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What Are U.S. Policy Options for Dealing with Security in Mexico?

When Mexican President Felipe Calderón came into office in December 2006, the issue of security was a major priority on his agenda, and it has grown in importance as the security situation in Mexico has deteriorated. The United States has been supportive of Calderón’s efforts, and Congress and the Bush administration finalized the Mérida Initiative, an assistance package that will provide \$400 million in aid to Mexico (primarily for technical assistance and equipment to combat drug trafficking).

In light of the current security situation in Mexico, unprecedented levels of cooperation between the United States and Mexico on security issues, and the recent change in administration in the United States, this study assessed Mexico’s security situation, its impact on the United States, and potential U.S. policy options.

What Is the Security Situation in Mexico?

Mexico’s security structure is extremely complex, and its security services are often duplicated across agencies because roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined. Despite the scale of effort across Mexican security forces, security continues to deteriorate. Based on a review of the literature and interviews with U.S. and Mexican government officials and nongovernmental experts, the study found that organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal migration and human trafficking in Mexico are worsening, and terrorism and rebel insurgencies remain a potential concern. All of these issues are U.S. priorities. In addition, crime and lawlessness, corruption, and street gangs are major concerns in Mexico.

Almost all those interviewed agreed that organized crime is the primary security threat to the United States from Mexico. Organized crime has infiltrated all levels of Mexico’s government

Abstract

In light of a worsening security situation in Mexico, this study identified three U.S. policy options for dealing with Mexico’s security issues—strategic partnership, status quo, and retrenchment—in terms of their impact on addressing U.S. priorities and of likely Mexican responses. The findings argue for a U.S. approach that takes advantage of the current window of opportunity and further engages the Mexican government in a deeper and broader relationship that strives toward a long-term strategic partnership.

and police forces and is involved in many illegal activities, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms trafficking.

Illegal movement into the United States from Mexico is clearly a threat to U.S. national security. There has not been a single report of a terrorist entering the United States from Mexico, but the United States is still concerned that terrorists could use human-trafficking networks to gain entry to the country. More generally, human smuggling and human trafficking feed into crime in the United States.

Within Mexico, the Popular Revolutionary Army could cause disruptions and challenge the Mexican government. While the insurgents have thus far operated independently, there is concern that drug-trafficking organizations and insurgents will either align with one another or become one and the same, like other Latin American insurgency groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

In addition to the U.S. priority issues outlined here, issues of “personal insecurity” (the result of increased crime and lawlessness, corrup-

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tion, and street gangs) are major concerns in Mexico. In the first half of 2007, the rates of major federal crimes, which include homicides, kidnappings, and arms trafficking, rose 25 percent above the rates in the same period of the previous year. From 2005 to 2006, the rates of these same crimes rose 22 percent. Gangland-style executions have risen 155 percent since 2001. Thousands of citizens have been killed each year, and the targeting of police and military officers has increased over the past two years. President Calderón has ordered the Mexican military and federal police to take over entire municipal police forces in an effort to stem corruption.

What Are U.S. Priorities and Policy Options?

The new U.S. administration will need to decide which security issues to address when allocating U.S. aid to Mexico and how such aid should be prioritized. In terms of priorities, four emerge from the study: (1) encourage the Mexican government to develop a cohesive security strategy and reform its security structure to meet that strategy; (2) encourage the Mexican government to bridge the gap between federal and local security forces; (3) support Mexico's efforts to address domestic concerns, such as crime and corruption; and (4) focus U.S. aid less on technology and equipment and more on increasing transparency in government institutions.

With these priorities in mind, the study assessed three potential U.S. policy options: (1) engage in a *strategic partnership* with Mexico that emphasizes reform and longer-term institution building; (2) maintain the *status quo* approach, which focuses on ad hoc, issue-specific cooperation but does not emphasize reform or longer-term institution building; or (3) institute a *retrenchment* approach by focusing on U.S. domestic efforts to combat security threats from Mexico and by disengaging from any partnerships with Mexico.

The table shows the impact the options would have in terms of the priority areas. From a U.S. perspective, strategic partnership has a high impact on all priority areas, while retrenchment has a low impact. However, the current strategy—status quo—is much closer in impact to retrenchment than to strategic partnership. Other analysis of the demand for U.S. government resources, personnel, and time has shown that the strategic partnership, status quo, and retrenchment options generally have high, medium, and low demands, respectively.

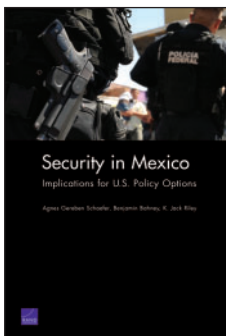
Impact of the Three Policy Options

Priority Area	Policy Option		
	Strategic Partnership	Status Quo	Retrenchment
Develop a cohesive security strategy and reform the security structure to meet that strategy	High	Low	Low
Bridge the gap between federal and local security forces	High	Low	Low
Support Mexico's efforts to address domestic concerns	High	Low	Low
Focus aid less on technology and equipment and more on increasing transparency in government institutions	High	Medium	Low

In choosing among the options, the U.S. government must also be sensitive to how the Mexican government may react, factoring in Mexico's historic sensitivities to U.S. involvement in Mexican internal affairs. In this respect, it seems clear that the Calderón administration wants more than the status quo and is interested in longer-term reform and institution building. The most risky and potentially damaging option is retrenchment. If the United States chooses to entrench itself against threats from Mexico and disengage from that country, it may trigger reciprocation.

Concluding Thoughts

All the U.S. and Mexican officials interviewed for this study indicated that the Calderón administration is serious about implementing reforms and tackling security issues in Mexico. If the United States does not build on the unprecedented levels of cooperation with Mexico, the strides forward in U.S.-Mexico relations during the Vicente Fox and Calderón administrations may dissolve. Thus, the new U.S. administration should take advantage of this historic window of opportunity and further engage the Calderón government in a deeper and broader relationship that strives toward a long-term strategic partnership. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND Corporation's continuing program of self-initiated research documented in *Security in Mexico: Implications for U.S. Policy Options*, by Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Benjamin Bahney, and K. Jack Riley, MG-876-RC (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG876/>), 2009, 104 pp., \$29.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4719-9. This research brief was written by Paul Steinberg. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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