after the U.S. government decided to drop drug trafficking charges against Mexican General and former Minister of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos, quoting “sensitive and important foreign policy recommendations.”<sup>29</sup> Although AMLO celebrated the controversial decision as a “diplomatic victory” that asserted the country’s sovereignty, several experts on both sides of the border expressed immediate concerns regarding the potential impact of this decision on the impunity and corruption pervading Mexico’s security and justice apparatus.<sup>30, 31, 32</sup> More so, in the view of many observers, Mexico’s resolve to bring Cienfuegos back to the country reflected López Obrador’s increasing reliance on the army for public security functions and his willingness to enlarge its influence and autonomy, despite evidence regarding the military’s involvement in human rights violations in the context of Mexico’s war on drugs.<sup>33, 34</sup>

Both the release of Cienfuegos and the approval of a new law regulating the presence of foreign agents in Mexico offer a window into the prospective irritants that will shape the U.S.-Mexico relationship under the new administration of Joe Biden. Such irritants include Mexico’s defensive and nationalist approach towards the United States, particularly as it concerns the United States’ allegations of corruption, impunity, and human rights violations involving Mexican high-level officials and security personnel. Whereas U.S. concerns regarding the rule of law and the need to reform Mexico’s security sector became subsidiary under President Donald Trump’s presidency, they will likely occupy a central place under the Biden administration, just as they did under the presidency of Barack Obama (2008-2016). As central as these matters are, if pressed by Biden, they may elicit an adverse response from Mexico. In particular, they may provide grounds for the Mexican government to ramp up its defense of sovereignty principles, appealing to long-standing feelings of distrust and discontent towards U.S. interference on domestic affairs.

Although these aspects of the bilateral agenda foretell key challenges for the future of U.S.-Mexico cooperation on matters of security, other key areas offer far better prospects of collaboration. These areas include the promotion of programs aimed at addressing the socioeconomic roots of insecurity and violence in Mexico and Central America, the development of a more humane and health-centered approach to the drug problem, and the replacement of the kingpin strategy in favor of more strategic and long-term deterrence policies against DTOs and TCOs more broadly. An additional area of collaboration involves the implementation of both preventive and law enforcement actions centered on the many other security threats that, beyond DTOs and TCOs, impact citizens’ wellbeing. The effect of these efforts, however, will remain short-lived and limited unless they go hand in hand with concerted efforts to tackle corruption and impunity in Mexico. This constitutes perhaps the greatest challenge to breaking the cycle of violence in Mexico and to opening a new chapter in U.S.-Mexico security cooperation.

As discussed before, the Mérida Initiative marked a watershed moment in the recent history of U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. However, the ongoing challenges of corruption and impunity in Mexico, together with the number of deaths produced by drug-related crimes, anti-drug policies, and drug overdose on both sides of the border, have pushed the Mexican and U.S. governments to express doubts about the currency of the initiative. According to some estimates, since 2006, 150,000 people have died and more than 70,000 people have disappeared in the context of Mexico's war on drugs.<sup>35</sup> Opioid overdose accounted for 70 percent of drug-related deaths in the United States in 2019, and opioid-related deaths have added to a historic decline in U.S. life expectancy.<sup>36</sup> Although the United States' ongoing opioid epidemic originated in the commercialized sale of highly addictive drugs by major U.S. pharmaceutical companies, in recent years, this health crisis has been fueled by fentanyl smuggling carried out by TCOs such as the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) and the Sinaloa Cartel.<sup>37</sup>

Reflecting these countries' current challenges, the Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission recently stated, "The Mérida Initiative is in urgent need of reassessment" and pointed at the drug charges implicating Cienfuegos as an incident that undermined trust between the two governments.<sup>38</sup> The Mexican government has gone even further and announced in November 2020 the end of the initiative, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Fabián Medina stating that cooperation between the two countries needed to be revised in order to reflect "the needs of the Mexican government."<sup>39</sup> Despite these doubts, the implementation and evolution of the Mérida Initiative show that Mexico and the United States have the capacity to develop cooperation efforts based on bilateral trust, mutual respect, and the recognition of security as a shared responsibility. Security cooperation between the two countries may no longer be attached to the funds or goals of the Mérida Initiative but the lessons offered by this effort present an important blueprint of what the two countries can and should do in the next few years.

Under the Biden administration, both countries have the opportunity to foster areas of collaboration centered on harm and violence reduction, as well as on tackling the social and institutional determinants of violence and crime. Based on the lessons offered by previous cooperation efforts, there are five policy recommendations that could open a new chapter in U.S.-Mexico security cooperation.

### ***1. Transition from an all-out war approach to more strategic and sustainable deterrence policies.***

Short-term, militarized, and repressive policies to combat criminal and drug trafficking organizations have had detrimental consequences for Mexico's context of security. The kingpin strategy, in particular, which has been supported by both countries, has led to the fragmentation and geographical diffusion of DTOs and TCOs. Mexico's all-out war approach has increased homicides and other high-impact crimes in the country, including kidnappings, extortions, and forced disappearances. It has further contributed to a surge in human rights violations perpetrated by police and military personnel. In addition to their detrimental impact on Mexico's levels of insecurity and violence, these strategies have also proved incapable of reducing either the flow of drugs or the number of drug overdose deaths in the United States. Given the negative consequences of an all-out war approach, both countries should emphasize law enforcement strategies that target criminal organizations strategically and sequentially. The targeting of criminal organizations should be based on their involvement in high-impact crimes (e.g. homicides, extortions, kidnappings) as well as their participation in smuggling fentanyl into the United States. Instead of kingpin targeting, however, cooperation efforts should focus on the arrest of mid-level members and on dismantling the financial infrastructure that facilitates these organizations' operations and functioning.<sup>40</sup>

A greater focus on mid-level criminal operatives and on money laundering would require stepping up cooperation programs centered on improving the investigative capabilities of members of the police and of the National Guard in Mexico. It would also require the continuation of vetting and evaluation programs to facilitate the sharing of sensitive information between the two countries.

## ***2. Implement both preventive and law enforcement programs centered on the many other security threats that, beyond DTOs and TCOs, impact citizens' wellbeing.***

Most bilateral cooperation efforts have focused on the dismantling of Mexican DTOs and TCOs. However, there are several other threats that have a direct impact on citizens' security and that are not related to drug trafficking or organized crime. Such threats include robberies, kidnappings, femicides, and intra-family violence.<sup>41,42</sup> Evidence suggests that, even in communities that have a high presence of TCOs, citizens' perceptions of insecurity are primarily shaped by criminal conducts that are rooted in local dynamics and that are not connected to the illicit market of drugs.<sup>43</sup> If the aim of cooperation efforts is to improve the security and wellbeing of citizens and to facilitate the development of a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable society south of the Río Grande, then both countries need to go beyond security policies centered on drug-related activities. In order to tackle these other security threats, cooperation efforts should promote targeted prevention programs and focused deterrence policies. Some of the prevention programs supported by USAID in the context of the Mérida Initiative showed positive results, particularly in regards to their impact on high-risk groups from marginalized areas.<sup>44</sup> Under the Biden administration, greater resources should be allocated to evidence-based prevention programs directed at communities experiencing high-levels of violence, independently of the presence of DTOs and TCOs in such communities.

## ***3. Address the socioeconomic roots driving migration from Mexico and Central America.***

This is perhaps one of the clearest areas of opportunity that the Biden administration presents for the future of U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. On December 19, 2020, both presidents announced their intention to work towards a more humane approach to migration that includes the creation of economic and development opportunities for citizens in Central America and Mexico.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned before, after being pressured by the Trump administration, Mexican authorities decided to send the National Guard to control Mexico's southern border and to prevent migrants from entering the country. The consequence of this decision has been to worsen the already precarious situation experienced by undocumented migrants, who over the last ten years have become the target of extortions, rapes, and other forms of abuse on behalf of Mexican criminal organizations and law enforcement officials. Mexican and Central American migration is driven by the high levels of violence experienced by citizens of these countries as well as by the lack of viable economic opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only amplified the challenges of poverty and inequality faced by Central American and Mexican citizens. It has further exposed them to the predatory behavior of gangs and criminal organizations.<sup>46</sup> In this context, it is urgent for both countries to address the socioeconomic roots driving migration flows from Mexico and Central America. The Security and Prosperity Partnership (2005 to 2008), which aimed to increase the economic benefits of NAFTA among the citizens of the three countries, was short-lived and focused mainly on economic competitiveness and trade rather than on questions of development. However, a more ambitious program focused on the economic development of traditional sending areas via job training programs and the creation of viable job opportunities could contribute to deterring migration. Prevention programs implemented by USAID in Mexico and the northern triangle of Central America have been positively evaluated and should continue to operate in these countries.

Furthermore, instead of supporting the deployment of the National Guard on Mexico's southern border, the United States should provide support for the professionalization and human rights training of Mexican migration agents. It should also provide assistance to the dozens of shelters and human rights organizations working in the southern and northern borders of Mexico.

#### ***4. Develop a more humane and health-centered approach to the drug problem.***

During his presidential campaign and at the beginning of his presidency, AMLO pledged to move away from the prohibitionist approach to drugs privileged by both Mexico and the United States and to focus instead on health-centered policies that would allow for the clinical treatment and social reintegration of drug-users. He also promised to explore the possibility of legalizing certain crops, including marijuana and poppy. Early next year, a new law to legalize cannabis will likely go into effect in Mexico. With this law, Mexico joins several states in the United States that have legalized the recreational use of cannabis.<sup>47</sup> While the legalization of drugs in Mexico will most likely be excluded from the cooperation agenda, the promotion of harm-reduction strategies centered on drug abuse does present a potential area of collaboration.

During his campaign, Biden expressed his willingness to tackle the opioid crisis in the United States through drug abuse treatments and mental health services. Consumption can no longer be seen as a problem exclusive to the United States. Evidence suggests opioid use is on the rise in Mexico, and that a public health response focused on high-risk groups is needed in order to prevent the further escalation of drug consumption and its detrimental impact on citizens' physical and mental health.<sup>48</sup> A more integral understanding of the drug problem should also consider the livelihoods of Mexican farmers that depend on poppy cultivation. Recent studies suggest crop-substitution programs are not easy to implement and that their results depend on the different incentives that, beyond economic considerations, determine farmers' willingness to grow opium instead of other legal crops.<sup>49</sup> Given the high environmental impact that fumigation and eradication policies have had, it is urgent for both countries to move towards sustainable measures that can reduce the cultivation of illicit crops while ensuring the livelihood of local communities.

#### ***5. Tackle corruption and impunity in Mexico (See also the chapter by Max Kaiser).***

This will remain perhaps the greatest challenge to breaking the cycle of violence in Mexico and to opening a new chapter in U.S.-Mexico security cooperation. Over the last decade, Mexican authorities have justified the use of the military on matters of public security in light of the high-levels of corruption permeating the police, particularly at the state and municipal levels. The recent arrest of General Cienfuegos, along with several cases of human rights violations and criminal collusion involving members of the military, have brought into question the assumed incorruptibility of the Mexican army. They have further underlined the need to ensure the civilian control of the country's military forces. Although the use of the military in public security functions has been presented as a temporary measure, it has not been accompanied by an exit strategy or by the systematic implementation of programs that develop the professional and technical capabilities of the police. Cooperation efforts aimed at improving the accountability, transparency, and professionalization of the police are in the best interest of both countries, as they would contribute to address the institutional roots of violence and insecurity in Mexico. Although it would be tempting for both countries to avoid potential frictions by continuing with the same strategies of the past – including kingpin targeting and militarization of public security – any cooperation effort that overlooks the challenges of corruption and impunity will remain limited and ineffective. Biden's expressed support for a more integral approach to address security concerns on both sides of the border could allow AMLO to go back to some of his initial promises regarding the need to fight corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and move beyond short-term and repressive strategies to combat crime.

## Endnotes

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