

**Testimony of Christopher Wilson, Associate, Mexico Institute, Woodrow
Wilson International Center for Scholars**

**House Committee on Homeland Security,
"Taking Down the Cartels: Examining United States – Mexico Cooperation"**

April 2, 2014

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, Members of the Committee on Homeland Security:

Thank you for this opportunity to join such a distinguished panel to address the important issue of U.S.-Mexico cooperation to weaken organized crime and strengthen public security.

The Capture of Joaquín Guzmán

As the members of this committee know, before dawn on February 22nd, the Mexican Navy arrested Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa organized crime group, which is the most powerful of the Mexico-based transnational organized crime groups. After having escaped from a high-security prison in 2001, Guzmán had taken on a semi-mythical status, and many Mexicans believed he was too powerful to ever be captured again.

Because of this, his capture has tremendous symbolic value. The Mexican government has made a powerful statement that no one involved in drug trafficking and organized crime is above the law. By creating an expectation that those involved in organized crime will be held responsible for the lives they ruin, this event will hopefully deter youth, in both Mexico and the United States, from considering a life of crime.

The Evolution of U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation

In 2007, Mexican President Felipe Calderón met with President George W. Bush in Mérida, Mexico, and agreed to greatly increase U.S.-Mexico cooperation in the hemispheric fight against drug trafficking. Through the ensuing agreement, known as the Merida Initiative, the United States has committed more than \$2 billion to support Mexican security forces, criminal justice institutions, border management, and crime prevention. Probably more important than the actual aid package that comprised the Merida Initiative, though, was the signal from the two presidents for their military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies to develop stronger relationships.

The Merida Initiative evolved following the election of President Barack Obama, and the close working relationship between the two governments deepened.

The Merida Initiative represented a major shift in the framework for the U.S.-Mexico security relationship. Attitudes of mutual recrimination, with the United States faulting Mexico for the northbound flow of drugs and Mexico faulting the United States for the southbound flow of illicit money and arms, gave way to an approach based on shared responsibility for the transnational challenges posed by drug trafficking and organized crime.

In this context, the 2012 election of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, from a political party (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) traditionally aligned with a more limited approach to international engagement, created a degree of uncertainty and apprehension among many U.S. policymakers regarding the future of security cooperation. For some, those fears were stoked by the early move to create a single “window” for information sharing, meaning that U.S. officials would need to direct communications on security matters through Mexico’s Interior Ministry rather than having ongoing direct contact with officials throughout Mexico’s security apparatus. Other actions furthered what was a trend toward centralization, a characteristic of the traditional PRI party governing style. For example, the Ministry of Public Security, which runs Mexico’s Federal Police, was eliminated as an independent ministry and placed under the control of the Interior Ministry. In fact, just days before the capture of Guzmán, the *Washington Post* published an article entitled, “Mexico law-enforcement partnership grows more thorny for U.S.,” describing the “pause” in cooperation and rewriting of the rules encountered by many U.S. officials as they engaged with Mexico on security cooperation.

Though far from the first sign of ongoing engagement with the United States in the new administration, the cooperative binational effort to track down and arrest Joaquín Guzmán is probably the strongest. It represents the culmination of years of effort, but importantly it shows that the new mechanisms put in place by the Mexican government to manage intelligence sharing and cooperation at the operational level are functioning sufficiently well to capture Mexico’s most-wanted criminal. *Day-to-day engagement may be limited, but vitally important cooperation remains strong.*

The ability the U.S. and Mexican governments have shown to cooperatively generate successes bodes well for the future of bilateral cooperation. Now that things are settling into a new routine on the intelligence sharing and law enforcement cooperation side of cooperation, perhaps there is an opportunity to strengthen engagement on what is known as Pillar Four of the Merida Initiative, building strong and resilient communities. To a certain extent this may already be underway. After a long pause in the binational process to create and approve Merida Initiative projects during the first year of the Mexican administration in 2013, a number of new projects have been agreed upon by the two governments in recent months. Such an approach meshes well with the increased focus from the Mexican government on prevention and the strengthening of

civil society, as exemplified by the creation of a new Under Secretary for Crime Prevention and Citizen Participation within the Interior Ministry.

The Wilson Center recently completed a multi-year research project on the role of civil society and the private sector in addressing public security challenges, launching a book, *Building Resilient Communities in Mexico: Civic Responses to Crime and Violence* (Wilson Center and Justice in Mexico Project, 2014). Our research shows that not only must the United States and Mexican governments work together to strengthen public security, they must also build trust and engage with society so that all parties are working in coordinated and cooperative ways. The biggest remaining challenges lie at the subnational level, where governance and police capacity remain uneven and in many cases quite weak. States like Baja California, Chihuahua, and Nuevo León have seen their rule of law institutions significantly strengthened over the past several years, but states like Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Veracruz and Guerrero still face major challenges. The Merida Initiative remains an important vehicle to identify and support trustworthy partners in subnational government and civil society.

Additionally, U.S. engagement with Mexico across a broad range of topics, especially trade promotion and efforts to strengthen North American economic competitiveness, are a vital part of the broader U.S.-Mexico partnership. The Mexican government understandably does not want security cooperation to dominate the bilateral agenda, so the strength of security cooperation is in part determined by the strength of engagement on other topics. If we boost cooperation on economic issues, that creates space for a greater amount of security cooperation without it overwhelming the agenda.

Similarly, the more the United States can show it is taking seriously its commitments to address issues of drug consumption, money laundering, and weapons trafficking, the more opportunities will emerge for cooperation in Mexico. To advance within the framework of shared responsibility outlined in the Merida Initiative, actions must be taken to counter organized crime and drug trafficking in both Mexico and the United States.

Looking Forward: The Implications of Guzmán's Arrest

The most important implication of the capture of Joaquín Guzmán is straightforward. He has already been convicted of drug trafficking in Mexico and has allegedly been directly or indirectly involved in a large part of the organized crime related violence occurring throughout many states in Mexico. He deserves to be in jail, and putting him there helps consolidate the rule of law and accountability in Mexico.

But however important his capture, it is not the end of anything. Drug trafficking will continue. Indeed, past arrests of high-level drug traffickers have led to no discernable decrease in the flow

of drugs into the United States. Violence will continue. The number of homicides in Mexico has declined since its peak in 2011, but the homicide rate is still approximately double what it was ten years ago, and the rise of citizen vigilante groups in states like Michoacán and Guerrero demonstrate that the Mexican state lacks the capacity to adequately respond to public security challenges in the entirety of its territory.

The capture of Joaquín Guzmán should be celebrated, but there exists the possibility that his arrest fuels greater violence. This could occur as the result of further fragmentation within the Sinaloa organized crime group, which is already comprised of various factions. In the past, internal disputes have led to violent divisions, as was the case when the Beltrán Leyva brothers broke away from the Sinaloa organized crime group. Similarly, there exists the possibility that rival criminal groups could seek to take advantage of the transition in the Sinaloa organization and fight for control of drug trafficking corridors currently under Sinaloa's control.

It is too early to judge the impact of Guzmán's capture on the Sinaloa organized crime group or the dynamic among organized crime groups in Mexico, but we should remain vigilant. To do so, we will need to continue to work closely with Mexican authorities to both counter organized crime and build the foundations of resilient communities throughout Mexico.

In conclusion, there is currently strong cooperation between the United States and Mexico on issues of organized crime, drug trafficking, and public security. Nonetheless, there is both a need for and space to further strengthen engagement in the areas of institution building and crime prevention.

I would like to thank the Committee once again for the opportunity to speak with you today.