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Three Years Together: **The New U.S.-Mexico Security Relationship**

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Over the past three years, the U.S.-Mexico relationship has been dominated by the security agenda. Common security has replaced border dynamics such as migration and trade that used to be the key issues between our countries. This is a positive step in our relationship as it embodies a new thinking that takes into account our common future. There is a sense of co-responsibility that can be characterized as historic. However, it is still at a very fragile initial stage and it is very vulnerable to misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

2010 will mark the third, and so far last, programmed year of the Mérida Initiative, a *sui generis* assistance agreement that has governed the U.S.-Mexico security agenda. With an unavoidable comparison with Plan Colombia, the Mérida Initiative has at times been referred to as Plan Mexico. Although their main objective is similar in that they both seek to strengthen institutions, their respective means differentiate them substantially. The Mérida Initiative has been crafted as a multi-dimensional security program with a regional perspective. What has materialized from it is difficult to explain, as we are only now experiencing the effects of its implementation.

The program began with an equipment-heavy phase, which was definitively slow to execute. This was a sensitive issue as past anti-narcotic equipment transfers have had mixed outcomes. As an example, the 1996 transfer of four C-26 surveillance aircraft was a success and they continue to be used to this day, but the transfer of 73 Huey helicopters was a complete disaster and disrupted U.S.-Mexico military cooperation over the next decade.¹ This meant that any

¹ The helicopters required substantial refurbishment, and after one crashed killing its crew they were labelled as junk by Mexican officials and returned to the U.S.

equipment included in this “fresh start” would have to be factory new. Production of the helicopters was delayed due to bureaucratic entanglements in letters of offer and acceptance, and start work orders with the manufacturers. Similarly, the Spanish-built CN-235 Persuader maritime surveillance aircraft required the selection and installation of mission equipment from a variety of sources.

The fact that neither the Bell 412 nor the CN-235 Persuaders are operated by the U.S. military² further complicated this. The U.S. could have prevented the imminent critique of “too few, too late” through the immediate transfer of similar active duty U.S. equipment,³ on an interim-loan basis, signaling an immediate concern to increase Mexico’s air mobility and detection capabilities.

Equipment becomes both significant and symbolic, because when a program relies heavily on intangibles⁴, we need to have something tangible to show for it at the end. This is not to imply that the eight helicopters and four fixed-wing aircraft are not appreciated; they will be very useful. The main strength of Mérida comes from obtaining “connectivity” between our agencies in what is being labeled as an “intermestic” (International-domestic) approach. In this regard, Mexico requires a culture of security and this is where U.S. experience can shorten the learning curve.

Screening, vetting, as well as passive and active counter-intelligence techniques developed during the Cold War are invaluable, as our current operational environment is not unlike the Cold War spy-vs.-spy era the U.S. experienced. Another big area for cooperation is financial intelligence, something that may lead us into a re-engineering of our financial sector.

Both of these, as well as judicial system reform, take a long time to take shape, in some cases decades. It is important that the foundations for long-term cooperation are established through multi-year programs in order for them to survive new administrations on both sides of the border.

Looking beyond Mérida

In his talk on “Beyond Mérida” at Georgetown in early February, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, clearly articulated the “Four Pillars” of U.S. security cooperation with Mexico, that are intended to (1) disrupt the operational capacity of organized crime; (2) support Mexico’s capacity to sustain rule of law, especially by reforming the police and judicial system; (3) improve organization and management of the shared border to better deal with commercial and security requirements; and (4) build strong and resilient communities.⁵

² The U.S. Coast Guard operates a version of the CN-235 known as the HC-144 Ocean Sentry, with a different mission suite.

³ Such as Blackhawk transport helicopters and P-3 Orion maritime Patrol aircraft.

⁴ Train the trainer, rule of law programs, institution building courses, intelligence and counter intelligence software, vetting processes, *etc.*

⁵ Bailey, John, Merida 2.0, *Reforma* newspaper, February 28, 2010 p.12.

However, I couldn't help but notice the very brief mention of reducing drug demand. Truth be told, there is actually little to be said. Rehabilitation is only successful in approximately 13% of the cases. Prevention may be the best tool, but the efficacy of that too is sketchy. The U.S. illegal drug market is composed of some 114 million Americans that have consumed drugs at some time in their lives (that is 1 out of 2 Americans ages 15 to 74) and about 20 million that are current consumers.⁶ Legalization is very difficult to achieve politically. Increased criminalization also seems out of the question, as the U.S. justice and penal system would be operationally incapable to process and jail tens of millions of consumers. One alternative would be to freeze drug consumers' financial assets and tax them for rehabilitation programs until that 13% expands. That could reduce the flow of cash that funds our common enemies.

By analyzing the Four Pillar Strategy and the U.S. FY 2011 funding allocations for Mérida, it is apparent that U.S. diplomacy is taking a step back in its engagement with the Mexican military and focusing on supporting Mexican federal, state, and municipal law enforcement agencies as well as organized society. This can become a positive issue if military diplomacy is allowed to take its own, parallel course. Given the institution's credibility and legitimacy in Mexican society, specifically on the war on drugs, ignoring them could be detrimental to our relationship.

I make a point of mentioning the word "war" because there is, in my mind, no other way to describe the level of violence that these military and law enforcement operations are producing. There are some conceptual similarities between this and the Global War on Terrorism, in that both wars feature states fighting non-state actors. Let's be clear that there is not an insurgency developing.

The Mexican and U.S. armed forces, which share little in common, either in roles or missions, are finding positive avenues for cooperation, that is...they are finding their connectivity. The humanitarian assistance role is one where the Mexican military has pioneered and has enough experience that it can take a leadership role in the relationship, something important when addressing each other as equals. American humility in accepting this should be noted.

The Mexican Navy, together with the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy, also has a maturing relationship through what has been called coincidental operations. These could develop into joint patrols. In this sense, the U.S.-Canadian "Shiprider" program could prove an interesting concept to explore both to foster cooperation and confidence building as well as augment operational capabilities.

There is one point I would like to stress: floating the notion that Mexico is on the verge of becoming a failed state is both ignorant and irresponsible. It undermines our credibility and directly affects our much needed foreign direct investments. Although a military's need to plan for *worst-case scenarios* is understandable, releasing a document such as the 2008 Joint Operational Environment Report⁷ for open publication is a blunder from a diplomatic

⁶ Numbers from the article "EUA se propone a mitigar la demanda de drogas ilegales, Agora," published by NORTHCOM, Vol.3 No.1, 2010, p. 40.

⁷ In it, Mexico is identified as a state likely to experience a rapid and sudden collapse.

perspective.

Although the U.S. Government has taken public responsibility for its share of the blame (that of drug consumption), the message has not substantially been absorbed by American society. This is an area worth focusing on. Most Americans still view the raging violence in Mexico as a purely Mexican problem, one that has snowballed from its inability to build an adequate police force, fight corruption, address poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment and so on. The question I still get asked after conferences and presentations is: "*So, are you going to be able to solve your drug problems?*" My answer is almost automatic: "*Are you going to be able to solve yours?*"

The Mérida Initiative is important as it marks, hopefully, a new era in North American security. We begin this as *partners* and there is a clear path that will take us to become *responsible partners*. I am optimistic and believe that we can eventually be called *allies*.