

**Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives,
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere,
Civilian Security, and Trade**
“Strengthening Security and the Rule of Law in Mexico”
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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Rooney, and members of the Subcommittee.

I would like to lay out four main points with respect to U.S. security cooperation with Mexico:

1. The 2008 Merida Initiative set out to reduce violence and the power of Drug Trafficking Organizations in Mexico. It has failed to achieve that goal. Preliminary data indicate that 2019 was the most violent year on record.¹ The tactic of capturing or killing High-Value Targets has not been sufficient to weaken the drug cartels, and by creating leadership vacuums, has increased lethal violence over succession and territory.

The cartels are still heavily involved in the narcotics trade, although the composition of that trade has changed. Less marijuana is coming across the border, but 90% of the heroin that comes into the United States comes from Mexico and the country remains a major transit zone for cocaine. Increasingly, heroin is being supplanted by synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, with precursor chemicals from China arriving in Mexican ports on the Pacific. According to 2017 data from the CDC, 48,000 people died in the U.S. from opioids, including heroin, prescription, and non-prescription opioids.

2. The Merida Initiative, despite its failure to reign in violence and drug trafficking, created a historic mechanism for security cooperation between Mexico and the United States that is paying dividends. A wide array of technical training by U.S. experts continues to improve Mexico’s institutional capabilities in confronting organized crime. Most importantly, Merida has made the Mexican government and its law enforcement agencies much more open to, and accepting of, U.S. advice and assistance.

Several specific examples of the Merida Initiatives’ ongoing programs² are:

- A prison accreditation program that has resulted in 20 Mexican correctional facilities receiving international accreditation since 2011;

¹ According to data released on December 20, 2019 from the Government of Mexico, National Public Security Executive Secretariat (SENSP), there were 31,688 murders between January and November of 2019. This was a 2.7% increase over the same period in 2018.

² From the Merida Initiative [factsheet](#), U.S. Embassy Mexico City.

- A national vetting system that has identified corrupt officials within Mexican government agencies and military units;
- Assessments, training, certification, accreditation, and equipment for forensic labs;
- Training for prosecutors, investigators, and other justice sector personnel;
- Training to professionalize Mexican federal, state, and municipal law enforcement agencies and to increase the capacity of their specialized investigative units.

Apart from Merida, Mexico with U.S. assistance has expanded the use of Financial Intelligence Units to identify, track, and if necessary, seize the assets of drug traffickers. This is an effective, non-violent way to shut down the cartels' business model.

- Towards this end, in August of last year Mexico strengthened its asset forfeiture law, a very positive step.

The Merida Initiative also created a framework for direct military to military training and cooperation. Between 2001-2008, that is before Merida, Mexican participation in U.S.-led military exercises consisted of just 2 exercises. Between 2009-2017, after Merida, the number surged to 46 joint exercises.³

Mexico, with U.S. help and equipment, also has taken steps to increase its maritime interdiction capabilities by beginning a program to add 8 long-range patrol vessels to its Navy.⁴ The first of these ships was launched in November 2018. These boats will enable the Mexicans to seize more Colombian cocaine shipments and Chinese precursor chemicals for fentanyl, deter illegal fishing vessels, and perform search and rescue missions up to 5,000 nautical miles from Mexico's coasts.

3. Point number three is that the Merida Initiative was conceived as a tool to support Mexico's own strategy, not as a substitute for it. Mexican and U.S. officials should work together to review what the Merida Initiative successfully achieved, what it did not, and help Mexico develop a new comprehensive strategy, that takes into account new security threats, such as violence and instability in Central America.

The key is to work together as partners to fix what needs fixing and leverage the institutional relationships that we have built up over the last 12 years. That work has already begun.

In two joint U.S.-Mexico declarations from December 2018 and June 2019, the Government of Mexico promised, among other things, a Mexican enforcement surge through the deployment of its National Guard, especially on its southern border,⁵ as well as a promise to cooperate with the U.S. to "enhance security, governance, and economic prosperity in

³ Iñigo Guevara, *More Than Neighbors: New Developments in the Institutional Strengthening of Mexico's Armed Forces in the Context of U.S.-Mexican Military Cooperation*, Wilson Center, February 2018.

⁴ "Mexican Navy Launches ARM Reformador," *Naval Today*, November 2018.

⁵ "U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration," Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, June 7, 2019

Central America.”⁶ This included a commitment by the Government of Mexico to invest \$25 billion in its southern provinces.

In early October of last year, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) Kirsten Madison led a delegation that met with senior Mexican officials to “discuss ways to intensify efforts against the shared challenges of synthetic and other drugs, organized crime, and related violence.”⁷

Last month, Attorney General Barr met with President López Obrador and his team to discuss “arms trafficking, money laundering, and international drug trafficking”⁸ and agreed to strengthen the bilateral High-Level Security Group created last August.

These commitments should be tracked and measured, and at the end of a comprehensive, bilateral strategic review, the United States should provide the level of security cooperation funding that matches the severity of the threat Mexico continues to face, both internally and from regional instability.

4. My fourth and final point is stating the obvious: Mexico’s security is linked to its prosperity. Its prosperity is directly related to U.S. policies on trade. I congratulate the House of Representatives on the passage of the USMCA treaty, a huge step towards ensuring that Mexico remains on an upward path of economic development that will create better opportunities for its citizens and the conditions for a safe and stable neighbor.

Thank you, and I would be glad to answer your questions.

⁶ “United States-Mexico Declaration of Principles on Economic Development and Cooperation in Southern Mexico and Central America,” U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, December 18, 2018.

⁷ “Assistant Secretary Kirsten Madison Travels to Mexico,” Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, October 3, 2019

⁸December 6, 2019 Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Mexico.