



Photo by matfisk.

An unofficial street sign in Mexico.

## U.S.–MEXICO FUTURES FORUM

# Silver or Lead: Confronting the Business of Violence

by Wendy Muse Sinek

**M**exico is fast becoming one of the world's most violent countries. In 2008, the United States military issued a Joint Operating Environment Report that paired Mexico with Pakistan and suggested that both states were “failing” and susceptible to rapid collapse. While many analysts, both in Mexico and elsewhere, strongly dispute this claim, the situation is undeniably grim. According to a 2009 report published by Mexico's Citizen Council for Public Security and Justice, the murder rate has increased four-fold in Mexico over the past two years, and as of September 2009, Ciudad Juárez was found to be more dangerous than either Medellín or

Baghdad. Today, drug trafficking gangs routinely battle with President Calderón's federal troops. Mexican citizens find themselves caught in the crossfire, and Americans worry that violence will spill across the border and into their front yards.

What sparked this chain of events? More importantly, what can policy makers in Mexico and the U.S. do to improve security on both sides of the border? Through the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum, UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies convened a roundtable discussion to address these issues. Prominent Mexican and U.S. elected officials met with foreign-policy experts from both

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Photo by Guillermo Anas/AP Photo

Blood and bullet holes mark a Tijuana murder scene.

countries to discuss causes and solutions to this crisis. Fully aware of the limitations of any given policy response, the participants delved into the contours of the debate to brainstorm realistic policy alternatives.

Shannon O'Neil, Fellow for Latin American Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, opened the discussion with an analysis of the U.S. response to the Mexican security crisis. On the one hand, Mexico deserves to be at the top of the foreign policy agenda; the two countries have become steadily more intertwined over the past 20 years. Trade, foreign direct investment and even immigration now flow in both directions. These transnational ties alone are sufficient to warrant increased U.S. attention. However, the rise of Mexico on the foreign policy agenda is due, sadly, to increased concerns over violence.

Given this heightened interest in Washington, what has the U.S. government done? O'Neil stated that the main policy result has been the Mérida Initiative, a security cooperation and assistance package for Mexico and countries in Central America. According to the U.S. State Department, the program will provide \$1.57 billion over three years to address security issues in Mexico, with the money going toward military hardware and training as well as some institution-building initiatives. In

addition, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives will receive some funding for border investigations and the Treasury Department will step up anti-money laundering efforts.

While the Mérida Initiative will undoubtedly provide needed resources, O'Neil argued that when viewed in comparative perspective, Mexico still appears to be an afterthought. Consider that Colombia, which has generally overcome the security challenges of 2000-01 and is today a relatively stable state, still receives \$600 million per year. Pakistan, Mexico's "partner" as a failing state, is slated to receive \$5 billion for 2010 alone.

More importantly, O'Neil stressed that efforts to increase security at the border miss larger social, political and economic concerns that underlie the escalating violence. For example, the priorities of the Mérida Initiative were designed with the Plan Colombia template in mind. However, the security situation in Mexico is very different. The Colombian state struggled to achieve a monopoly over the legitimate use of force throughout their territory because guerrilla movements, led by drug- and weapons-trafficking organizations, had gained control over significant portions of the country. Large swaths of territory were without a strong,

legitimate state presence, and guerrillas were quick to fill the void. By contrast, the Mexican state is visible and present in every community, and state institutions are found throughout the territory. The issue for Mexico is that these institutions are weak, and in many cases, they have been co-opted by nefarious elements. As a result, critical resources need to be dedicated to institution-building initiatives. Hardware and helicopters are useful for taming guerrilla factions but not for strengthening institutional legitimacy and the rule of law.

For a true security solution, O'Neil emphasized that the U.S. must strengthen democracy in Mexico, namely by supporting the growing Mexican middle class. Americans want the border area to be stable and secure. Pouring funds into military hardware might achieve this objective in the short term, but for sustained peace, the border area and other urban centers must provide economic opportunities for Mexico's working people. Moreover, no amount of money will be able to solve Mexico's security dilemma without the support of ordinary citizens.

Amalia García Medina, Governor of Zacatecas, agreed with O'Neil that security is a shared challenge for both countries. However, she argued that Americans

need to acknowledge the many factors that brought Mexico to this crisis point. The U.S. is, after all, the world's largest consumer market for illegal drugs. By virtue of its geography, Mexico is a natural location for producers and traffickers.

The consequences of geography have been compounded by globalization and the worldwide economic crisis. Since the passage of Nafta, Mexican corn farmers have been hit hard by cheap imports at home and crop subsidies that protect markets abroad. Declining corn prices have made cultivating marijuana a tempting alternative. The recent economic crisis has also increased the pull of the illegal economy. As of September 2009, there were almost 800,000 newly unemployed persons in Mexico, all needing to find a way to make a living. García Medina stressed that these dynamics give Mexican farming families a terrible choice: suffer the economic vicissitudes of the legal agricultural markets or cultivate economically viable but illegal drug crops.

Complicating this situation is the undeniable fact that corruption exists, not just within Mexico but also at the U.S. border. Within the past few years, Mexican cartels have amassed great power, and 90 percent of their weapons

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Soldiers arrest municipal police in Nuevo León, November 2009.



Photo by Juan Carlos Reyes Garcia/AP/Getty Images.

come from the United States. But, García Medina stressed, we must ask ourselves how this occurs. To illustrate her point, she recounted how she had once mistakenly packed a travel sewing kit in her carry-on bag for a flight from the U.S. to Mexico. Her kit, with its small needle, was confiscated as a potential security threat. This incident demonstrates that careful vigilance is clearly possible — and yet there are 11,000 points along the U.S.–Mexico border where weapons of war cross every day. How is it that a tiny sewing needle is caught and confiscated but bazookas and AK-47s pass through undetected? Mexico clearly has a corruption problem, but the U.S. must admit that corruption exists on its side of the border as well. Without it, this level of weapons trafficking would not exist.

García Medina concluded that in order to address Mexico's security crisis, a highly trained and well-equipped police force is needed. However, she added, Mexicans also need to change their society from within. Every day, young people enter the criminal life. To counter this, families must teach children self-respect, solidarity and responsibility, and everyone should watch out for each other. At the same time, the Mexican government should reinforce these values. To this end, she questioned why Mérida Initiative funds are directed toward weapons and military training but not education, health care or productive community projects. In order to prevent criminal activity, people — especially youth — must be enabled to envision a future with dignity. That is the way out of the security crisis, for both countries, she maintained.

On the whole, O'Neil's and García Medina's remarks touched on complementary themes. The U.S. should secure the border while simultaneously heightening efforts to strengthen Mexico's democratic institutions and support the emerging middle class. For its part, Mexico needs to combat pervasive corruption — but the U.S. should also admit that corruption exists north of the border as well. Reducing the demand for illegal drugs in the U.S. is another component of the solution.

These are broad, long-term goals. Few would argue that they are not worthwhile, but what do they mean in practice? The real work lies in translating desirable ideals like these into feasible policy solutions. The roundtable's assembled guests took up this challenge and debated the merits and limitations of specific courses of action for over an hour.

Some individuals questioned whether or not Mexican security is at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. Silvano Aureoles Conejo, a senator from Michoacán, affirmed that Mexico is doing its part, but the U.S. needs to share responsibility as well. It's not enough for Mexican violence

to make the nightly news; elected officials must give sustained policy attention to security concerns. Ana Paula Ordorica, a Mexican political analyst, reinforced this view asking, "What evidence do we have that Mexico is central to American foreign policy?" O'Neil responded that Mexico has risen to the forefront of President Obama's attention, sharing front-page status with Afghanistan and Iraq on the president's daily foreign policy memo. The question is not whether Mexico has the United States' attention in terms of security — it clearly does. The challenge is that the discussion has not broadened beyond securing the border.

Alex Saragoza, Professor of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, concurred that a paradigm shift in Washington is crucial. Whenever the U.S. media reports on Mexico, Americans hear about problems "over there" — from drugs to travel advisories to the H1N1 virus. And, in his view, the Mérida Initiative reinforces this perception. Funding is dedicated almost entirely to solving the crisis "over there" in Mexico. Few resources are earmarked for addressing issues within the U.S. that contribute to the problem, namely reducing the demand for illegal drugs.

David Bonior, Chair of American Rights at Work and former U.S. Congressional Representative for Michigan's 10<sup>th</sup> district, expanded on this issue, drawing out two practical implications. First, the way to decrease demand is to reduce the number of drug users in the United States, which means targeting hard-core addicts for rehabilitation. O'Neil agreed, citing research from the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy group which found that while hard-core addicts comprise only about 20 percent of American drug users, they consume 70 percent of all illegal drugs. Rehabilitating these chronic users would significantly reduce the demand for drugs in the United States. However California State Senator Gilbert Cedillo reminded the group that drug rehabilitation initiatives have never been politically popular. Getting measures like these through the policy-making process would require a broad coalition. He suggested that one way to meet this challenge might be to bring doctors on board and to frame the issue in terms of ensuring public health.

Bonior also stressed that the U.S. needs to control the trafficking of firearms. There are already laws in place to prevent individuals with arrest records from purchasing guns. However, gangs have begun recruiting young women with clean records as purchasers, drawing previously uninvolved individuals into criminal activity.

What would stronger controls on weapons trafficking look like, and would it be politically possible to enact them in the United States? Rafael Fernández de Castro, Presidential Advisor for International Affairs and



Photo by Gillies Mingasson/Getty Images.

A Texas gun store manager poses with her wares.

Competitiveness in Mexico, asked the members of the U.S. Congress present: “Is it impossible to enact a law banning assault weapons in the United States?” The perception in Mexico is that this policy would be highly effective in reducing international weapons trafficking but that it is a political impossibility due to the strength of the American gun rights lobby.

In response, Bob Filner, a member of Congress representing California’s 51<sup>st</sup> district, said that such a ban is possible, and the U.S. should try to enact one. While he acknowledged that this is a politically sensitive issue, Filner also claimed that there is sufficient support in the House. If President Obama took up this issue, it might get through the Senate as well.

Up until this point, the discussion on how the U.S. can take responsibility for its share of the security crisis had centered around two specific policies: providing treatment for hardcore drug addicts to reduce demand and enacting stronger controls on cross-border weapons trafficking. Within this conversation, Isaac Katz, Professor of Economics at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, observed that the discussion so far had overlooked a crucial point: Mexican cartels exist because the drug trade is profitable. The root of the

security problems that both countries face can be traced to the Mexican cartels’ extraordinarily high revenues, which he estimated to be \$30 billion per year. The “paradox of the war on drugs,” Katz claimed, is that “the more resources you put into fighting drug cartels, the more profitable the activity becomes.” Decreasing U.S. demand and tightening gun control laws are components of an overall security strategy, but, Katz argued, “as long as we don’t discuss the legalization of drug production, drug trafficking and drug consumption, there will be these security issues again and again and again.” As a first step, part of the solution would be to strengthen Mexico’s financial system to prevent the cartels from laundering their profits with impunity.

With this comment, the participants began to discuss the practical challenges involved in strengthening Mexican institutions. Juan Ernesto Pardinás — a consultant for the Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad, a Mexican policy research group — shared Professor Katz’s concerns. Taking the challenge of institution-building a step further, Pardinás claimed that reforming the Mexican municipal police is crucial.

Municipal police forces were designed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their structure has remained unchanged to

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the present day. As a result, they are unable to confront 21<sup>st</sup>-century threats. Over the past year, municipal forces in 22 states have engaged in shootouts, not with the drug traffickers, but with federal police forces. Why do local-level officials protect drug kingpins and cartel members? The municipal police live in the very neighborhoods that they protect. In the United States, this might be seen as an advantage, but within the context of cartel violence, it is a liability. Drug traffickers know where families live, where children attend school. Faced with these personal threats, municipal police find themselves protecting the traffickers' interests instead of those of the state. Pardinás explained that Mexicans describe the situation as one of "*plata o plomo*" (silver or lead). Cooperation is rewarded with payment while standing in the way of the traffickers' interests results in a bullet for yourself or your family.

García Medina responded to the issues that Katz and Pardinás raised, stating that efforts are in place to strengthen the rule of law and reform the municipal police. For example, some states are currently reforming their penal codes so that people can receive timely access to justice. However, she agreed that reforming the municipal police force is a difficult challenge. Municipal police officers tend to have little education and low salaries, so they are in no position to stand up to the cartels. She suggested that state governments should collaborate with the federal government to coordinate their response, possibly meeting weekly in each state.

Pardinás countered that within his state of Monterrey, increased coordination efforts among the three armed forces have been attempted for years, with few positive results. The essential issue is that municipal police whose families are threatened by the cartels will never prioritize the interests of the state over protecting their loved ones. For this reason, Mexican state or federal police should relieve the municipal police forces of their front-line responsibilities. Responding to cartel violence should be addressed at the federal level.

And yet, O'Neil replied, federal armed forces are not well suited to internal policing efforts in any country. Militaries are generally not trained in domestic policing, nor should they be — these efforts are outside the scope of their proper role. In response, Fernández de Castro stressed that coordination remains essential. Perhaps the emphasis should shift toward ensuring better information sharing between the U.S. and Mexico. Government agencies naturally tend to protect their intelligence, but in order to combat the cartels, information needs to flow at least as freely across the border as drugs and weapons do.

**“You have to be strategic about your resources... your state will be overwhelmed if you try to incarcerate... your way out of this problem.”**

**— Gil Cedillo, State Senator, California**

At this point, Ordorica asked García Medina to comment on the feasibility of funding broader educational and social initiatives within Mexico. Specifically, if Mérida Initiative funds were channeled toward particular community projects, would Mexican elected officials view this as intruding on their sphere of influence? García Medina prefaced her answer by clarifying that she would respond not as a state governor or a party representative, but just as a Mexican citizen. With that, she noted that the U.S. has been funding educational initiatives in Mexico for many years. In her home state of Zacatecas, this funding has been very well received, and it is producing positive results. For example, Carnegie Mellon University has partnered with Mexican secondary schools to teach students software development. In January 2010, this program was expanded to introduce elementary students to the field of robotics. Initiatives like these are fundamentally connected to security concerns because they not only encourage youth to envision a positive future, they provide them with the tools and opportunities that they need to get there. With practical skills and job opportunities waiting for them, youth will be better able to resist the lure of the cartels.

With the time for discussion rapidly coming to a close, Pete Gallego, a state representative from Texas, observed that public support is critical for any of these proposed policy solutions to succeed. Clearly, the problem cannot be solved through military efforts alone. Community initiatives, reducing corruption on both sides of the border, strengthening democratic institutions and rehabilitating hard-core drug users are all part of the solution, yet most citizens don't connect these issues with enhanced security. The challenge going forward is to gain public awareness and support.

This session of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum resulted in a thorough and lively discussion that explored the merits and limitations of specific policy solutions to the security crisis. Although the participants did not reach consensus on every issue, one element is clear: the time for focusing on short-term security efforts is over. Relations between Mexico and the U.S. can no longer be

based on funding for weapons and military incursions alone. Doing so allows the drug cartels to set the agenda and does little to ensure results over the long term.

The Mexican state is not failing, but its institutions, particularly the rule of law, are weak. Reforming the municipal police so that they are protected from cartel threats is a key part of the solution. In addition, broader social initiatives to support economic opportunities for the middle class and education for youth will serve to strengthen democracy in Mexico. Cartels find it difficult to operate when democratic institutions are strong.

U.S. funding for the Mérida Initiative is welcome and necessary. No security strategy would be complete without basic military efforts to secure the border area. However, security solutions cannot and must not stop there. The U.S. needs to address the corruption within its own ranks that allows illegal weapons to enter Mexico unchecked. Rehabilitating hardcore drug users, though politically difficult to implement, would do much to reduce drug demand, thus making the drug trade less profitable for the cartels.

Not all of these policy prescriptions can be easily enacted, but some of them must nevertheless go forward.

The current economic crisis has demonstrated once again that the world is increasingly interconnected, and security is no exception. As partners and neighbors, Mexico and the U.S. must accept shared responsibility for the security crisis and move forward with a common agenda focused on long-term solutions.

The Security Panel was a session of the U.S.–Mexico Futures Forum held at UC Berkeley on August 23-25, 2009. The presenters included Amalia García Medina, Governor of Zacatecas, and Shannon O’Neil, the Douglas Dillon Fellow for Latin American Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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A vigil against violence in Mexico.



Photo by Ed Carisi.