

Mexico's National Security Paradoxes and Threats in a Geopolitical Context

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This article examines Mexico's national security paradoxes and threats in a geopolitical context from a politico-historical perspective into a contemporary setting. It argues that, despite Mexico's nascent democratic transition, none of the various elite groups in power have been able to conceive a broad, democratic security doctrine. On the contrary, realpolitik and regime security form the tradition and true nature of the national security permeating the political system. There are serious doubts that Mexico's next president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, will change this historical legacy. Despite the widespread desire for change, corruption and impunity are more prevalent than ever, setting the stage for conflict with the United States—the world's biggest drug consumer and the primary vendor of weaponry to Mexico's criminal organizations. This situation is exacerbated by Mexico's interdependence and shared geopolitics with its northern neighbor. The combination of these internal and external factors places Mexico's future in question.

Keywords: National Security, Regime Security, Security Doctrine, Mexico, Democratic Transition, Mexican Political History, President López Obrador, Interdependence, Insecurity, Corruption, Geopolitics, United States.

Este artículo examina las paradojas y amenazas a la seguridad nacional de México en un contexto geopolítico desde una perspectiva político-histórica hasta la actualidad. Argumenta que, a pesar de la transición democrática naciente, ninguno de los diversos grupos de élite en el poder ha podido concebir una doctrina de seguridad democrática. Por el contrario, la realpolitik y seguridad del régimen constituyen la tradición y verdadera naturaleza de la seguridad nacional que impregna el sistema político. Hay serias dudas de que el próximo presidente, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, cambie este legado histórico. A pesar

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del deseo generalizado de cambio, la corrupción e impunidad prevalecen más que nunca, preparando el escenario para el conflicto con los Estados Unidos, el mayor consumidor de drogas del mundo y el principal proveedor de armamento para las organizaciones criminales de México. Esta situación se ve agravada por la interdependencia y geopolítica compartida con su vecino del norte. La combinación de estos factores internos y externos pone en duda el futuro de México.

Palabras Clave: seguridad nacional, seguridad de régimen, doctrina de seguridad, México, transición democrática, historia política de México, Presidente López Obrador, Interdependencia, inseguridad, corrupción, geopolítica, Estados Unidos.

本文从政治历史的角度分析了墨西哥在地缘政治背景下的国家安全悖论和威胁。笔者认为，尽管墨西哥处于崭新的民主过渡时期，当权者中没有一个是精英群体能够构想出一个广泛的民主安全理论。相反，现实政治和政权安全是渗透在政治体系中的国家安全的传统本质和真实性。人们严重怀疑墨西哥下一任总统安德烈斯·曼努埃尔·洛佩斯·奥夫拉多尔将改变这一历史遗产。尽管人们普遍渴望变革，腐败和有罪不罚现象仍比以往任何时候都更为普遍，这与美国发生冲突创造了条件，因为后者是世界上最大的毒品消费国和墨西哥犯罪组织的主要武器供应商。这种情况因墨西哥与其北方邻国的相互依存和共同的地缘政治而更加恶化。这些内外因素的结合使墨西哥的未来深受质疑。

关键词: 国家安全, 墨西哥, 民主过渡, 相互依存, 腐败, 地缘政治, 美国.

In 2010, Mexico celebrated its independence from Spain and the centenary of the beginning of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. My central argument in this article is that Mexico's security model since independence has been one of authoritarianism marked by corruption and impunity. Despite a weak transition to democracy in the year 2000, the object of security is not the state, but the regime. I contend this is a specific legacy or tradition of the stability of the political system between the 1929 founding of the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* [PRI]), through its defeat in the year 2000, to the present day, thus manifesting continuity that has carried over through the democratic transition. The foundational elements I identify in this legacy are fivefold.

First, neither during the long periods of military dictatorship (1877-1911) and authoritarianism (1929-2000), nor during the transition to democracy (2000-06), was there a clear state security strategy for dealing with threats. Second, political pluralism has exacerbated the lack of consensus and coordination on shared goals in terms of confronting threats. The ongoing democratic transition has focused solely on electoral reform and did not incorporate a reform of the armed forces and intelligence services. Third, without reforms, the Mexican presidency undermined the security apparatus by exacerbating tensions with the

opposition and making a series of decisions that derailed consensus building. This undermined its own ability to define the policies needed to preserve the integrity of the nation, its institutions, and its population. Fourth, the absence of a postindependence state security strategy has created a haven for drug traffickers. Finally, Mexico's proximity to the United States, the world's largest consumer of drugs and the arms supplier to cartels, has made the nation vulnerable, creating major difficulties in terms of protecting its borders, seas, and airspace.

Furthermore, in the period between the election of Vicente Fox and the present day, we can identify a loss in the effectiveness of the institution of the presidency as the cornerstone of stability and a loss in the viability of the three branches of government at the municipal, state, and federal levels. This has effectively made the state nonexistent or in territorial retreat in some parts of the country. Nevertheless, this loss in the effectiveness of the institution of the presidency has been felt in the neglect of the state, the population, and the territory ever since the Mexican Revolution, which made the presidency, or the current regime, the center of national security instead of the state and the nation—and, least of all, its people. This loss of effectiveness of the presidency in unifying the state coincided with integration with the United States under the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A quarter of a century later, this integration is in jeopardy, with the administration of President Donald Trump identifying Mexico as a threat—a perception exacerbated by the proximity and interdependence, as well as by the increasing porosity of the border, transnational organized crime, immigration, and violence.

Why has Mexico lost momentum and direction on issues of national and regional security? What are the sources of Mexico's national security paradoxes? What are the threats to Mexico's security in the geopolitical context? In subsequent sections, I seek to answer these questions by applying concepts from the international relations security studies literature. First, I lay out the theoretical-conceptual framework. Then, I localize and discuss the “push” and “pull” factors in modernity and tradition in Mexico's history and their relation to political disjunctures. Here I address national security paradoxes embedded in an authoritarian tradition by discussing problems in Mexico's transition to democracy (2000-06) with a focus on: Calderón's questioned legitimacy; Calderón's weaknesses on security; obstacles to a “total war” on drug trafficking; and Calderón Administration's controversial national security strategy. I then review the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto and the limitations of his term in power with regard to Mexico's security paradoxes and threats, illustrated in particular by the Ayotzinapa case. Third, I turn to Mexico's national security threats in the geopolitical context. In subsequent sections, I examine the geostrategic component, defense, and U.S.-Mexican national security vulnerabilities and threats. Finally, I ask whether Mexico is a national security threat to the United States. The conclusion summarizes the key arguments and points to challenges for the incoming administration under López Obrador.

Theorizing Mexico's Regime Security

Since 1947, the study of national and international security has considered the state to be the primordial unit to be secured. In 1952, Arnold Wolfers in his article “‘National Security’ as an Ambiguous Symbol” (Wolfers 1952) identified the concepts that would later be expanded on by Barry Buzan (1983) in his seminal work *Peoples, States, and Fear*. The “classic” (realist) understanding of national security invokes the defense of the national interest. National security therefore seeks external defense against threats in the international system and is a key tool for preserving the national interest. In the Cold War, Wolfers adds, security threats were external. Barry Buzan (1983), in turn, expands the conceptual explanation that has been in permanent evolution since Westphalia: the protection of borders, populations, and territories forms its conceptual basis. Buzan adds that, under the concept of state security, more-or-less democratic governments concentrate on outside threats and the key to security lies in ideas and in the intimate connection between the state and the nation: the glue binding the state, the territory, and the nation also bestows sovereignty. In sovereignty lies the construction of the legitimate use of force and the projection of power through the armed forces, economic development, foreign policy, and, above all, the capacity to protect the country’s population, institutions, and territory, which make up the physical base of national security (Buzan 1983). Authoritarian regimes, however, prioritize internal security: the enemy can be the population itself. Felipe Agüero (1995) reminds us that this authoritarianism may be civilian or military in nature. The latter was the case in the Southern Cone during the Cold War, while Spain and Mexico experienced civilian authoritarianism. In these circumstances, we can clearly distinguish between state security and regime security (Buzan 1991).¹

In regime security, security is not solid; it is amorphous and ambiguous, as the agent to be secured is not a state or a nation, but a political elite whose power can be authoritarian or democratic. This is the lesson of Mexican history over its nearly two centuries of insecure independence, eroded by an international context immersed first in colonial disputes and then by American expansionism. Proximity is a central factor in the practice and analysis of national security, above all when the neighbor (the United States) is the most influential actor in the entire international system (Buzan and Waever 2003).

In the post-Cold War world, a real threat to national security can be internal or external. National security is invoked in the event of an imminent threat to the existence of the state, the population, the territory, or national independence—and natural resources are therefore considered of a higher order than public safety. For instance, state security is greatly affected by interdependence and globalization. Nevertheless, the government has to define its place in the international system. Internally, the improper administration of

¹ I use two editions of the same book: Buzan (1983, 1991).

the law, affecting the lives and rights of either individuals or the population at large through exposure to crime or through unjust criminal charges, undermines justice and falls under the rubric of public safety. Buzan (1991, 156) points out that “[t]his problem is not very relevant to national security, unless it generates dissatisfaction with law enforcement and is very widely politicized.” This perfectly describes the Mexican case. By concentrating regime security in the directives of the president and their cabinet, and lacking a real system of accountability, decisions are made in terms of the actors that hold power and control bureaucracies, budgets, and promotions. Without a doctrinal framework or a comprehensive legal system, decisions are made based on the priorities of each administration—which, in the short term, are determined by the particular interests of the elite groups then in power. This inertia has led Mexico astray from its path; the development of the states along the northern border with the United States and the southern border with Central America has been neglected, for example.

Regime security is the source of insecurity and the breeding ground for the increased porosity of Mexico's borders, the expulsion of migrants, and the rise of organized crime because it is opposed to transparency, accountability, and legality; it acts at its own discretion and threatens the state and the nation.

In the case of Mexico, an explanation of the decision-making process under regime security can be found in a premise that has been observed since 1943 to the present. The Mexican Doctrine of War consists of securing the unquestionable loyalty of the military command to the institution of the presidency. This alliance has enjoyed a lack of transparency at the highest levels; while civilian authorities hold power for six years, the armed forces enjoy their privileges and immunities on a permanent basis. The permanence of their privileges is the basis of the loyalty and subordination of the armed forces to the institution of the presidency. This explains the lack of *coups d'état* in Mexico during the decades of the Cold War, which saw extremely traumatic military takeovers in the Southern Cone, including in Chile (1973), Argentina (1976), and Brazil (1964).

The loyalty of the armed forces to the president lies behind the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, the Corpus Christi massacre in 1971, the confrontation with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (1994), and the Aguas Blancas (1997) and Tlatlaya (2015) confrontations. This unwritten civilian-military pact is undermined by transparency, free access to information, and military accountability toward a strong constitutional system. This brief explanation of regime security illustrates the complex decision-making process that has historically been used at the highest levels of power and the discretionality of which has compromised the state, the territory, and the population. Despite Mexico's nascent democratic transition over the past 50 years, reform has not fully reached the barracks or changed the habitual practices of the military. As a result, the country is increasingly vulnerable and impoverished, and weaker both internally as well as at the international level. It remains to be seen if, with Andrés Manuel López Obrador's inauguration as president on December

1, 2018, this unwritten pact between the presidency and the defense sector can be maintained through a democratic reform.

“Push” and “Pull” Factors in Modernity and Tradition in Mexico’s History and Their Relation to Political Disjunctures

This section identifies some of the “push” and “pull” factors embedded in traditions and modernity in Mexico regarding national security and how they are related to specific political disjunctures in its history from the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A peculiar characteristic of Mexico’s political and social life is that of saying one thing, even in writing, and then doing another. Examples of this include a constitution that was modern and innovative for its time (1917) and that crystallized social demands, but that has been applied through the clientelistic practices and authoritarian corporatism of the PRI; a government that talked of social justice and its origins in a social revolution but that massacred students (1968); boasting of “modernization” by reforming the government and the economy under President Miguel de la Madrid (1987) and then stealing the election the following year; making Mexico “modern” through macroeconomic reforms and NAFTA (1994), but imposing them in an authoritarian fashion without consulting society or allowing for a system of congressional checks and balances; passing a national security law (2005) in a democratic fashion that nevertheless leaves the privileges of the armed forces and the presidency intact.

One could also point out specific disjunctures in the political system that have had rather adverse effects for the “push and pull” dynamic of tradition versus modernity from the past century to the present. For example, the 1928 assassination of the presidential candidate Álvaro Obregón gave rise to the institutionalization of the revolution and the construction of a regime that placed loyalty and faithfulness to the institution of the presidency at the summit of the power structure. It also helped shape the national security policy, as established in the Mexican Doctrine of War (1943), which clearly defines a system of regime security. This equation of power has remained intact in both military and civilian governments—or rather, through the weak democratic transition (Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón) between 2000 and 2012, up to the return of the PRI (2012-18) and the end of the Enrique Peña Nieto Administration. The absolute and unquestioned loyalty of the armed forces to their commander-in-chief as the premise of stability and continuity through the Mexican Revolution, the signing of NAFTA, the democratic transition, and the open confrontation with the Trump Administration and organized crime are the clear legacy of privileging tradition above modernity—despite attempted reforms on issues such as national security and free trade. The real rules of power have nothing to do with democracy, transparency, and accountability. The armed forces are the last bastion of the power of the state and their loyalty

is not to the democratic spirit, but to their practically blind support of the will of the president.

An Authoritarian Tradition

In less than 200 years of independence, the Mexican state finally took shape through autocratic-military regimes such as the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship (1876-1911) and the one-party rule of the PRI (1928-2000). This process has not been linear or simple. Between 1821 and 1921, Mexico experienced more than 1,000 military revolts (Bolis 1947). Of Mexico's 68 presidents between 1821 and 2000, 29 were civilians and 39 were military. There have also been four military juntas. One more example of instability: Mexico had 36 presidents between 1821 and 1857 alone (Benítez 2004).

Only two historical periods have had stable governments for a significant period of time—that of Porfirio Díaz and that of the PRI. The Díaz dictatorship (often called the “Porfiriato”) elevated the presidency to absolute power. Despite the fact that he achieved peace and economic development, his vision was narrow, partial, and shortsighted. Indeed, neither Díaz nor the PRI was able to conceptualize, implement, and institutionalize an inclusive and pluralistic democracy. Moreover, Mexico has never conceived of a democratic and effective national security doctrine that would develop and incorporate the country's regional heterogeneity and ethnic and political diversity (Rodríguez Sumano 2008).

The second period of stability occurred under the rule of the PRI. Although the political system achieved a certain stability through authoritarianism, corporatism, and clientelism, it excluded the majority of the population and never formulated a real national security strategy. Although strongly nationalist in its rhetoric, the official positions in support of the “institutions” were not based on the authentic defense of the Mexican sovereignty as a whole, but rather on the defense of the prerogatives and privileges of the political and military elite (Quezada 1998).

Throughout critical moments in Mexican history (1846-47, 1910, 1914, 1928) the U.S. government has played a decisive role in internal Mexican affairs—sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Paradoxically, Mexico has had two constitutions based on liberal, democratic, and federal principles—formulated under presidents Benito Juárez (1857) and Venustiano Carranza (1917)—yet the authoritarian nature of the Mexican political system has always prevailed. It was not until General Lázaro Cárdenas became president (1934-40) that the Mexican government began an effort to build effective national sovereignty (Meyer 1968).

The country, however, had to endure 71 years of one-party rule before experiencing a peaceful transition to democracy in the year 2000, which I discuss in greater detail shortly. In the end, the postrevolutionary system (1929-2000) lost direction and misconstrued threats to the nation state security, fostering a state of insecurity compounded by impunity and corruption. The first non-PRI government therefore inherited tremendous challenges.

Problems in Mexico's Transition to Democracy (2000-06)

After National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox won the 2000 presidential elections, his administration did not place a priority on consolidating democracy or reforming national security policy. One of his main concerns was to ensure that the PAN would retain power after the end of his administration. President Fox even politicized security without completing the national security structure that should have formed part of a comprehensive democratic transition and truly modernized Mexico (Linz and Stepan 1996). His 2005 national security law was certainly the first of its kind in Mexican history. However, it mainly regulated the activities of the National Security Research Center (CISEN) and ignored the need to reform the armed forces. By the end of the Fox Administration, the newly formed National Security Council was in shambles and the role of the technical advisor to the National Security System remained unclear.

Although results fell far short of expectations in the end, Fox's first national security advisor, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser (2001), had promoted a new national security doctrine and structure, which would be accompanied by a legal reform. But by the end of the administration in 2006, the national security reform was far from being completed. Conceptually, visions of national security and public safety were inconsistent, threats were not clearly redefined (Ley de Seguridad Nacional 2005), and a lack of coordination and a sense of mission prevailed over attempts at reform.²

During its last two years, the Fox Administration became obsessed with the rising popularity of the leftist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The president even went so far as to try to block López Obrador's candidacy by using the attorney general to launch a legal challenge that would remove the opposition candidate from the ballot. When this did not work, Fox became deeply involved in the presidential campaign of his party's nominee, Felipe Calderón, and his administration derailed the transition (Quezada 2010).

Unfortunately, state security agencies were used to threaten and attack several political movements during the election year of 2006 (Ascencio 2011). The Department of Justice, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Safety, CISEN, and to a lesser extent the armed forces, were all actively involved in politics in Mexico City, Mexico State, and Oaxaca before Felipe Calderón took power on December 1.³

² National Security Adviser under Felipe Calderón, conversation with the author, Sigrid Arzt, Mexico City.

³ For more information on this period, see "Guillermo Valdés, confidente de Calderón, al Cisen," <https://www.proceso.com.mx/204727/guillermo-valdes-confidente-de-calderon-al-cisen>; "Sólo 19 huelgas en 2008," <https://www.proceso.com.mx/110617/solo-19-huelgas-en-2008>; "Oaxaca recoge los lodos de 2006," <https://www.proceso.com.mx/446063/oaxaca-recoge-los-lodos-2006>; "Maestros de Oaxaca conmemoran desalojo de 2006; exigen cárcel para Ulises Ruiz," <https://www.proceso.com.mx/344858/maestros-de-oaxaca-conmemoran-desalojo-de-2006-exigen-carcel-para-ulises-ruiz>; "2006-2009: oprobiosa impunidad militar," <https://www.proceso.com.mx/85588/2006-2009-oprobiosa-impunidad-militar>

The Controversial National Security Strategy and Questioned Legitimacy of President Calderón's Administration

There is no question that Mexico experienced one of the most controversial and tumultuous transitions of power in its history in 2006. In January that same year, polls showed Andrés Manuel López Obrador in the lead with 40 percent of the vote, followed by Felipe Calderón Hinojosa at 30 percent, and PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo Pintado at 26 percent. However, by April, Calderón Hinojosa was up in the polls at 38 percent, while López Obrador had shown a perplexing decline to 35 percent and Madrazo Pintado remained in third place with 23 percent.⁴

On July 6—four days after the election—the Federal Electoral Institute ruled that Calderón Hinojosa had won a majority of votes and could therefore be named the winner of the July 2 elections (El Universal 2006). López Obrador immediately denounced this as an “electoral fraud” and the final electoral outcome had to await a controversial legal battle at the Federal Electoral Tribunal. This body officially confirmed Calderón as the winner on September 5 (La Nación 2006), despite confirming that electoral violations had occurred—in particular the intervention of President Fox, which is prohibited under the Mexican law (Ugalde 2008).⁵ The final tallies were as follows: Calderón Hinojosa with 35.89 percent (14,916,927 votes) and López Obrador with 35.33 percent (14,683,096 votes); the difference was 233,831 votes, or just 0.56 percent (La Nación 2006; Quezada 2008).

The outcome profoundly shook the Mexican left, considering that, just six months before the elections, its candidate held a 10 percent lead in the polls.⁶ López Obrador's party, the Democratic Revolution Party (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática* [PRD]), and his supporters, who included the majority of the nation's poor, organized protests claiming the election had been stolen and calling for a vote-by-vote recount. They occupied the streets of the capital from July 2 to December 1, when Calderón was inaugurated.⁷

The new administration therefore faced serious problems of governability and legitimacy from its very first day in office. Buzan, Waeber, and de Wilde's (1998) research on governability and stability helps explain the electoral crisis. They argue that, without a clear consensus among actors on structures, processes, and institutions, it is very difficult to achieve a stable institutionalization of authority. “Then, the critical variables are obviously the recognition of such

⁴ The source of these figures comes from Sergio Aguayo's independent research on Mexican democracy, information shared with the author.

⁵ The former IFE president confirmed this information two years later.

⁶ It is fair to note that López Obrador committed several political mistakes that led his campaign to adopt a very limited view of Mexico's challenges and opportunities; however, these are not the subject of the present article.

⁷ For a detailed explanation of arguments regarding the “fraud,” see Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2007) and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo (2008).

an arrangement from within and without that lends it legitimacy and thereby the stability needed for political activities to be framed by it rather than to be about it” (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998, 144). To this end, uncertainty on the electoral results “broke the electoral consensus obtained in the year 2000” (Crespo 2008, 5), leading to the extreme polarization between followers of the president-elect and those of the leftist candidate during the 2006-12 period. Two prominent members of the Fox Administration published a book, *La Guerra Fallida* (The Failed War), arguing that Calderón launched a total war on organized crime due to his “legitimacy” problems following the 2006 presidential election (Castañeda and Aguilar 2009). It is hard to know for sure; in terms of economic and human resources, the presidential campaign was very unequal, while doubts remain regarding the final result—especially since the electoral authorities did not allow for a full recount of the votes cast.

Calderón’s campaign did not initially identify insecurity at the top of his list of priorities. The rule of law, sustainable economic development, foreign direct investment, competitiveness, infrastructure, jobs, education, and tourism, among other issues, dominated his electoral platform. As a candidate, Calderón’s limited vision of security issues can be seen in the document entitled *The Challenge for Mexico*, published on June 20, 2006: “In this new stage, the transformation must aim at ensuring the right to sustainable human development; namely, to promote a continuous process of capacity expansion that will allow all Mexicans to live a decent life without compromising the heritage of future generations.”⁸

This relative absence of security issues contrasts notably with the platform of PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo, whose plan of government explicitly included the subject in a document entitled *Foundations for a Strong Government*. His vision revolved around the following axes: (1) “Sovereignty, foreign policy, and the armed forces;” (2) “Good governance for democratic consolidation;” and (3) “Strong institutions and law enforcement” (Pintado 2005). In comparison, Calderón’s campaign did not place national security issues at the center of his domestic and foreign policies. Four months before his inauguration, the president-elect announced a list of commitments for his first 100 days that, among other things, delineated a noncomprehensive strategy on national security, consisting of limited reforms in defense, intelligence, foreign policy, and economic development. His 100-day program did contain a detailed compendium of security measures, but it contained a surprisingly disjointed collection of policies aimed at fighting drug trafficking.⁹ This reveals the lack of an overall strategy from the very beginning of his administration.

During his campaign, security and defense issues were not strongly argued or presented as a comprehensive strategy or plan (Calderón 2006). Neither

⁸ Information provided by a member of the Calderón Administration.

⁹ Members of the Office of the President, information provided to the author, August 2009, *100 días de gobierno*, Presidencia de la República: <http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/prensa/documentos/100dias.pdf>

the Fox Administration nor the PAN placed these issues near the top of their agendas. Calderón's preoccupations were represented in his campaign slogan, "The President of Jobs." Security only made sporadic appearances in his campaign and electoral platform. On September 5, Calderón listed three goals: (1) fighting poverty; (2) building a competitive economy; and (3) combating insecurity. Nevertheless, violence, kidnappings, and murders were reaching worrying levels in states such as Sinaloa, Baja California, Tamaulipas, and Chihuahua (Camarena and Zepeda Patterson 2007), as well as Michoacán, Calderón's home state.

When the new president took office on December 1, 2006, he gave a speech in the National Auditorium where he added the fight against crime to his top priorities, and on December 11, he announced the Joint Operation in Michoacán and a "total war on drug trafficking" (Hinojosa 2014).¹⁰ Calderón defined drug trafficking as the main threat to national security, which marked a clear break with Vicente Fox's ambiguities and doubts on national strategy and foreign policy, particularly after September 11, 2001. However, a central controversy during the Calderón Administration was the inability to define clearly the nature of the threat, the policies that were needed to reduce vulnerabilities, or an action plan that would anticipate the sources of threats. There was a total lack of conceptual framework for identifying the dimensions of the threat, the priorities of the government, and the tools available for coordinating national security and public safety agencies. As Mexico is a very diverse country, the level of institutional strength and adherence to the rule of law varies deeply from state to state and coast to coast—so much so that sometimes we have the impression of crossing into another country when traveling from one region to another. Each region has its own dynamics, most of which are quite different from Mexico City, where decisions are made at the federal level. For this reason, the centralization of power remains one of the key weaknesses of any government, as nationwide support is needed to implement its strategies, yet it does not seem to have that support, or even an in-depth understanding of many parts of the country. There is even a dispute as to whether it is possible to forge a shared vision in the war against drugs.

At the federal level, another liability in the lack of a coherent national security policy has been a fundamental confusion between what constitutes a national security issue and what constitutes a public safety issue. This conceptual and institutional disjuncture can be clearly seen by analyzing the 2006-12 and 2012-18 National Development Plans and the National Security Laws of 2005 and 2008. Another key document here is the *Mexican Politics against Organized Crime* (PGR 2008), which declares the goal of "breaking any agreement with criminals" or the national public security system. There is no institutional coordination between national security and public safety agencies (PGR 2008).

¹⁰ It was controversial because President Calderón himself did not accept it as a "total war;" instead, he preferred to call it a fight against insecurity.

This last document lists five main objectives: (1) to recover territory and strengthen local governments; (2) to reorganize security agencies and build a strong legal system at the state and municipal levels; (3) to undertake joint operations on land, primarily through the armed forces; (4) to unite society against organized crime; and (5) to improve international cooperation (PGR 2008). These documents confirm the necessary interplay between public safety and national security, but do not distinguish between the two and do not specify which should take priority. It is fair to recall that, since the founding of the National Public Safety Department on April 26, 1994, both PRI and PAN administrations have confused insecurity with a national security threat (ICESI 2008, 8).

Five critical elements highlight the obstacles and inertias of Calderón's security strategy. First, neither during the long periods of military dictatorship (1877-1911) and authoritarianism (1929-2000), nor during the transition to democracy (2000-06) has there been a clear governmental strategy for dealing with threats. Although it requires great effort, energy, and resources to transform public, judicial, and financial structures for this purpose, no such commitment was carried out during the Fox Administration.

Second, the arrival of political pluralism exacerbated the lack of consensus and coordination on shared goals in terms of confronting threats. This has been the case since 1997, when, for the first time in its history, the PRI lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies, as well as its control of the Mexico City government—the latter to the PRD and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano. It is also important to add that the ongoing democratic transition has focused solely on electoral reform and did not incorporate a reform of the armed forces and intelligence services.

Third, without reforms, the Mexican presidency undermined the security apparatus by exacerbating tensions with the opposition and making a series of decisions that derailed consensus building. This, in turn, undermined its own ability to define the policies needed to preserve the integrity of the nation, its institutions, and its population.

Fourth, the absence of a state security strategy in the different periods of Mexico's postindependence history has created a haven for drug traffickers.

Finally, Mexico's proximity to the world's biggest consumer of drugs and the arms supplier to cartels—the United States—has placed the nation in an extremely vulnerable situation, creating major difficulties in terms of protecting its borders, seas, and airspace. Given these obstacles, the unanswered question is why President Calderón decided on the strategy of a “total war on drug trafficking” as the keystone of his fight against insecurity.

Enrique Peña Nieto's Limitations in Power

With the collapse of the PAN after twelve years in power, Enrique Peña Nieto and a reinvigorated PRI managed to take the lead in the polls in 2012. The party's new State of Mexico-based leadership, known as the Atlacomulco

Group, the home base of Peña Nieto, arose from its toughest and most tightly bound faction and is made up of former governors, secretaries of state, businessmen, and key party figures—who range from Isidro Fabela to Pichardo Pagaza by way of Carlos Hank González, Alfredo del Mazo, and Arturo Montiel, the latter two of whom are relatives of Peña Nieto (Martínez 2012). Accordingly, the Atlacomulco team took charge of the PRI's strategy to return to Los Pinos after 71 years in power. For these political operatives, the central idea was to give the party a fresh, reinvigorated, modern, and democratic image through campaign promises and commitments to public works projects.

Peña Nieto rose to power with the help of a young technocrat, Luis Videgaray, who served first as his campaign manager, then as the director of his transition team, and finally, throughout his administration, as the proponent of a series of structural reforms that advanced the “modernizing” wing of the party that goes back to the time of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-94). One example of Videgaray's influence on the administration can be seen in the visit of then-candidate Donald Trump in August 2016. A candidate who had, by then, spent over a year running on an anti-Mexican campaign was welcomed as a world leader without yet having become one. This occurred on the recommendation of Videgaray, despite the reservations of the Mexican Foreign Service, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and the majority of the political class and public opinion. At the time, the move was considered to be treason to Mexico on the part of Peña Nieto and Videgaray. Later, I reexamine the relations with the United States, but for now, it is worth mentioning that Videgaray was fired from his position as Finance Minister one week after Trump's visit. Yet on January 4, 2017, the president suddenly named him the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position from which he would be responsible for relations with the United States and the rest of the world—proof of the power of Videgaray in the Peña Nieto Administration.

The return of the PRI to Los Pinos was marked by three aspects that would become explosive in terms of security matters over the course of the Peña Nieto Administration. First, the president's limitations regarding the national agenda and his close ties to the old guard of party operatives ended up ensuring corruption and impunity. Second, there was a denial of the humanitarian and security crisis that he had inherited from the Calderón Administration. Finally, there was the priority placed on a series of reforms on a variety of issues: energy, telecommunications, taxes, labor, education, and so forth. The Peña Nieto Administration sought first to distance itself from the war on drug trafficking launched by the outgoing President Calderón. The new direction placed an emphasis on peace through the National Development Plan and then a National Security Plan based around the following principles: (1) a Mexico at peace; (2) an inclusive Mexico; (3) a Mexico with quality education; (4) a prosperous Mexico; and (5) a globally responsible Mexico. Both of these were innovative tools that incorporated the multidimensional concept of security used by the

United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS). Nevertheless, the president and his cabinet were unable to develop a comprehensive strategy of constitutional reforms based on unresolved national security and public safety issues as they lacked the political will and long-term commitment required. In reality, it was an agenda that had no connection to the nation's security tragedy and that failed to address the state's failures to fight the corruption and impunity that go back decades.

The most emblematic case of the failure of the Peña Nieto Administration to handle the spiraling violence and insecurity was the enforced disappearance on September 26, 2014 of 43 students from a teachers' college in Ayotzinapa, near Iguala in Guerrero state (see Gobierno de la República 2018). When the government was unable to provide the victims with a convincing, conclusive answer on what happened and who was responsible, this marked the beginning of a direct confrontation with the parents of the victims and nongovernmental organizations.

To understand national security issues during the final years of the Peña Nieto Administration, it is essential to analyze the role of Tomás Zerón, the technical secretary of the National Security Council. At the time of the Ayotzinapa incident, he was the director of the Criminal Intelligence Unit of the Attorney General of Mexico (Ortega 2016). On October 28, 2014, one month after the students were "disappeared," Zerón and several agents under his command, as well as Agustín García Reyes, one of the alleged culprits for their disappearance, supposedly found a bag containing human remains along the Río San Juan. The remains appeared to be those of Alexander Mora, one of the disappeared. Nevertheless, investigative journalists have shown that Zerón was actually at the site one day later, on October 29, and that the black bags containing the skeletal remains of the students appeared with him (see e.g., Delgado 2016). This information contradicts the official story, the "historic truth." According to the authorities, the 43 students were cremated by Los Rojos, one of the cartels that infiltrated the government of Guerrero, while the survivors of the massacre insist that their classmates were disappeared by the federal government (SDP Noticias 2015).

The official story was also disputed in court, with the parents of the victims turning to the OAS Inter-American Court of Human Rights. This also led to a confrontation between the parents and the Peña Nieto Administration. The central arguments of civil society and the OAS were based around the search for the truth surrounding the students' disappearance, the establishment of the rule of law, scrutiny of Zerón's arguments (Esquivel 2018), and the possibility of investigating the role of the National Defense Secretariat's 27th Infantry Battalion (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2018). The case is further complicated because transnational organized crime has managed to discredit the authorities and the reconstruction of events to date remains unsatisfactory. Zerón was controversially removed from his prosecutorial position, but the Office of the President then promoted him to technical secretary

of the National Security Council. If the incoming administration of López Obrador seeks to find out the truth about the Ayotzinapa case, it would be well advised to investigate the responsibility, and fabricated arguments, of Zerón.

To Mexico's structural and historical challenges in terms of security and justice—which are rooted in corruption and impunity—we can add its interdependence with the United States. Mexico's geopolitical position as a key regional actor also has global implications when sharing a border with the most influential power in the international system. The next section examines these challenges in the immediate geopolitical context.

Mexico's National Security Threats in the Geopolitical Context

The subsequent discussion revolves around the issue of Mexico's geopolitical context and its consequences for the country's national security and the presence of threats. I first outline the elements tying together Mexico's geostrategic component, its defense, and the United States as its closest neighbor. Then follows a brief analysis of Mexican national security vulnerabilities and threats. Finally, I examine how Mexico has been constructed as a national security threat to the United States and what effects this has had on Mexico's own constructions of national security threats facing the nation.

Geostrategic Component, Defense, and the United States

Mexico's territory includes approximately two million square kilometers of land, an over three million square kilometer Exclusive Economic Zone, and more than 11,000 kilometers of coastline. By territory, Mexico is the world's 14th largest country and its Exclusive Economic Zone is the 9th largest. Mexico's land and seas are trafficking routes for the transportation of goods and people between Central and South America and North America. This geostrategic location provides many opportunities to secure Mexico's national development interests. But it also places Mexico in the middle of problems of global insecurity, presenting major national security challenges.

The Mexican Navy is the only institution with the characteristics and capacity needed to enforce the law on the seas and coasts, ensure maritime defense, and operate in domestic waters. It acts as both a navy and a coast guard. It has jurisdiction over islands, keys, reefs, bases, lakes, inland waters, and navigable areas, including the corresponding aerospace; it safeguards the sovereignty of Mexico's Exclusive Economic Zone.

The Mexican Army is responsible for defending Mexico on land, preserving the nation's independence and sovereignty, protecting its strategic infrastructure, protecting civilians in the event of natural disasters, and coordinating with civilian officials. To fulfill its mandate, the Mexican Armed Forces execute

a variety of tasks that include terrestrial, maritime, and aerial operations in Mexico's 32 states.

Mexico's location places the country in a situation that is simultaneously influential, privileged, and highly sensitive. Influential, because it has coasts on the world's two biggest oceans, the Pacific and the Atlantic, allowing for cultural and commercial exchanges with Europe and Asia along with its increasing exchanges with the United States and Central America. Privileged, because of the extent of its territory and coastlines, its immense potential on land and at sea, and its proximity to the world's biggest economic power. Sensitive, because it borders the United States, which places it within the U.S. security perimeter and increases threats such as terrorism and the trafficking of people, arms, and drugs (Secretaria de Marina Armada de México 2010).

Drug-producing countries, particularly cocaine producers, use Mexican territory as a bridge across which to transport drugs to the United States and have increasingly seen Mexico as a growing drug market. The threats produced by Mexico's geostrategic location are further compounded by an incomplete reform of the civilian and military national security structures that takes into account the extraordinary pressure of the United States and the challenge of confronting transnational cartels in Mexican territory.

From a geostrategic perspective, it is important to note that, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the defined perimeter of U.S. national security has drastically changed. For the first time in its history, this perimeter was explicitly extended to the entire planet. In North America, this led to the creation of the Northern Command (Northcom), which incorporates Mexico and Canada into this new security perimeter (Kilroy and Rodríguez 2013).

The Northcom Area of Responsibility has redefined U.S. national security, as well as its influence and reach in the international system. This corresponds to a major transformation in conceptual, doctrinal, and institutional priorities, incorporating the concept of the homeland and homeland security and defining defense in the context of a global view of the world order that has only been developed recently. Mexico must therefore rethink the dimensions, structures, and emphases of the U.S. national security strategy and the new context of transnational threats in the period from George W. Bush to Donald Trump.

The post-9/11 context has also changed the dynamic of the NAFTA years, which concentrated on trade. The national security strategy adopted by George W. Bush after these terrorist attacks created obstacles to cooperation between Mexico and the United States and caused significant strain to the relationship between the two countries on defense and security issues, since the Bush Administration's emphasis on the global war on terror was not shared by the Fox Administration (VMI 2010). This changed under the Calderón Administration with the launch of the Mérida Initiative, while Peña Nieto began to distance the Mexican government from the United States, which then became a clear threat to national security with Trump's rise to power.

The relationship between the United States and Mexico illustrates the contrast between their respective positions. As the United States continues to aggressively define a sweeping new security strategy, Mexican national security remains ambiguous. Its lack of strategy has been supplanted by the Mérida Initiative, thus linking its national security to U.S. national security through the creation of the Northcom. Unfortunately, the Mexican Armed Forces and the Minister of Foreign Affairs have not yet defined Mexico's national security strategy within the security perimeter defined by Washington. This situation becomes even more delicate due to the lack of control over the U.S.-Mexico border. This climate of insecurity touches on one of the most sensitive issues for both countries: U.S. homeland security and the potential for increasing intervention in Mexico.

Mexican National Security Vulnerabilities and Threats

It is well known that Mexican territory is a space that is commonly used for trafficking drugs from South America and illegal chemicals from Asia in route to their final destination in the United States. The Mexican Armed Forces focus their efforts on terrestrial, maritime, and aerial patrols in areas that are likely to be used by drug traffickers. These actions are undertaken with the support of a variety of national and international intelligence institutions. However, the country's military and civilian security apparatus are unable to cover the country's entire territory. Coordination and cooperation with the United States, Central America, and South America are therefore key to the fight against transnational threats.

Mexico has intercepted an increasing number of weapons coming from the United States, which confirms the existence of a constant flow of illegal weapons over the border. When these weapons are traced, it has been determined that the majority of them come from the states of Texas, Arizona, and California and that they are brought into Mexico by land. On the basis of this information, it can be inferred that there are direct market transactions in these states involving members of Mexican organized crime. Recognizing the danger to the shared border region, the U.S. government has taken steps to reduce illegal arms trafficking (Entous and Hodge 2010), but so far, the response has been insufficient, affecting only a small percentage of the actual cross-border flow of illegal guns (U.S. GAO 2016a). Southeastern Mexico has also become a strategic location for smuggling illegal weapons of all kinds, particularly over the border with Guatemala. These weapons have supplied both common criminals and members of criminal organizations.

As I have shown, in 2006, the Mexican government launched a new national security strategy to fight the growing power of criminal organizations and curb their ability to operate with impunity in certain areas of Mexico. These organizations responded to this government pressure with increased violence against law enforcement agencies. The government's efforts also appear to have

resulted in increasing conflicts among criminal organizations over lucrative drug trafficking routes. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2012) has noted that the Mexican government's strategy shift also affected trafficking routes in Central America. As it becomes more hazardous for traffickers to ship drugs (particularly cocaine) directly to Mexico by air or boat, an increasing share of the drug trade has begun to move overland through Central America, entering Mexico through its southern land borders with Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, Belize.

According to the UNODC (2012), this change in trafficking patterns has resulted in increased competition for territorial control among local organized crime groups. Mexican criminal organizations have also increasingly moved into Central America to gain control of these trafficking routes. As a result, violence has increased substantially throughout Central America. Mexicans and Central Americans have cited violent crime as one of the most important issues facing their societies. Many of the criminal organizations involved in the drug trade also traffic firearms across the region.

Although most of the firearms that have been seized in Mexico have been traced to the United States, they also travel in both directions across Mexico's southern border. It is difficult to ascertain the volume of firearms trafficked across Mexico's borders with Guatemala and Belize, but according to the Mexican government firearm seizure rates in the states along the southern border are low in comparison with those along the northern border and the country as a whole (U.S. GAO 2016b). According to a bilateral assessment conducted by U.S. and Mexican officials, many Central American countries lack the ability to independently trace firearms, which makes it difficult to determine the percentage of weapons seized in Mexico that originate in Central America (U.S. GAO 2016a). Also, both Guatemala and Belize allow for the commercial sale and purchase of firearms, so the availability of legal firearms differs considerably across the three countries. Guatemala and Belize are much smaller than Mexico and data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives indicate that the volume of firearms seized and traced in these countries is also much lower than in Mexico (U.S. GAO 2016b). From 2010 to 2014, for example, Mexico seized and traced around 83,000 firearms, while Guatemala seized and traced around 7,000, and Belize seized and traced around 300 (U.S. GAO 2016b).

Mexico, a National Security Threat to the United States?

The announcement by then-candidate Donald Trump that Mexico and many other countries are part of the problem for the United States in terms of jobs, immigration, domestic security, and global projection (Ye Hee Lee 2015) was an omen of a new, difficult era in the bilateral relationship. The executive order *Border Security and Enforcement Improvements*, issued on January 25, 2017, is intended to be the most far-reaching measure on this

issue. It is built around three objectives: security for the people, territorial integrity, and the enforcement of immigration laws. This plan aims to curb the growth of the undocumented population (within the United States), as well as restricting legal immigration from all regions of the world, starting with Mexico and encompassing all of Latin America and the Caribbean; to strengthen immigration controls and sanctions (internal and external); and to “improve” maritime, air, and land points of entry. “The purpose of this order is to direct executive departments and agencies to deploy all legal resources to secure the southern border and prevent further illegal immigration into the U.S., as well as rapidly repatriate illegal beings” (White House 2017b).

This executive order seeks to adjust the most important immigration programs since 1996 (the Clinton Administration’s Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 aimed at “preventing” terrorist acts), as well as border-strengthening measures such as the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Secure Fence Act, in order to build the containment structure for the naturalization, persecution, and expulsion of immigrants, crowned by the construction of the wall.

The systematic analysis of the southern border of the United States has therefore become an obligatory reference point for analyzing its relationship with the rest of the continent and the entire world. At the same time, its border policy with Mexico is subordinated to the new reforms of the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council that are aimed at ensuring better control of transportation, trade, the movement of people and goods, transnational organized crime, and the potential entry of terrorists into the United States. It also affects the passage of ships between the Pacific and Atlantic, air transport, policy for receiving satellite signals originating across the border, endemic species in the Pinacate Desert and the Great Altar Desert and shared seas, natural reserves, aquifers and climate zones, in addition to lawful transactions.

In places like Tijuana, there is already a large population boom of people from Haiti, Africa, Cuba, and Central America, among others, as well as the growth of Muslim communities due to refugees that either did not receive asylum in the United States or were deported and today live in Mexico. The shadowy presence of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, the criminal organization with the greatest power and growth rate in all of Mexico, can also be felt on the U.S. border (Martínez 2016). Trump’s organized crime policy calls for greater pressure on Mexican authorities if they do not stop the cartel’s expansion; he has even threatened a military response on Mexican soil to defend the U.S. border (Horton 2017); but how real is this threat? Likewise, Trump’s organized crime policy puts greater pressure on Mexican authorities to stop the spread of transnational organized crime. For example, the executive order *Transnational Criminal Organizations* is linked to immigration directives because it assumes that criminal networks enter the U.S. illegally (White House 2017a, 2017b). The Secretary of State, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Attorney General,

the Director of National Intelligence, and the head of the Drug Enforcement Agency, among others, have formed a group to fight this threat to national security without fully considering the role of the United States in the creation of terrorists, transnational organized crime, and large migratory flows. What is clearly visible is the hostility toward undocumented immigrants and the terrible humanitarian crisis that is already underway with the announcement of anti-immigrant and security measures for populations on both sides of the border.

Conclusions

Mexico is currently living with the consequences of not having constructed a state security system, as defined by Barry Buzan (1983), throughout the years of the Porfiriato (1877-80 and 1884-1911), the revolutionary regime (1929-2000), and the democratic transition (2000-18). On the contrary, as in the past, today Mexicans live under a system of regime security, which has consolidated a criminal structure that exists parallel to the legal system, neglecting to protect the country's institutions, territory, and population. This deeply undermines the international image of Mexico. A complicating factor is its geopolitical position, where the country shares borders, seas, and skies with the world's biggest drug consumer and the principal exporter of weapons to criminal organizations. The decision-making process led by Felipe Calderón (2006-12), which coincided with a profound change in the Western hemisphere due to the shift toward drug-trafficking routes through Mexican territory, created the spiral of violence that placed Mexico at the epicenter of violence in the region.

At first, Peña Nieto seemed very promising to the international community and to investors. The reality was that he did not even attempt democratic reforms on national security issues. The National Development and National Security Plans, signs of apparent modernization, were not accompanied by political will and means of implementation needed to tackle structural problems regarding violence, poverty, insecurity, and so forth. The backwardness of the Mexican state and the dangers of corruption and impunity allowed for the rise of organized crime, which was exacerbated by Mexico's geopolitical condition, its interdependence with the United States, and its proximity to Central and South America.

Unfortunately, from Fox to Peña Nieto, there has not been a clear national security reform under a democratic framework. The great dilemma is that the country's institutions and legal system are dysfunctional in terms of generating security for the state and the nation, as well as the property and lives of citizens. As a result, according to the National Public Safety System, there have been 234,000 homicides under the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations with 2017 officially recognized as the most violent year in recent Mexican history (Hernández Borbolla 2017). During the entire period from independence through the Mexican Revolution to the postauthoritarian era, Mexico has been

unable to establish a coherent national security strategy, which has come at an outrageous cost in terms of human lives.

Added to Mexico's structural and historical security and justice challenges in terms of security and justice are its interdependence with the United States and its geopolitical position as a key regional actor. As of this writing, the Mexico-U.S. relationship has acquired a new momentum following Andrés Manuel López Obrador's landslide electoral victory on July 1, 2018. Nevertheless, the leader of neither country has addressed critical issues such as organized crime, drug consumption, the sale of firearms, and the corruption that does so much damage to Mexico. The future is not promising: the negative legacy of the past makes it difficult to protect the state, the population, and the territory during the rise of new populisms in Mexico and around the world.

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