North America Security Threats: Beyond the Merida Initiative

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Introducción

The fight against transnational organized crime, specifically against drug trafficking, has transformed into one of the priority issues in the construction of the North American Security Community.

The Merida Initiative emerged out of recognition of the shared responsibility and interdependence between Mexico and the United States in relation to the fight against drug trafficking, which should contribute to consolidate relations of cooperation in security matters between the two countries.

Nevertheless, despite having been presented as the most important cooperation program between the two countries in recent years, the Merida Initiative has not achieved its objectives in reference to the restraint of drug trafficking and reinforcement of institutions and the State of Law. The increased levels of violence on both sides of the border and especially in Mexico, translated into assassinations, kidnappings, extortions, and acts of terrorism, are evidence of this situation.

The Initiative is a limited and partial response to the problem of drug trafficking, in which preference is allotted to its combat through a traditional approach of transfer of equipment and technology. As a consequence, its results will also be partial and short-lived.

The combat of organized crime in North America requires an integral long-term strategy that includes diverse aspects, most notably the containment of arms trafficking and of the financial flows of the drug traffickers from the United States toward Mexico; the institutionalization of cooperation in the exchange of information and even joint operations; institutional reinforcement, and support to economic and social development programs in Mexico.
The Merida Initiative in the context of North American Security Community

North America has become a real region due to reasons of security, economic advantages and political interests, generating the idea of consolidating a North American Community.

We can argue that in North America, a pluralistic security community, understood as a transnational region formed by sovereign States that maintain expectations of pacific changes, is being developed (Adler & Barnett, 1998). The North America Security Community will be built starting from mutual confidence and interdependence (what Buzan calls “positive vision”), but their building has been responding to the United States’ immediate needs: safeguarding U.S. territory, especially from a potential terrorist attack.

The Security Community began to be built in 2001 with the implementation of smart border mechanisms and the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) in 2005. The three countries recognize common problems regarding security and the existence of transnational threats that cannot be treated independently (particularly terrorism and traffic in drugs, persons and arms) although it is true they have opted for paused, thematic, practical and at a bilateral level (United States-Canada/United States-Mexico) encouraged by the United States’ immediate needs.

In the case of Mexico, the security agreements with the United States continue to face resistance based on sovereignty concerns and little or no understanding among the political elite and the public about the intergovernmental nature of the actions to be taken. As a result, cooperation on security matters between Mexico and the United States has focused on two fundamental issues:

a) Border security, through the smart border mechanism, cooperation programs operational since the 1990s between municipalities on Mexico’s northern border and counties in the southern United States (like the case of Tijuana and San Isidro)
and in the framework of the Bilateral Commission’s Working Group on Security and Border Cooperation.

b) The fight against drug trafficking, new axis of U.S.-Mexico security relations in the framework of Merida Initiative.

Drug trafficking has converted into one of the primary threats to security and democratic governance in Mexico. The battle of drug traffickers in the country has transformed from the dispute for control of drug routes to that for control over territories, parallel to the conversion of Mexico to an important illicit drug market in itself.

The violence unleashed by the drug cartels undermines the institutions and generates a climate of absence of social control that has translated into a sensation of vacuum of authority and a weak State of Law, situation which has impacted both sides of the Mexican-United States border.

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In 2006, President Felipe Calderon launched the “war against drug trafficking”. The strategy was based on the classical punitive hard line approach of drugs problem, focus on dismantling organized-crime groups and privileging the use of armed forces. In fact, under the Calderon administration, the combat to the drug trafficking organizations was securitized and presented as the most important issue in Mexican agenda.

The rise of the violence in Mexico is largely attributable to drug trafficking and organized crime. The number of homicides grew from 8,867 in 2007 to 27,199 in 2011. No other
country in the Western Hemisphere has seen such a large increase in the number of homicides over the last five years.¹

In addition to these deaths, the press has become target of aggressive harassment and permanent threat, and, of greatest concern, society itself has come under attack, in the form of extortions, kidnappings, and direct attacks of intimidation. The perception of insecurity among Mexican population is very high: 36.8% of Mexicans feel insecure in their neighborhoods and 55.9% say that security has deteriorated. These percentages are higher than countries with greater rates of homicide and violence as Honduras, whose percentage with 23.2% and 40.2% respectively.² Another data reveals that 66% of Mexicans has stopped performing at least one activity for fear of being victimized (ICESI, 2011).

Therefore, over the last decade, the *Mexico Peace Index* score has deteriorated by 27.5%. Since 2008, Mexico has fallen 45 ranks on the Global Peace Index and in 2013 is ranked

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¹ Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico. Data and Analysis Through 2012, Special Report*, Trans-Border Institute, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, 2013. UNDOC data.

second least peaceful country in Latin America. Furthermore, taking in to consideration the murder rates and violence, in its 19th annual rankings of worldwide conflict published in 2011, the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, elevated the status of the conflict in Mexico from "crisis" to "war," putting the country alongside Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq and Somalia. The Conflict Barometer 2013, continues to classify Mexico as a country at war: with more than 10,000 killed throughout 2013 and in the complex scenario of the emergence of the armed vigilante groups (autodefensas, policías comunitarias) in Michoacan and Guerrero. However, the violence experienced in Mexico has not been felt equally across regions, with some areas of Mexico, like Campeche, remaining peaceful. The total economic impact of violence in Mexico is conservatively estimated to be 4.4 trillion pesos (US$333.5 billion) per year, representing 27.7 percent of Mexico’s GDP. The total economic impact of violence containment is equivalent to over 37,000 pesos (US$3,000) for every citizen in Mexico.

More than 90 percent of the cocaine and 70 percent of the methamphetamines and heroin consumed in the United States now either originates or passes through Mexico. The total value of this trade is perhaps $25 billion annually, much of which is smuggled back into Mexico or laundered through front businesses in the United States.

The DEA has raised the alarm regarding the institutional reach acquired by the Mexican drug trafficking organizations, which have displaced their Colombian peers in the control of drug production, transportation and distribution. In fact, since 2006, the United States government has been identifying the Mexican cartels as the greatest organized crime threat faced by the country, given their control of drug distribution in 230 cities and their

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3 Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) Mexico Peace Index 2013,
4 Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK), Conflict Barometer 2013, University of Heidelberg, 2014.
5 Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) Mexico Peace Index 2013,
6 GAO, Status of Funds for the Mérida Initiative, December 2009
continually expanding dominion and even violence in certain cities such as Phoenix, Arizona.⁷

The United States has recognized the interdependent character of this threat, also accepting that it is a matter of common responsibility that involves factors such as drug consumption within U.S. territory and the trafficking of arms toward Mexico. This situation constitutes a milestone in bilateral relations in the matter.

Therefore, in the last years we have seen a change in priorities on Mexico’s agenda of identified threats. Mexico’s new concept of security, much closer to the U.S. one, has been reinforced during the administration of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). He made the fight against drug trafficking—which he calls “the war against drug trafficking”—the country’s priority security issue, bringing in the armed forces in a face-to-face confrontation with the drug cartels.

The hardenings up of Mexico’s security agenda and the federal government’s actions in the so-called “war against drug trafficking” have been welcomed by the United States. It expressed its total support for the Calderón administration’s actions, and at the same time, for the first time in the history of bilateral cooperation against drug trafficking, it has recognized that this fight is a shared responsibility.

It has also stated that this shared responsibility includes broader issues than the production or transport of drugs from Mexico to the United States, now bringing into the debate the issue of consumption north of the border and arms trafficking from the United States to Mexico. This is an important step forward toward a bilateral understanding of the issue.

In this context, the Merida Initiative (the Program for Cooperation against Organized Crime) was formally presented in October 2007 amidst an enormous controversy in Mexico given the scanty information available about its objectives, scope and resources.

⁷ GAO, U.S. Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges, June 2009.
**Scopes and limits**

According to the Department of State, the four basic goals of the Mérida Initiative are to: 1) break the power and impunity of criminal organizations; 2) assist the Mexican and Central American governments in strengthening border, air, and maritime controls; 3) improve the capacity of justice systems in the region; and, 4) curtail gang activity in Mexico and Central America and diminish the demand for drugs in the region.\(^8\)

Table 1 Resource Allocation

In 2008 the first tranche of $400 million dollars includes funding for helicopters (up to five Bell 412) and surveillance aircraft (up to two CASA); non-intrusive inspection equipment, ion scanners, and canine units; technologies and secure communications; and finally technical advice and training to strengthen the institutions of justice.

The Bush Administration’s budget request in 2009 (of $450 million dollars) placed more emphasis on assistance to non-military agencies. The Congress approved $300 million, of which a minimum of $75 million for judicial reform, institution building, anti-corruption, and rule of law activities.

On April 9, 2009, the Obama Administration submitted a supplemental request that included an additional $66 million to acquire three Blackhawk helicopters, for Mexico’s Secretariat for Public Security (SSP). The Congress approved $420 million: $160 million for SSP (forensics and nonintrusive inspection equipment, computers, training, and fixed and rotary wing aircraft including the Blackhawk helicopters) and $260 million for expedited aviation assistance to the Mexican Navy.

For the budget 2010 the president Obama had requested $450 millions for helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, surveillance systems and non-intrusive inspection equipment. Nevertheless, on December 13, 2009, Congress passed $210.3 million.⁹

Nevertheless, a substantive strengthening of the anti-drugs strategy through the Initiative is not perceived in Mexico, while in the United States it is recognized that the entry of drugs to that country from Mexico has not diminished.

The “war against drug trafficking” in the country has demonstrated the debility of the institutions and the levels of penetration of organized crime in police forces and state security corps. The violence unleashed by the drug cartels in Mexico, both in their struggle to dominate trafficking routes and territory and derived from their confrontations with State forces, is unprecedented.

The Merida Initiative has prioritized technology and equipment transfer with the clear goal to strengthen interdiction capacities. However, the delivery of equipment has suffered delays. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), as of September 2009 the State Department had exercised only US$26 million of the $830 million authorized for Mexico and Central America.¹⁰

Nevertheless, according to data provided by the State Department, as of November 27, 2009, some $359 million in Mérida funding was actively supporting projects in Mexico and Central America. In the case of Mexico, roughly $77.2 million worth of equipment was delivered by the end of December, including 30 ion scanners and five Bell helicopters for

¹⁰ GAO, Status of Funds for the Mérida Initiative, December 2009
the Mexican Army. Another $135.5 million in equipment is scheduled to be delivered by June 2010, including a $50 million CASA surveillance aircraft for the Mexican Navy and three UH-60 helicopters for the SSP.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Arms trafficking}

Arms trafficking today represents one of the primary threats to the security of Mexico. It is the second most important illicit activity carried out by organized crime and represents a business of more than $30 billion dollars each year. The violence of the drug cartels can not be disassociated from their access to fire power and to the resources obtained through their activities. Thus, “drugs and illegal migrants flow north, guns and money flow south.”\textsuperscript{12}

The Mexican government estimates that 2,000 firearms are smuggled across the Southwest border everyday. More than 23,000 firearms were recovered by Mexican authorities and submitted for tracing to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) from 2004 through 2008. Over 90\% of firearms recovered in were found to have come from the United States. Of those firearms, 68\% were manufactured in the USA and 19\% were manufactured abroad and imported into the USA. About 70\% of traced firearms were found to have come from Texas (39\%), California (20\%), and Arizona (10\%).\textsuperscript{13}

Along its southern border, the United States has registered more than 12,000 points of arms sales of all calibers. Mexican drug cartels and enforcer gangs are reportedly buying semiautomatic versions of AK-47 and AR-15 style assault rifles, and other military-style firearms in the United States.

Just as occurred regarding drug trafficking, the United States has gradually recognized that the combat of arms trafficking is a shared responsibility and a priority topic if progress is aspired to in the fight against organized crime in the region.

\textsuperscript{11} Clare Ribando Seelke, \textit{op.cit}
\textsuperscript{13} Vivian S. Chu & William J. Krouse, \textit{Gun Trafficking and the Southwest Border}, Congressional Research Service, September 21, 2009
From 2005 it launched the Project Gunrunner under the responsibility of the AFT. Through Gunrunner ATF conducts investigations, develops intelligence, and provides training related to arms trafficking to Mexico. In 2006 and 2007 around 100 ATF special agents and 25 industry operations investigators were dedicated to the Project, while by March 2009, the numbers had increased to 148 special agents and 59 industry operations investigators.

In 2005, the Gunrunner Project was established under the responsibility of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). In 2008, Mexico and the United States initiated Operation *Armas Cruzadas* with a budget of US$15 billion under the responsibility of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This program includes the deployment of high level border equipment (Border Enforcement Security Task Force -BEST) in the four Border States to investigate and prevent the illicit trafficking of goods, people, money and arms.\(^\text{14}\)

The program involves intelligence sharing and joint law enforcement efforts with vetted Mexican units. As DHS reported in March 2009, the operation has resulted in more than 100 criminal arrests, 42 convictions, and the seizure of more than 400 weapons.

In addition, the Border Violence Prevention Act, the Southwest Border Security Initiative and the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy, approved in January, March, and June 2009, respectively, foresee the deployment of more BEST elements along the border; the strengthening of detection and interception capacities (through greater security technology such as biometric controls and scanners) and better coordination between the ATF and the ICE in the exchange of information.

Regarding the Merida Initiative, it is important to keep in mind that although the Mexican government emphasized that the program incorporate the combat of arms trafficking, in reality the issue has not been a priority. Only US$4.5 million has been channeled to the

\(^{14}\) GAO, *U.S. Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges*, June 2009.
Gunrunner Project with the purpose to develop the eTrace (firearms tracking technology) system in the United States Consulates in Mexico.

The development of bilateral programs in response to arms trafficking has thus been a gradual process characterized by the preeminence of national programs (such as the case of the Gunrunner Project and the Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy), lack of coordination among the United States agencies themselves, and distrust regarding corruption in Mexico.

Five initiatives were presented in 2009 in the United States Congress related to arms trafficking. Emphasis has been placed on increasing resources to fight this threat and hardening punishments for traffickers.

Returning to the Merida Initiative, the proposal presented in the House of Representatives by Howard Berman (H.R. 2410) included a specific section on arms trafficking. In this way, in addition to approving the naming of a United States coordinator of the Initiative and incorporation of the Caribbean region within the same, the House of Representatives approved the establishment of an evaluation and monitoring mechanism that includes issues related to human rights and to arms and money trafficking, and a Working Group on prevention of illicit small arms trafficking in the Hemisphere.

The recognition of the problem by the United States opens possibilities to advance in the cooperation programs, and the arms trafficking issue can therefore convert into another motor of the North American Security Community. The challenge once again is in the bilateralization of the programs and in the construction of bridges of understanding and greater linkages among the agencies of both countries to work in a joint manner against transnational organized crime.

*Root causes of violence*
According with several studies, as 2013 UNDP Regional Development Report and the Mexico Peace Index, there are no automatic relationships between violence and factors such as poverty and inequality. The UNDP Report highlighted the changes on the “traditional” patrons related poverty and violence:

In Mexico the highest homicide rates are found in the municipalities with less multidimensional poverty. (…) between 1990 and 2000 the highest incidence of homicides recorded in municipalities with higher income poverty, in 2005 and 2007, this relationship began to change, and by 2010, had changed dramatically; then, a greater number of murders had begun to occur in municipalities of less income poverty.\(^{15}\)

Also, Mexico Peace Index points out that:

Identifying consistent socio-economic relationships to violence has proven particularly challenging in Mexico as the drug war has played a distorting effect. This has resulted in many of the factors commonly associated with violence in other countries not being as statistically related in Mexico (…) However, it is important to note that contrary to general intuition, the relationship between peace, economic opportunities, and education in Mexico is not always positive; meaning that more affluent states are not necessarily the most peaceful. (…) The activity of the drug cartels follows a pattern dictated by the needs of their drug businesses, which is independent of the normal socio-economic factors associated with peace. This factor has distorted the distribution of violence and has muted correlations that otherwise would likely have been stronger.

Although the concentration of the violence has a correlation with the mapping of the criminal activities in terms of fighting for certain routes and markets, the analysis of the links among exclusion and violence should not be dismissed. Even the limits mentioned above, Mexican Peace Index recognized that “the combination of poverty, lack of opportunity, and proximity to major drug smuggling routes are the preconditions for low levels of peacefulness”.\(^{16}\)

The analysis of violence and insecurity perpetrated by and against young people, evidence the links between exclusion, insecurity and violence. Young people in Mexico are victims and victimizers. The homicide rate for young people increased from 7.8 in 2007 to 25.5 in 2010. This means that, one out of every four Mexicans executed in the context of the war


\(^{16}\) Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) *Mexico Peace Index 2013*,

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against drugs is young. Also, young people were responsible for 50% of crimes committed in 2010.\textsuperscript{17}

But young people are also the most vulnerable sector in the country. In 2011, some 66.1% of 15-29 year-olds in the country were not in education and 24.7% of that age group were neither employed nor in education or training (NEET). The proportion of women who were NEET in 2011 (37.8%) is more than three times larger than the proportion of men who were (11%). Also it is important to note that, even if younger Mexicans have higher levels of educational attainment, they are more vulnerable to unemployment. Some 5.8% of 25-34 year-olds with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualifications are unemployed compared to 4% of 35-44 year-olds with the same level of attainment. Meanwhile, 7.2% of tertiary-educated 25-34 year-olds are unemployed compared with 3.4% of 35-44 year-olds with a tertiary education.\textsuperscript{18}

A recent study shows that in Mexico young people with less years of education are more likely to be victims of violence: in men between 18-40 without complete primary education, the homicide rate reached 300 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. In contrast, among males between 26-40 with university studies the rate dropped to 26 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011. For women, average is between 18 and 25 years without completed primary studies.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Conclusions}

The fight against drug trafficking undertaken by the Calderón administration and the U.S.

\textsuperscript{17} World Bank, \textit{La violencia juvenil en México. Reporte de la situación, el marco legal y los programas gubernamentales}, June 2012.

\textsuperscript{18} OECD, “Mexico Country Note”, \textit{Education at Galance 2013}.

government’s interest in supporting it through the Merida Initiative may give new impetus to the construction of the North American Security Community. The Merida Initiative is the most important bilateral effort of recent times in the fight against organized transnational delinquency. The recognition of common responsibility was fundamental to solidify the agreement.

However, centering the agenda of the North American Security Community solely on the issue of the fight against drug trafficking (in addition to borders and terrorism) and making this the axis of agreements between Mexico and the United States involves grave risks regionally. This is because the tendency to “bilateralize” agenda issues would prevail over the trilateral perspective, at the same time that any possibility would be lost of incorporating the broad security and cooperation for development agenda points and making them priorities for maintaining regional security.

The Merida Initiative may represent a new paradigm in U.S.-Mexican affairs, but it also symbolizes an old paradigm in U.S. counternarcotics policy: the paradigm focuses mainly on strengthening international interdiction capacities and security, with domestic treatment and prevention initiatives, source-country economic development programs, and other alternative strategies assuming considerably less importance.\(^20\)

Recognition of the arms trafficking problem has not resulted in a substantive commitment. In fact, it is only recently beginning to be recognized as a threat to the security of both countries. There is no commitment in the United States to control the secondary arms markets, and the most simplistic responses suggest that “Mexico should reduce its weapons demand.” But recent incipient efforts to incorporate the issue must be acknowledged. The United States strategy against arms trafficking is disarticulated, while in Mexico the issue comes up against the situation of corruption and institutional weakness.

Opting to fight threats instead of the possibility of working on different levels to prevent them would have a long-term effect on Mexico because the majority of threats affecting its

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security are rooted in problems related to the development agenda. This means that a fight that uses purely coercive methods will have only limited success and must be accompanied by preventive measures.

Consequently, far from contributing favorably to the construction of the North American Security Community, the prominence of the issue of drug trafficking in Mexico-U.S. relations may become an obstacle for recovering the spirit that gave rise to the SSP. This included the recognition that prosperity and security were two sides of the same coin with regard to regional integration and that there was a need, strongly backed by Canada and Mexico, to advance around issues on the multidimensional security agenda.

This will depend on the political will of the three North American governments to arrive at agreements to transcend the short-term vision of the fight against threats and take up a long-term vision that would include coming to intergovernmental cooperation agreements to fight threats within the region and deal with transcendental issues like migration.

In this sense, the European Union’s strategies for fighting drug trafficking and organized crime, included under the heading of Justice and Internal Affairs as part of the construction of the European Space for Freedom, Security and Justice, may be a point of reference for developing the North American mechanisms to deepen cooperation, particularly with regard to the exchange of information and the administration of justice to deal with the challenges of international organized crime.

In North America, it is urgent that we move ahead toward common focuses to face the challenges of international organized crime. We should base this effort on the principle of shared responsibility and the recognition that these phenomena transcend national borders and require common, comprehensive focuses. This means that it is necessary to go beyond the simplistic view that puts all our energy into the fight against criminal groups (like Felipe Calderón’s war against drug trafficking that the Merida Initiative aims to bolster), and generate a comprehensive focus combining inter-governmental action in areas of law enforcement and judicial cooperation, and cooperation in other sectors like health and
education.