

Prospects and Possibilities for US-Mexico Security Cooperation during the Sheinbaum Administration

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The start of the Claudia Sheinbaum administration in Mexico provides an opportunity for strengthened US-Mexico counternarcotics and security cooperation. Although a close protégée of the former Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (whose security policies were deleterious to both Mexico and the United States), Sheinbaum unveiled a surprisingly comprehensive anti-crime plan in October 2024. During the López Obrador administration, criminality in Mexico reached unprecedented levels while Mexico’s law enforcement cooperation with the United States plummeted. Far from quelling violence, López Obrador’s hands-off approach toward organized crime groups facilitated growth in their power and functional reach in Mexico, and their expansion around the globe. These developments profoundly threaten US national interests as well as the Mexican state and society. It is increasingly likely that Mexico will turn into a narcostate, even if a stable one. Although the structural legacies and legal and policy frameworks that López Obrador handed over to his successor hamper the implementation of more effective anti-crime policies in Mexico, the United States can embrace the various positive elements of Sheinbaum’s security plan. It should broaden its counternarcotics policies vis-à-vis Mexico to tackle the entire spectrum of criminal activities of Mexican criminal groups, beyond fentanyl trafficking. Countering fentanyl trafficking itself, a key priority for the United States, will be enhanced by a broader and smarter approach. The United States also needs to strengthen its anti-crime policies at home and look beyond relying on Mexico to counter migration to the United States.

Crime Trends and Anti-Crime Policies during the López Obrador Administration

Mexican drug trafficking groups, including the two most powerful ones—the Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)—are the principal producers and traffickers of the deadly fentanyl they smuggle into the United States, and methamphetamine and cocaine they smuggle globally. They also have many profound negative effects on Mexico.

During the López Obrador administration, not only did crime and violence in Mexico remain high, but criminal groups began acting with far greater impunity and brazenness and intensified their takeover of legal economies and state institutions. As part of its “Hugs-Not-Bullets” security strategy, the López Obrador administration announced a goal of reducing homicide rates from 25 per 100,000 in 2018 to 4 per 100,000 in 2021.¹ It failed to accomplish that. In 2023, there were 31,062 homicides, with the corresponding rate of 24 per 100,000.²

In fact, criminal violence in all forms has notably worsened across Mexico under the López Obrador government. Forced disappearances have been an increasingly common tactic used by Mexican criminal groups to incite terror while also placating national and state level authorities. The vast majority of the disappeared will never be found alive. In May 2023, the Mexican National Registry of Missing and Unlocated Persons (RNPDNO) put the total number of the missing from the Felipe Calderón administration through the López Obrador administration at 115,967, with some half having disappeared during the López Obrador

administration.³ Infuriated by the exposure of its ineffective anti-crime policies, the López Obrador government fired the RNPDO staff and after a politicized review, announced that the number of the missing was only 12,377, violating its early promise to bring justice to the families of the disappeared.⁴

Egregious violence in Mexico has also become brazen, exhibiting criminal groups' sense of impunity. This has taken the form of political violence, such as frequent assassinations and attempted assassinations of high-level Mexican security officials, politicians, and journalists; cartel convoy activity in public spaces; and narco-blockades of some of Mexico's key ports of entry to the United States.⁵ In the state of Michoacán, where CJNG has been fighting with local criminal groups such as Carteles Unidos over methamphetamine production labs as well as extortion and takeover of agricultural production of avocado, citrus, and grain, and logging and mining, the battle tactics have come to resemble war. They have featured large urban battles between convoys of armed men as well as the extensive use of armed drones to carpet bomb villages displacing hundreds of thousands.

Such brazenness matters: it discredits the state's capacity to enforce rule of law and intimidates society and government officials as well as the criminal group rivals.⁶ Yet President López Obrador amplified the impunity and intimidation power of the criminal groups by publicly appealing to them repeatedly to reduce violence.⁷ Despite these pleas, Mexican criminal groups control extensive territories where the government has only limited control and sporadic access.

Underpinning the criminal violence is a bipolar war between the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG over the domination of Mexico's criminal market. This war spans the rest of Latin America and has brought violence to places previously considered islands of peace in Latin America, such as Ecuador, Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile, the latter two also representing areas of expanding operations of the Brazilian cartel Comando Primeiro da Capital.

But myriad smaller criminal groups operate underneath the two large Mexican cartels in Mexico. The fighting these smaller criminal groups and their switching sides among their large criminal overlords, such as the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG, has made the Mexican criminal market extremely difficult to stabilize for Mexican authorities and the criminal groups themselves.⁸

Complicating the security picture is the inner conflict of the Sinaloa Cartel and its potential splintering. Infighting among the three key branches—the Chapitos branch (sons of the notorious founder of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán who is now imprisoned in the United States), the Mayos branch, and the Caborca faction of incarcerated Rafael Caro-Quintero—has been intensifying over the past several years. This conflict became acute in the second half of 2024 when one of the Chapitos kidnapped the Sinaloa Cartel's co-founder Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada García. Along with surrendering himself to US authorities, El Chapo's son also handed El Mayo over to them.⁹ It remains to be seen whether as a result of the intense infighting among the Chapitos and the Mayos, the Sinaloa Federation will continue operating as a coherent entity or officially break up into fully separate groups and, if so, which group will become dominant.

Mexican criminal groups have not only diversified into a wide arrange illegal economies, such as extortion, human smuggling and trafficking, illegal logging and fishing, wildlife trafficking, and cyberscams, but they are also taking over legal economies in Mexico.¹⁰ No business in Mexico, no matter what its size, is immune from extortion attempts by Mexican criminal groups. Large Mexican and multinational companies devote increasing portions of their budgets to security measures.¹¹ But the criminal infiltration and takeover of legal economies, such as of legal fishing, logging, mining, alcohol and cigarette retail, goes far beyond extortion.

My fieldwork in Michoacán, Acapulco, and Baja California Sur in October and November 2021 and in Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Puebla, and Quintana Roo in June and July 2023 showed that criminal groups dictate to agricultural producers and fishers when they can harvest, demanding that their accountant be present.¹² They set prices below market levels and force producers to sell only to them, burning down the houses, storage facilities, and facilities of those who disobey them or killing those who speak out against them and their families.¹³ In addition to lowering the revenues of businesses, the narco-extortion also increases the costs of goods sold in Mexico, including staple goods as businesses pass at least a part of the extortion fee onto customers.¹⁴ The criminal groups are forcing processing plants to process the goods they bring in, such as seafood, and issue it with fake certificates for exports to the United States and elsewhere.¹⁵ They are demanding that hotels in areas of their operations buy only the seafood the criminal groups deliver to them. They are increasingly investing in acquiring their own processing plants.¹⁶ In areas of intense narco-control, the criminal groups also prohibit that anyone open an alcohol or cigarette retail store without their permission.

The influence of Mexican criminal groups is more than economic, but also shapes political realities in Mexico by corrupting government institutions and civil society. For decades, successive Mexican administrations have failed to purge judicial and law enforcement institutions, from the municipal to the national level, of cartel infiltration. This creates a vicious cycle of corruption and impunity, as the same bodies that would be responsible for investigating and prosecuting criminal influence in government institutions (and crime generally) are the ones beset with criminal interference and infiltration. This cycle of corruption results in heinous levels of impunity: Only 3.7 percent of violent crimes in Mexico resulted in effective prosecution in 2022 according to the Mexican think tank México Evalúa.¹⁷

Beyond government institutions, criminal groups in Mexico have long targeted elected politicians for intimidation, corruption, and cooption. Currently, however, they seek not only to influence those in power, but also those who seek it. Political violence is increasingly inflicted on candidates and is used to determine who can run and who will win an election. Mexico's 2024 elections—electing the president as well as representatives for both chambers of the Mexican Congress as well as governors and municipal authorities—were the most violent ever. From September 2023 through the election day of June 2, 2024, at least 889 people were attacked for political and electoral reasons and 268 were murdered, including 39 political candidates or expected candidates.¹⁸

Over the course of the López Obrador administration, cartel activity went essentially unchecked. Formally, the López Obrador security strategy of “hugs, not bullets”¹⁹ prioritized socio-economic programs to deal with crime and address the causes that propel young people to join criminal groups, such as lack of education and job opportunities. Amounting to another form of direct cash handouts, these socio-economic programs ended up amorphous and ill-defined and have not had any meaningful short-term impact on crime. Worse yet, López Obrador’s anti-crime strategy never entailed a security or law enforcement component. In fact, López Obrador instructed the Mexican military, National Guard, and law enforcement agencies to avoid using force in response to criminal groups.²⁰ Essentially, the López Obrador administration hoped that by not challenging the criminal groups in any way, violence would subside as they would resettle their turfs. That didn’t happen. Instead, the lack of law enforcement strategy and the severe policy constraints on Mexican security agencies essentially gave the criminals a *carte blanche* to dangerously expand their power while continuing campaigns of violence.

US-Mexico Relations during the López Obrador Administration

In addition to mounting problematic internal anti-crime policies, López Obrador also significantly reduced US-Mexico security cooperation. From the start, he was deeply uncomfortable with the extent to which the United States could have visibility on the pervasive infiltration of criminal groups into Mexican institutions. Also blaming the US-Mexico bilateral security framework—the Mérida Initiative—and its associated policies for criminal violence in Mexico, he sought to end that bilateral security framework.

That resolve only strengthened as a result of the October 2020 arrest of former Mexican Secretary of Defense Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos by US officials for collaborating with a vicious Mexican drug cartel. In retaliation for the US arrest, López Obrador threatened to end all law enforcement cooperation with the United States and expel all US law enforcement personnel from Mexico.²¹ Although the Trump administration handed Cienfuegos back to Mexico where he was rapidly acquitted, the López Obrador administration responded by US law enforcement activities in Mexico and hampered bilateral cooperation by passing a national security law on foreign agents in December 2020.²²

Throughout the rest of the López Obrador administration, bilateral cooperation failed to fully recover. Even after the Mérida Initiative was replaced with a new framework in the fall of 2021—The US- Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities—the Mexican government refused to engage in joint raids with US counterparts within Mexico, or even allow US law enforcement officials to ride along on lab busts or arrest operations. The activities of the US Drug Enforcement Administration in Mexico became particularly deleteriously constrained and the intelligence flows between the two countries dramatically shrank. The Mexican government was willing to collaborate solely on actions centered on the US-Mexico border or within US territory.

In the spring of 2023, López Obrador began falsely denying that fentanyl was produced or consumed in Mexico.²³ Later on he backed away from the claims, but the Mexican government systematically manipulated and exaggerated data about the number of drug labs it busted in Mexico.²⁴ But even when the clandestine drug labs were actually raided by Mexican authorities, few investigations, arrests, network dismantling and prosecutions followed. With the networks left largely intact by Mexican law enforcement agencies, rebuilding labs has been easy for them. To placate the United States reeling from devastating fentanyl deaths, the one domain where the López Obrador administration was sporadically willing to collaborate was in occasionally arresting top criminals, with intelligence provided by the United States. As long as the high-value target (HVT) operations did not entail visible showdowns of force between the Mexican military and the criminals, the Mexican government was sometimes willing to arrest powerful narcos.²⁵ Yet without an accompanying or preceding dismantling of the middle operational layer of the network, HVT practiced in Mexico since the Calderón administration, has continued to be a driver of violence in the country, triggering cartel fragmentation and infighting.

The Structural Legacies of the López Obrador Administration

Many of the bad security policies of the López Obrador administration became codified in institutional restructuring and constitutional changes. To promote a Fourth Transformation²⁶ in Mexico to bring justice and economic empowerment to Mexico's many poor, López Obrador sought to weaken and dismantle many of Mexico's civilian government and independent institutions and bureaucracies that acted as checks and balances on executive power. His salary reforms drove out scores of competent technocrats, leaving agencies to be run by his young loyalists.

The justice sector was hit particularly badly. It also faced intense political pressures during his administration. At odds with the judiciary across his entire administration, López Obrador compounded the harms in September 2024 when he pushed through a constitutional reform whereby all Mexican judges, including Supreme Court justices, would be elected by a popular vote. In the context of criminal groups' already extensive manipulation of Mexican elections through bribery, intimidation, and outright assassinations, the justice reform provides a perfect opportunity for Mexican cartels to get judges friendly to their criminal agendas elected across Mexican courts.

The reform does not just jeopardize the already-weak neutrality of Mexico's judicial system and risk its further politicization amidst an already critically weak rule of law context. It also eviscerates prior accomplishments in strengthening Mexico's overburdened judiciary achieved by abandoning an old inquisitorial system and adopting an oral-trial-based accusatorial system. For decades, the old Mexican justice system had known for its slowness and massive backlogs of cases, corruption, politicalization and subordination to criminal groups.²⁷ The reforms helped, but now, the system is undermined anew.

Beyond the judiciary, some agencies were dismantled altogether, such as the Federal Police, ostensibly because of its infiltration by criminal groups, and civilian intelligence agencies. This has decimated most of Mexico's criminal investigative capabilities, leaving only inadequate numbers of investigators in the federal and state attorney general offices. The new institution López Obrador put in its stead—the National Guard—lacks not just investigative capacities, but also, and crucially, mandates. Perhaps the one positive aspect that came out of López Obrador's September 2024 constitutional reforms was, that the National Guard was permanently placed under the control of the Mexican military, which, though a problematic development, gave it mandates to work alongside civilian counterparts from attorney general's offices in investigations. While this move further militarizes Mexico's public safety and rule of law, it means that the National Guard could eventually become more effective in fighting crime.

Overall, not just public security, but public policies have become militarized in Mexico during the López Obrador administration. With his distrust of civilian institutions that he saw as part of the “mafia of power” of the country's political and business elite, López Obrador used the Mexican military as his go-to policy implementor. He tasked the military with running Mexico's airports, ports, and the national custom agency. He also handed over to the military the construction of railroads and other critical infrastructure as well as luxury apartments and hotels.²⁸ Now sitting on top of budgets worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually and receiving funds from some of them in perpetuity, the Mexican military found itself flush with income unseen in decades. These tasks deplete the focus of the Mexican military from public safety issues, while these revenue streams reduce the civilian control over the military.

The Security Strategy Plans of the Sheinbaum Administration

Like López Obrador, Claudia Sheinbaum highlighted poverty, marginalization, and the lack of opportunity for young people as the root causes of crime in the country, without mentioning rampant impunity.²⁹ But once in office, the Sheinbaum administration revealed a more robust and promising security plan, even if it left many questions unanswered and presented massive challenges in execution.

The Sheinbaum administration's overarching “peace-and-security strategy”³⁰ consists of four pillars:

1. addressing root causes of crime, particularly in youth;
2. strengthening the capacity of the National Guard to arrest criminals;
3. strengthening investigations and intelligence, including through the creation of a

National Intelligence System; and

4. improving coordination among different branches of law enforcement and the judicial sector, such as prosecutors.

Its *Security Strategy for the First 100 Days* fleshed out further details in October 2024.³¹ “To pacify the country,” her administration prioritized reducing homicides in the 10 deadliest cities and surrounding municipalities where a quarter of all homicides in Mexico were perpetrated last year.³² The list includes Tijuana, Acapulco, Ciudad Juárez, Guanajuato, and Colima. These are localities with varied crime dynamics and criminal groups, but major cartel fighting, including between the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG, takes place in many of them. Multiple Mexican administrations sought to significantly reduce violence there, but either failed altogether or were not able to sustain security improvements, many of which stemmed from one criminal group temporarily winning dominance over others.³³

Beyond the 10 cities-municipalities, the Sheinbaum administration also highlighted the entire state of Chiapas, where warfare between the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG and many other forms of violence exploded in 2022, becoming a top priority. The Sheinbaum administration also promised to tackle extortion of the lime industry by criminal groups in the state of Michoacán, specifically in the municipalities of Nueva Italia, Antúnez, Buenavista, Tepalcatepec, Aguililla, and Apatzingán. But it did not commit itself to protect other agricultural production, extractive industries, or other businesses in Michoacán or elsewhere in the country, even though all are under narco-threat.

The federal government is also set to develop a special security policy to improve highway security and reduce cargo theft by Mexican criminal groups through the creation of checkpoints on highways and the deployment of surveillance technologies. The Sheinbaum administration has also committed itself to combatting fentanyl trafficking and announced the creation of a new “alternative” security cabinet made up of officials from the Ministry of Finance, specifically its Financial Intelligence Unit, the Federal Prosecutor’s Office, the state oil company Pemex, and the federal tax agency, and other government institutions tasked with combatting financial crimes and money laundering.

Many elements of the Sheinbaum strategy are praiseworthy. But the strategy also leaves many troubling holes, and its implementation will be a massive challenge. To various degrees, it echoes previous programs, including of previous Mexican governments, and it remains to be seen whether the Sheinbaum administration will be able to design and implement the strategies better. For example, will the anti-crime youth programs be better designed than the amorphous, ill-defined, and unevaluated programs of the López Obrador administration? Although financial intelligence can provide invaluable insights into criminal networks and result in impactful arrests, the anti-money laundering efforts of López Obrador mostly targeted his perceived political enemies and had little impact on the functionality of Mexican criminal groups.

Most appropriately, Sheinbaum wants to strengthen investigative capacities in Mexico—by increasing the number of federal investigators in Mexico by 6,000-8,000. That will take time. Expanding investigative and intelligence- capacity of Mexican public safety agencies and prioritizing investigations to dismantle and effectively prosecute Mexican criminal groups is essential, and another praiseworthy element of Sheinbaum’s security vision.

The fourth goal of improving coordination, something many a Mexican government has put on its agenda, includes the federal government creating nationwide standards for Mexico's 32-state police, prosecutors, and prisons. The often-poor quality standards at the state level have been a key problem of anti-crime strategies. But will the Sheinbaum administration be better able to implement those coordination and federal oversight objectives than its four predecessors and will it resurrect adequate federal resource support for the budgets of state police forces, decimated by the López Obrador administration?

US Interests

While Mexican criminal groups do not engage in the levels of violence in the United States that they do in Mexico, their trafficking and other criminal activities in Mexico pose serious threats to US public health, security, economic, and geostrategic interests.

Mexican criminal groups—particularly the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG— are the principal suppliers of fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, and other illicit drugs to the United States. These substances are increasingly mixed into all kinds of drugs in the United States, killing tens of thousands of people per year. The purest and most potent in the world, Mexican methamphetamine has also become increasingly lethal and like fentanyl, it is largely produced from non-scheduled chemical precursors with limited government regulations that the Mexican cartels import from China and India.³⁴

Mexican drug trafficking groups have been to sell fentanyl and methamphetamine through pharmacies in Mexico that operate in major international tourist areas and cater to US customers. For decades, American citizens have resorted to buying their regular medication in Mexico since they struggle to cover the high costs of medications in the United States.³⁵ As I saw during my June 2023 fieldwork in various parts of Mexico, these pharmacies openly advertise drugs such as antibiotics, anabolic steroids, and prescription opiates, but sell them illegally without prescription. Furthermore, these pharmacies do not inform their international customers that Mexican cartels mix fentanyl and methamphetamine into drugs such as oxycontin and Adderall, to supply the illegal market and get new victims hooked. The pharmacies thus pose enormous life-threatening public health hazards and serve as vectors of international drug trafficking.

As a result of investigative work by *Los Angeles Times* and *Vice* and the subsequent US government pressure, the Mexican government finally shut down tens of these cartel-linked pharmacies between March 2023 and December 2023.³⁶ Hundreds more, however, remain. Moreover, the López Obrador government did not appear to mount any investigation into which cartels or illicit drug networks were supplying the fentanyl- and methamphetamine-laced drugs to the pharmacies, even though a handful of pharmacy managers and shop assistants selling the illegal drugs were arrested.³⁷ These pharmacies and this form of illicit drug supply continues to pose a high threat to the safety of US citizens.

Nor is the adulteration of fake medications with fentanyl and methamphetamine the sole problem. The retail of any controlled medication without prescription can pose significant harm. For example, the unauthorized sale of antibiotics intensifies the spread of drug-resistant bacteria—a grave global public health, economic, and security threat. Although Mexican criminal groups are more cautious of inflicting harm on US citizens than on Mexican ones for fear of US law enforcement,³⁸ US and other foreign citizens living or traveling in Mexico can find themselves subject to extortion, murder or kidnapping, whether on purpose or because of cartel hits gone awry.³⁹

No terrorist attack against the United States has ever originated across the US southern border, with both the Mexican government and Mexican cartels themselves understanding the high costs of failing to counter any terrorist activity in Mexico.⁴⁰ As the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have become far more involved in human smuggling -- charging extortion fees to human smugglers, fostering logistical chains for human smuggling, and recruiting migrants from as far away as West Africa -- their level of control and screening over migrant flows may have been reduced. Similarly, the increased volume of Russian-speaking migrants coming to Mexico and crossing the US-Mexico border could augment the risk of Russian criminal actors entering the United States illegally or setting up shop in Mexico.

The intensity of risk from migration nonetheless remains relatively low, because, as in all cases, the vast majority of migrants are escaping political oppression and economic misery and do not seek to perpetrate crime, and because the Russian criminal groups would face an intense and violent opposition from Mexican criminal groups if they encroached on their turf. The greater risk is that Russian intelligence agents in Mexico could seek to recruit assets among Mexican criminal groups. Yet, despite US objections, the López Obrador administration tolerated a significant increase in the presence of Russian intelligence agents in Mexico, even as European countries began expelling them.⁴¹

Mexican criminal groups also pose a variety of economic threats to the United States and to US citizens. Not only do Mexican products taxed by the narcos head from Mexico to the United States and contribute to the coffers of Mexican criminal groups, but the criminal violence and theft in Mexico, such as truck-hijacking and narco-blockades of legal ports of entry, jeopardize the safety of US-Mexico supply chains. The increasing economic reach of Mexican criminal groups into legal economies in Mexico⁴² also impose economic costs on the United States and on the economic growth enabled by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).⁴³

The criminal infiltration into legal economic could jeopardize US geostrategic objectives of de-risking from China through nearshoring to Mexico as well as expose US businesses and individuals to grave legal liabilities. Increasingly, the Mexican cartels, most prominently CJNG harm US citizens through cyberscams, such as timeshare scams. Such scams and other cybercrime activities have cost US citizens hundreds of millions of dollars, often destroying the entire savings of US families.⁴⁴ Timeshares are also a tool of money laundering for the cartels, as are investments in construction, including of hotels and resorts, and hospitality

services in areas of high tourism.⁴⁵ Overall, Mexican criminal groups use a wide range of money laundering methods, including cryptocurrencies.

A particularly problematic form of illicit value transfer is the increasing payments for fentanyl and meth precursors with Mexican wildlife products, coveted in China for Traditional Chinese Medicine, aphrodisiacs, and other forms of consumption. Instead of paying Chinese suppliers of precursors chemicals with cash, Mexican cartels pay them in wildlife.⁴⁶

This value-transfer method engenders multiple serious threats to public health and safety, economic sustainability, food security, and global biodiversity. It can devastate Mexico's unique and valuable biodiversity and the transmission of dangerous zoonotic diseases, thus also posing a threat to national security.

Increasingly, Mexican criminal groups also utilize Chinese money laundering networks. The latter have become the go-to money launderers for Mexican cartels. Since various Chinese criminal groups also provide a variety of services to the Chinese government and intelligence agencies, such as developing networks of influence and corruption abroad and monitoring and repressing Chinese diaspora communities,⁴⁷ the intensified interactions among Mexican and Chinese criminal groups could also pose an intelligence and national security problem. These strong criminal relations could bring Mexican criminal groups to closer proximity with Chinese espionage agents.

In sum, the existing level of criminal takeover of Mexico and the possibility that this criminal takeover could be exploited by hostile powers poses extensive and multifaceted threats to the United States. Few international relationships are as directly consequential to the United States as the US-Mexico one.

US Policy Recommendations

The importance of US interests regarding Mexico and the severity of the criminal challenge that Mexico faces require that the United States elevate Mexico to the level of US interest priority on par with China and Russia. The narco-threat the key interests face also necessitates that the United States expands and strengthens its policy toolbox of dealing with Mexico. The sotto voce approach of the Biden administration failed to induce adequate cooperation from Mexico on a wide range of core issues, including countering fentanyl trafficking and the takeover of Mexico by criminal actors. So did the Trump administration's narrow focus on migration as the dominant bilateral issue.

Crucially, the United States must expand the aperture with which it approaches Mexican criminal groups: Countering their fentanyl trafficking is essential, but not sufficient. Since fentanyl trafficking is facilitated by parallel crime operations, thus, instead of narrowly countering fentanyl or lethal synthetic drug trafficking, the United States should take a holistic approach to counter the panorama of operations that criminal groups engage in.

This means that the United States should strongly support and incentivize actions by the Mexican government to start purging Mexican criminal groups from Mexico's legal economies and government institutions. It should support the Mexican government in moving beyond the sporadic hits and window dressing operations against criminal groups that characterized the López Obrador administration and toward mounting a sustained and comprehensive effort to roll back the criminal takeover of the Mexican state and society. If the Mexican government were, in fact, to move in this direction, Mexico's criminal groups would like amplify violence to deter such a comprehensive push against them. The United States should thus work with Mexico to prepare for and mitigate such violence so that the Mexican government and society can win the coercion battles against the cartels instead of backing down in front of the cartels as occurred during the López Obrador administration.

In collaborating with the Sheinbaum administration on countering fentanyl trafficking, the United States should embrace the Sheinbaum administration's emphasis on dismantling the structures of Mexican criminal groups and not default to either HVT or lab busting and seizures as the principal actions and measures of effort. Just as in its domestic policies the Biden administration publicly disavowed a narrow HVT approach,⁴⁸ so it should make comprehensive network dismantling a centerpiece of its policies in and with Mexico. The targeting of the middle, operational layer of criminal groups, not just on the crime bosses, prevents an easy and violent regeneration of the leadership in the targeted criminal group. This is especially common when most of the middle layer is arrested in one sweep.

If middle-layer targeting were combined with Mexican forces being prepositioned or rapidly deploying to areas where such arrest operations took place, dismantling the middle layer could also reduce resulting turf violence. Promoting such policies would allow anti-crime operations to be more politically sustainable. But the Mexican government remains deeply challenged in middle-layer targeting for several reasons: It continues to lack both tactical and particularly strategic intelligence on Mexico's criminal groups.

The Mexican law enforcement apparatus also remains extensively corrupt, with intelligence leaks to criminal groups frequent, making it risky for Mexican investigators and intelligence analysts to sit on any intelligence or asset long enough to develop a comprehensive picture of the middle layer of a criminal group. The intelligence phase of middle-layer targeting can take a long time during which political leaders have little visible action to show to the public.

The United States should offer Mexico assistance with building the intelligence and investigative structures and capacities the Sheinbaum administration seeks to establish. Helping to build tactical kinetic capacities of the National Guard could also be useful since a greater internal confidence of the force may increase its willingness to do more than just passively patrol. The primary US focus and objective should be to help Mexico build up the robust investigative and intelligence capacities against criminal groups and hostile powers. A strong component of such assistance must be strongly anchored anti-corruption mechanisms, such as vetting systems and internal affairs units, to root out existing and prevent future corruption of Mexican security and rule-of-law agencies.

After years of having law enforcement cooperation with Mexico severely constrained by the Mexican government, the United States should not allow itself to be seduced into delivering capacity building and technical assistance to Mexico without Mexico enabling and implementing such strong anti-corruption and anti-criminal-infiltration measures. Purging out the extensive corruption and criminal networks from Mexican institutions must be an indispensable twin element of US assistance provision. Expanded US access will once again fall flat if Mexican rule-of-law institutions remain corrupt.

Effective prosecutions of arrested members of criminal networks are a critical component of network dismantling. Even if the Sheinbaum administration strengthens the country's investigative capacities to deliver better trial evidence, the narco-pressures on elected judges will likely result in an effective prosecution rate remaining inadequately low. To secure guilty verdicts and obtain further intelligence, the United States should thus encourage the extradition to the United States of as many top and middle-layer actors of Mexican criminal actors as possible.

Expanding the presence of US law enforcement agents in Mexico and pushing for, at minimum, their intensive observer and ride-along role in Mexican anti-crime operations should be a constant and core focus of US-Mexico law enforcement collaboration. The United States should no longer allow itself to be placated with Mexico's questionable reports of labs busted and the amounts of drugs and precursors seized, without such numbers being verified by the ride-along US law enforcement agents. And the United States should work with Mexico to build out just busts and seizures into the dismantling of Mexican criminal networks.

In its own targeting, the United States should also create strong incentives for Mexican criminal groups to refuse to cooperate with any anti-US state actors which may seek to recruit them. Although the United States has a greater capacity to effectuate such deterrence effects vis-à-vis large criminal groups than Mexico's many small ones, it should communicate to the criminal groups that if they cooperate with anti-U.S. espionage, sabotage, and other clandestine operations of other governments, they will become as much a target as groups trafficking to the United States highly lethal drugs such as fentanyl.

Collaborating in anti-money laundering efforts and financial intelligence build up against Mexican criminal groups in Mexico and in the United States provides another venue for strengthened US-Mexico collaboration. Just like in its own anti-money laundering operations, the United States should encourage Mexico to focus on countering the role of Chinese money-laundering operations servicing Mexican cartels and on the value transfer among illegal economies, such as logging and wildlife trafficking, increasingly utilized by the cartels to evade banking sector controls.

Finally, the United States should explore opportunities to enhance cooperation in the public health domain to respond to expanding drug use in Mexico. To start with, the United States should encourage Mexico—as well as adopt in the United States—robust wastewater monitoring

to detect drug use and its evolving patterns. Other concrete measures include expanding naloxone availability in Mexico to reverse opioid overdoses as well as methadone maintenance and other medication-based treatment of those suffering from opioid use disorder. The United States and Mexico can also collaborate on developing medication-based and other effective treatment and harm reduction measures of lethal methamphetamine, modalities currently woefully lacking around the world.

To encourage Mexico to adopt the above measures, the United States should seek to foster a problem-solving cooperative approach with the Sheinbaum administration. Many aspects of the Sheinbaum administration's security plans well match the above U.S. objectives. However, if the Sheinbaum administration does not show a far greater willingness to meaningfully collaborate in anti-crime efforts than the López Obrador administration did, the United States needs to have other measures at the ready. Linking security issues to the 2026 review of USMCA should be one of them.

Other measures can include significantly intensified border inspections, including intrusive ones, even if they significantly slow down legal trade and cause substantial damage to Mexican goods, such as agricultural products. Under optimal circumstances, US-Mexico law enforcement cooperation would be robust enough to make legal border crossings fast and efficient and cargo inspections away from the border at loading sites, as the Obama administration sought to do. But if Mexico's collaboration remains inadequate, the United States should be ready to absorb and impose the costs of slower border flows due to the need to inspect cargo more intrusively. The economic costs will be painful to the United States too, but the threat merits absorbing them. Either way, the United States should also seek to significantly expand non-intrusive technologies at the border to detect contraband.

Furthermore, packages of leverage, including indictment portfolios and visa denials, should also be developed against Mexican national security and law enforcement officials and politicians who sabotage rule of law in Mexico, assist Mexican criminal groups, and perniciously hamper law enforcement cooperation with the United States. If better cooperation from Mexico is not forthcoming, the United States should indict and arrest former and current Mexican officials complicit in criminal activities.

The Sheinbaum administration may react just like the López Obrador administration did during the Cienfuegos arrest, trying to shut down all collaboration. Washington must anticipate that and have a cascade of indictments and other countermeasures at the ready to neutralize such leverage. Thus, such indictment and arrest decisions need to be carefully evaluated and planned out at the highest US levels, with input integrated from the US interagency system, and not take place as a surprise decision of a singular agency. But dismantling the top echelons of corruption networks in Mexico is not just a pressure tool, it is essential to improving rule of law in Mexico.

In an ideal circumstance, Washington and Mexico City would collaborate in such efforts to purge out criminal infiltration of Mexican institutions and against corrupt government officials. Unfortunately, the two countries are far from such a healthy state of collaboration. The United States must find a way to break out of the migration policy straitjacket which subordinates all other bilateral interests to the imperative that Mexico reduce and host the flows of migrants to the United States. Large flows of migrants from across Latin America and around the globe seeking to enter the United States will persist for years and perhaps decades. In responding to that migration, the United States cannot simply give up on its other interests with Mexico.

Either the United States finds a way to adopt a comprehensive migration reform, or it must develop a counter-leverage against Mexico's use of the on-and-off spigot of migration to deflect US pressure on other issues. Slowing down the legal trade across the border or issuing indictments of Mexican officials on criminal charges can also serve as such countermeasures. In the short term, such tough dealing with Mexico would be painful not just for Mexico, but for the United States as well. But a willingness to stand tough and absorb the costs in the short term will far better protect US vital interests with Mexico than letting itself be perpetually trapped in the migration policy straitjacket.

Tough dealing does not mean unilateral military action against Mexico. As history has shown, Military strikes against drug targets in Mexico, such as drug labs or visible military formations of Mexican criminal groups, accomplishes little. Most such targets are in urban places, and significant collateral damage could not be avoided. And busted labs or killed leaders would easily be replaced, as they are now. The counternarcotics and anti-crime impact of such a dramatic policy would be extremely limited.

Such a policy would be deeply counterproductive and severely jeopardize the scope of relations with our vital trading partner and neighbor. It could also motivate a Mexican government to give even freer reigns to the intelligence operations of hostile powers, such as Russia, in Mexico. Deleteriously, it would eviscerate the willingness of the Mexican government to cooperate with the United States in the sustained and persistent efforts against Mexican criminal groups that are necessary for reversing the narco-takeover of Mexico for protecting key US interests.

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