

SECURITY COOPERATION IN MEXICO: EXAMINING THE NEXT STEPS IN THE U.S.-MEXICO SECURITY
RELATIONSHIP

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Testimony given by Dr. Duncan Wood, Director, Mexico Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center
for Scholars

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the committee; it is a privilege to join you today.

I have been asked to cover a number of issues related to Mexico's evolving security situation today and would like to begin by stating that we are still in the early stages of the Peña Nieto administration's implementation of its security strategy so that our evaluation can only be somewhat partial at best. However, even though there are still insufficient details available to the general public, there are clear lines developing within the strategy, and they provide us with a point of entry into the analysis.

Thus far we can identify two central themes to the Mexican government's strategy that stand out above all the rest. The first of these is coordination. The government has identified that one of the major failings of the Calderon administration was its failure to properly and adequately coordinate the actions of the diverse security agencies in Mexico. That is why, upon taking office, President Peña Nieto took the immediate step of centralizing security decision-making power into the Secretaria de Gobernacion (Interior Ministry), under the leadership of Miguel Angel Osorio Chong, bringing the office of Public Security under his purview. But the coordinating tendency is not limited to structural changes in the administration. Much higher levels of coordination between all government ministries, and between the Federal and State governments has emerged as a central feature of this government. The coordinating theme is to be seen most clearly in the operation of the *Pacto por Mexico*, a coordinating mechanism between Mexico's major political parties that has achieved considerable success in getting reforms passed though the congress and includes 34 different proposals relating to security policy.

The second major theme of the administration's security strategy is violence reduction. The government is touting the role that will be played by the ministry of Prevention and Citizen Participation (subsecretaria de Prevención y Participación Ciudadana), under the leadership of under-secretary Roberto Campa, within the Interior Ministry. Coordination is a central element here: the National Program for the Social Prevention of Violence and Crime is based on close coordination between the ministries of the Interior, Social development, Health, Education, Economy, Employment, Communications and Transport, Agrarian Development and Finance. Although details are still not clear, the goal of this government agency is to invest heavily in social programs and citizen engagement strategies at the local level in high risk communities. Building on the successful experience of cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and now Monterrey, the government is developing panoply of social programs that seeks to both reduce immediate violence levels and prevent youth from entering into organized crime.

I mention Monterrey for three reasons. First, it was discussed recently in a piece by The Economist magazine that focused on the central theme of rebuilding and maintaining the social fabric. Secondly, it

is the marquee program that is being touted by the government and highlights the administration's goal of coordination. Monterrey involves close collaboration between the Federal government, the government of the state of Nuevo Leon, the municipal government, business and civil society groups. Third, it highlights the tie in between these social programs and the remaking of state-level police forces. The *Fuerza Civil* is a new police force for Nuevo Leon that has been in the making since 2011, and the government sees this as an example to be followed by the rest of the country.

When we examine the Peña Nieto administration's security strategy at a closer level, we should take note of several other approaches that stand out. First, there is the creation of the much touted gendarmerie, a paramilitary style police organization whose final size is unclear (somewhere between 10-50 thousand), which will be used as a rapid reaction force in those areas of the country where local and state police are failing or absent. Second, there is once again the discussion of the idea of the unified command structure for police forces, the *mando unico*. The idea here is to bring together the multiple police forces in each of Mexico's states under one unified command structure, to ensure better coordination, professionalization and the implementation of common standards. An idea that was attempted under the Calderon administration, it has returned as part of the *Pacto por Mexico*, and we are waiting to see how it will be implemented.

At the same time, the government has recognized that different regions of the country have divergent security needs, and has thus divided up Mexico into 5 security zones, each of which will be treated accordingly. This is where the government faces its biggest threat in the short term – understanding the diversity of Mexico's public security challenges across different zones and implementing actions that will bring down violence levels. Already the government has been able to report drops in homicides but there is considerable skepticism in Mexico over official numbers and it is unclear if this is a long term trend or just a short-term drop.

Judicial reform and penal reform are also key elements in the government's overall approach. Continuing, and accelerating the implementation of the judicial reforms of 2008 is a priority according to leading government representatives. The deadline for implementation is 2018, but the urgency of a properly functioning court system is more urgent than ever. Although tens of thousands have been sent to trial over the past six years, only a small percentage has been incarcerated, and the public has almost no faith in the operation of Mexican justice. Just as urgent is a reform of the prison system –of those who have been convicted and have gone to prison many have escaped, and those who have stayed in jail have continued to play a role in organized crime activities. However, there is little sign as yet that the government is ready to take on a wholesale reform of the prison system.

The impact of the change in security strategy by the Peña Nieto administration on US-Mexico relations has been marked. Since the elections of last July, there has been a process underway of gaining mutual understanding, with US authorities trying to find areas of overlap and common interest with their Mexican counterparts. Of course the process really only began in earnest with the beginning of the new administration in December, and since then there have been many comments by US personnel that it is much more difficult to communicate and talk substantive issues with the new Mexican security team. Much publicized decisions by the Mexican government to halt ongoing cooperation have provided an

extra irritant. It is my understanding that the process of “feeling each other out” is still very much underway.

However, we can point to a number of areas where we can expect fruitful collaboration. First, in the area of prevention and violence reduction, there is ample room for continued cooperation, similar to that which took place under Pillar IV of the Merida Initiative. The work of rebuilding communities, of investing in social programs, of engaging with civil society in crime prevention and in the justice system has attained significant success in places such as Baja California and the experience of working with US agencies there provides a model for future efforts. Second, there is likely to be a receptive attitude from the Mexican authorities with regards to the issue of policing standards. As the process of unifying police commands across communities in the states of Mexico continues, and as police professionalization remains as key topic, there is much that the US has to offer. Third, the creation of the gendarmerie will likely involve the secondment or permanent transfer of military personnel into the new force. In order to avoid the pitfalls of having troops adopt a policing function, there will be a need to train these individuals in policing, criminal justice and investigation techniques. Again, the US has significant and important experience in this area.

Beyond these areas, counter- money laundering actions and intelligence gathering and sharing continue to provide potential areas for collaboration. Mexico’s new anti-money-laundering laws require immediate implementation – over the past 5 years, a mere 83 individuals were convicted of money laundering in Mexico, while we know that more than \$10 billion is laundered a year within the country. The movement of money back from the United States is an issue that needs to be addressed and high level talks are needed on that issue. On intelligence sharing I perceive a more difficult road ahead. Trust issues and the absence of mutual understanding, combined with the centralization of power over security policy in the Interior Ministry, mean that the progress of the past 5 years is by no means guaranteed. At this point in time it is vital that we adopt a long-term perspective, that patience and good judgment prevails, and that we do not burden the new relationship with the expectations of the old.

Lastly, I have been asked to comment on the recent visit by President Obama to Mexico, to meet with President Peña Nieto. There can be little doubt that the visit was a huge success, both in terms of building a relationship with the Mexican president on a personal level, and in convincing the Mexican public that the relationship with the United States is a positive one. In particular, the speech given by the President at the National Anthropological Museum received very favorable press and attention. On a more substantive level, the agreements between the two presidents on education and the economy have injected new vigor into bilateral affairs, helped greatly by the optimism over the prospects for immigration reform here in Washington. Already we are seeing benefits in terms of spill over into other areas – the upcoming Inter-Parliamentary Group meetings in Washington in the Fall, as well as the bilateral talks on energy scheduled for October, promise to further revitalize the relationship.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I am of course at your disposal to answer any questions you might have on my testimony.