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# 20 Years of Security In North America

When the UNAM Center for Research on North America (CISAN) was founded in the late 1980s —originally as the Center for Research on the United States of America (CISEUA)—, it opened up paradigms for new knowledge: what was needed was to transform the idea prevalent in Mexico in the twentieth century that the United States was an empire and that we hadto to build a nationalist defense shield against it. The United States was feared; and we knew that, sooner or later, our Mexican compatriots there would number in the millions and would build a huge political force. However, we were not fully knowledgeable about the empire.

Regarding security issues, at that time, the governments that had emerged from coups d'état in Latin America and civil wars in Central America were coming to an end. During the 1990s, the winds of globalization swept through North America giving rise to interdependence, beginning with the interactions that arose out of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement and its entry into effect in January 1994. The process of European integration, the dismantling of the Soviet Union, and the discourse of positive globalization influenced the three countries of North America. In the case of Mexico, the most important influence of the United States and Canada was to pressure to resolve the political crisis unleashed by the 1994 Zapatista uprising through dialogue and negotiation.

Interactions in security and defense came later, when the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001 and needed the help of its neighbors, Canada and Mexico, for its own defense. Mexico signed the Smart Border Agreement in March 2002, initiating an era of cooperation required by the U.S. for its defense in the face of the new radical-religious terrorism. The interdependencies in North America due to its noteworthy interconnections

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in trade turned into cooperation under the aegis of "shared responsibility" in issues of security and defense.

For the United States, the dark side of trade was the rise of terrorism, and for Mexico, the empowerment of criminal groups. The criminal organizations exporting cocaine from Colombia saw a huge opportunity for introducing their product through Mexico's porous land borders with the United States. They shored up the Mexican criminal groups like the old Sinaloa and Gulf Cartels, and many others were born to take advantage of the opportunities. Now, it was Mexico asking for help, and the Mérida Initiative was signed in 2007. And the "war on drug trafficking" began.

Thus, the security paradigms among the three countries were changing, from focusing on national security to a shared tri-national security approach.

## TIME LINE: SECURITY IN NORTH AMERICA

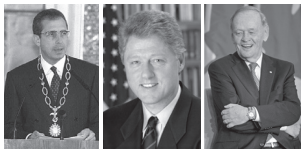
### From National Security to Shared Security 1990-2006

**1990-1994** Trinational Security Takes Off

George Bush, 1989. Fall of the Berlin Wall and world trade integration accelerates. William Clinton takes office in the U.S. in 1993. NAFTA is decidedly encouraged: in Canada, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney supports it and Mexico's President Carlos Salinas de Gortari makes it the cross-cutting issue of his policy.

**1994-2000** NAFTA

The three heads of government, Clinton, Chrétien, and Zedillo, consolidate the treaty and many talk about strengthening cooperative mechanisms with Mexico for security, defense, and border control. Mexico is required to improve its human rights situation due to the uprising of the 1994 in Chiapas and to consolidate democracy. The change in administrations in Mexico in 2000 strengthens trinational integration.



**2000-2006** President Vicente Fox takes

office in December 2000, and George W. Bush does the same in the United States in January 2001. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States determine a change in the security agenda, strengthening border protection measures. The three countries of North America enhance cooperation. Mexico's southern border is the most vulnerable flank for the region's security. The Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) is launched in March 2005 as a trilateral effort to increase security and enhance prosperity among the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

### From Terrorism to Drug Trafficking 2006-2012

**2006-2012** Drug trafficking emerges as

the most important threat to Mexico, and Mexico and the United States construct a model for cooperation through the Mérida Initiative. President Felipe Calderón takes office. Between 2008 and 2019, aid given through the Mérida initiative came to US$2.88 billion.[9]

**2006-2016** With the inauguration of

Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper as Canada's prime minister in 2006, the country returned to a schema of national security and did not join in the fight against drug trafficking. Harper even imposed visa requirements for Mexican citizens in 2009, which were removed when Liberal Party Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took office in 2016.

**2009-2017** President Barack Obama's

inauguration in January 2009 changed the paradigm of the Mérida Initiative, emphasizing prevention programs and the reform of Mexico's justice system.

**2012-2018** President Enrique Peña Nieto

takes office in December 2012 and begins questioning the Mérida Initiative. Peña Nieto centralizes the security cooperation program and the amounts of aid decrease. However, the strategy of the war against drug trafficking continues.

## Migration and Nationalism 2016-2019

**2016** Donald Trump's presidential campaign centers on criticizing free trade and its "big winners," Mexico and China. He promises to pull out of NAFTA when he takes office in January 2017. He harshly criticizes Mexican migrants and maintains that "Mexico will pay for building the border wall." This marks a return to old Cold War conceptions of national security, but now the threat is the migrants. His campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," is a *de facto* negation of free trade and the trinational concept of North America.

**2017-2018** Andrés Manuel López Obrador's campaign

for the Mexican presidency centers on a traditional left-wing discourse rejecting Trump's nationalist positions and reconstructing Mexico's lost nationalism. It is a return to a discourse typical of the golden years of the twentieth century, based on statism and national values, and it roundly criticizes "neoliberalism" and "conservatives." AMLO wins in July 2018 and little by little his original discourse fades. He decides not to enter into a confrontation with Donald Trump. Mexico defends NAFTA and fosters the negotiations for its redesign with Canada.

**2019** Good relations among the United States, Mexico, and Canada are rebuilt. Donald Trump also decides to reformulate NAFTA. Numerous Democratic congresspersons, business groups, and U.S.-Mexico border states bring great pressure to bear to not break trade relations with Mexico and Canada. The three countries decide to renegotiate NAFTA and build the United States, Mexico, Canada Agreement (USMCA). U.S. aid to Mexico for security and defense is also reactivated in May 2019. A new paradigm for cooperation emerges: the three leaders, Trump, Turdeau, and AMLO do not share political ideologies, but build mechanisms for understanding, dialogue, and cooperation. Mexico cooperates intensely with U.S. security through controlling migration from the south. In the United States, between October 2018 and August 2019, the most apprehensions of migrants in history are made: 926 769. Between January and November, 179 335 migrants are detained in Mexico.

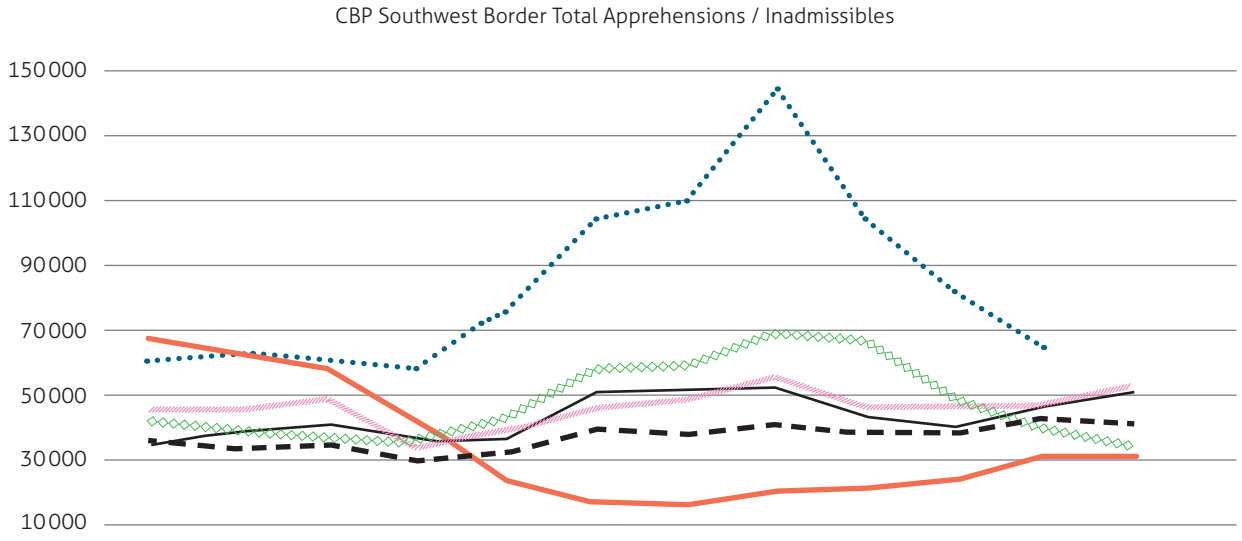
## The Donald Trump Challenge

The Mexico-United States-Canada relationship has changed radically since Donald Trump took office. Concisely put, we could say that we went from being partners seeking joint solutions to global and regional challenges to neighbors clashing on many issues that determine daily coexistence.

In security, relations have been institutionalized between the United States and Canada since the Cold War. It was not until 2002 that relations with Mexico began to include operational commitments. In this case, Mexico barely defines the rules with its North American neighbors. The topics are the fight against terrorism (the U.S. and Canadian priority), the fight against organized crime (Mexico's main issue), and migration (which the Trump administration has given absolute priority to in the United States, beginning with the president's first electoral campaign in 2016). In all three issues (defense, justice, and border security), the aim is to strengthen the North American perimeter. Thus, the management of the common border gave rise to a series of normative instruments, but, above all, to a shared agenda to cooperatively manage the vibrant border between the two countries. They called it a "twenty-first-century border." This position of limiting migration has not been shared by important sectors of the Democratic Party, particularly by some governors —the most important being the governor of California—, and by many local authorities, who have even decreed sanctuary counties.

For the new Mexican government headed by Andrés Manuel López Obredor (AMLO), it is no simple matter to adapt to the new logic in which we have gone from being partners with converging interests to a new stage in which Mexico's interests are seen as contrary to those of the great world power. Since his campaign, Trump questioned the Mexican administration of Enrique Peña Nieto, and AMLO took office with an unprecedented adaptation to the sign of the times marked by the rhythm of Trump's new strategic vision.

Detentions on the U.S. Southwest Border (FY2014-FY2019)




| | OCT | NOV | DEC | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| FY19 | 60785 | 62467 | 60791 | 58311 | 76542 | 103732 | 109463 | 144255 | 104362 | 82055 | 64006 | | |
| FY18 | 34871 | 39051 | 40519 | 35905 | 36751 | 50347 | 51168 | 51862 | 43180 | 40149 | 46719 | 50568 | 521090 |
| FY17 | 66842 | 63218 | 58379 | 42359 | 23557 | 16794 | 15798 | 19966 | 21673 | 25069 | 30582 | 31280 | 415517 |
| FY16 | 45516 | 45755 | 48742 | 33657 | 38311 | 46118 | 48511 | 55386 | 45671 | 46909 | 46909 | 51893 | 553378 |
| FY15 | 35903 | 33032 | 34243 | 30180 | 32550 | 39162 | 38296 | 40683 | 38619 | 38611 | 42415 | 41165 | 444859 |
| FY14 | 41828 | 38685 | 36695 | 35181 | 42399 | 57405 | 59119 | 68804 | 66541 | 48819 | 39758 | 34003 | 569237 |

**Source:** Customs and Border Protection, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/media-releases/all.

## AMLO and His Dilemmas *vis-à-vis* the North

The AMLO administration has defined its relations through a series of letters. One, dated May 30, 2019, reacted to the U.S. threat of imposing tariffs if Mexico did not stop the flow of Central Americans, which in the month of May had surpassed 144 255. In this letter, President López Obrador reiterated his willingness to dialogue and be prudent to avoid falling into a pattern of symmetrical reprisals ("an eye for an eye") and his desire to find solutions to the base cause of the migratory problem. Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard accepted (*nolens volens*) a temporary procedure for the U.S. to unilaterally verify —that is, without parameters, independent arbitration, or mediation— that Mexico was complying with its commitment to militarize its southern border (the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Veracruz) to contain the flow of Central Americans. That was the only way to avoid the imposition of tariffs and halting the negotiations for a new trade deal. With this agreement, signed in May 2019, the Mexican government reversed its migratory policy and made a 180-degree turnabout that bore results in 45 days. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo approved the deployment of Mexican troops to control the Central American population, and Trump has publicly thanked the country on multiple occasions for it. For Trump, this means the "wall" is being paid for by Mexico. Surmounting the hurdle of the tariffs not only did not change, but in fact deepened, this new assignation of roles in which Mexico appears as the problem and not as a partner contributing mutually beneficial solutions. In other words, Mexico's migratory control was provided to favor the signing of the new North American trade deal.

Mexico's public presence in influential media outlets in the United States is capital. There still has not been a single speech or article in which Mexico's president defines his broad foreign policy strategy. AMLO has opted to delegate in his foreign relations minister, Marcelo Ebrard,

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the development of the country's foreign policy and even its immigration policy, which, formally speaking, is the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior. In these terms, in which Mexico has significantly cooperated to contain the flow of Central Americans, the foreign minister should defend Mexico's position in the U.S. media, positioning three messages:

- Mexico is trustworthy;
- Mexico is key for providing stability; and
- Mexico can provide solutions.

In the field of security, the following question remains open: What are we going to do with the Mérida Initiative and the paradigm of co-responsibility? Here, it is fundamental to execute an internal analysis to determine what Mexico wants from cooperation with the United States. Does it require intelligence for operation? Does it need funds to reinforce its own capabilities? Or, does it need a fully sovereign relationship in which each of the countries fulfills its functions and equally shares the development of the strategy. At the same time, Mexico has much more to say about the tragedy caused by the illicit traffic in drugs and weapons.

## The Victims of the Failed War against Drugs

In Canada, the deaths due to opioid and fentanyl overdoses are considered a grave health crisis. More than 13 900 apparent opioid-related deaths occurred between January 2016 and June 2019.[1] In western Canada, particularly British Columbia and Alberta, drug consumption and drug-related deaths are higher.[2] The last U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) report on the number of deaths in the United States and their causes (directly or indirectly related to drugs) is shocking. In 2017, the number of injury deaths by drug poisoning was an alarming 70 237, while other deaths were due to suicide (47 173), homicide (129 510), firearms (39 773), and motor vehicle crashes (40 231). This comes to more than 300 000 deaths, in many cases directly or indirectly linked to drug consumption. In 2019, these figures continued on the rise, with an estimated 72 000 due to opioids.[3] The DEA attributes the massive distribution of these drugs to Mexican criminal groups:

> Although offshoots from previously established Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) continue to emerge, the DEA assesses the following six Mexican TCOs as having the greatest drug trafficking impact on the United States: Sinaloa Cartel, New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG), Beltran-Leyva Organization, Juarez Cartel, Gulf Cartel, and Los Zetas Cartel. These TCOs maintain drug distribution cells in designated cities across the United States that either report directly to TCO leaders in Mexico or indirectly through intermediaries.[4]

In Mexico, the figures for homicide deaths caused by the violence unleashed with the war against drugs has increased year after year. In 2019, government estimates put the figure at 35 588.[5] The humanitarian crisis is also growing: official figures cite 61 637 disappeared persons between 2006 and 2019.[6]

Because of this great humanitarian tragedy that North America is experienc-

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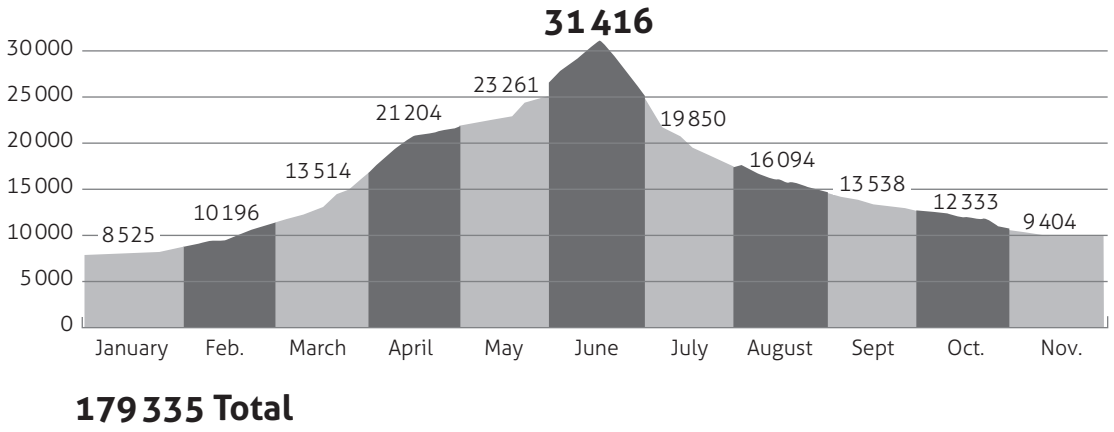
Migrants Detained in Mexico (January-November 2019)




**179 335 Total**

**Source:** Secretaria de Gobernación, Unidad de Política Migratoria, January 2020, http://portales.segob.gob.mx/work/models/PoliticaMigratoria/CEM/Estadisticas/Sintesis_Graficas/Sintesis_2019.pdf.

ing, despite borders, combatting drug trafficking is a humanitarian obligation for the three governments, since it is the public who is the main victim of this scourge.

## Subordinate Cooperation: Control of Migration

The United States and Canada are countries of migrants. Thinking of migrants as enemies is a change to the paradigms that gave birth to both nations. However, the Trump administration perceives them as the new great challenge and links migrants to the threats to its security. It is difficult for Mexico to be constantly certified by the U.S. government, since no clear parameter exists to identify the success of migratory control to determine Mexico's cooperation with the United States. What would the risks be if we were to become a safe third country, showing that, when required, Mexico can be a reliable partner? The humiliations experienced in May-June 2019 must be presented as a willingness to cooperate. In other words, making the need imposed by our neighbor the condition for "shared responsibility" is a huge challenge for Mexican policy.

This is no minor issue for Mexico, and, of course, we must look more deeply at the implications of a strategy of containing Central American migrants. As shown by the graph, migrants detained in Mexico in 2019 totaled 179 335; added to this is the fact that the closure of the U.S. border has meant that the population of Central American origin has grown by between 700 000 and one million in Mexico, according to different sources. All of them are surviving in very fragile conditions. Among them, almost 500 000 were returned from the United States to Mexico between October 2018 and October 2019.[7] What are the future consequences of their stay in Mexico going to be, taking into account that poverty levels of broad sectors of the Mexican population are also very high?

For this reason, in the medium term, it is a priority to raise the political costs of anti-Mexicanism and the rejection of the Central American population in the United States. Any actor in U.S. public life can easily talk badly about Mexico and Mexicans. If the guarantee of Trump's reelection in 2020 is playing the anti-migration, anti-Mexicanism card and insisting on "payment for the wall," as happened in 2016 —and is continuing to happen—, it is a priority to make it costlier to do that. Even more so when the AMLO government has displayed what can be called "subordinate cooperation" to be able to continue with a *no-conflict policy*.

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## Trump Empowered And Mexico's Stability

After getting through the impeachment process in the first week of February 2020, President Trump's election campaign has the advantage over his Democratic Party rival. We have already seen the high price of Trump's bad-mouthing his neighbor to the south. That is why it is vital to reinforce the idea that Mexican stability is the most important aspect of North American security. Weakening a moderate left government in Mexico offers the United States no geopolitical advantage. Mexico's government, with a cautious foreign policy with no anti-U.S. rhetoric, could change if it is harassed by the U.S. nativist, nationalist discourse. This could open up the door in Mexico to ultra-nationalist, anti-globalization, anti-Yankee currents, as has happened in several Latin American countries.

Mexico becoming Venezuela-ized would be catastrophic for North America. It is a huge paradox that AMLO's Morena- party government is the champion of free trade, abiding by the rules of the trilateral agreements in effect since the 1990s, and the responsibility of providing prosperity and common goods in a region devastated by criminals like Central America and many states of Mexico. For that reason, we have to insist that this is a bad narrative to relay to the U.S. public. On the contrary, despite the nationalism on both sides of the border, borders actually fade in the face of reality, and convergence between governments becomes obligatory despite their differences.[8]

Finally, this logic of situating Mexico as the enemy has eroded one of the most solid pillars of international politics in the post-Cold War period, which was to create a convergence between two distant neighbors who have a thousand reasons to be enemies, but millions of reasons to cooperate. VM

### Notes

**1** https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms.
**2** https://www.france24.com/es/20180918-la-crisis-de-los-opiaceos-deja-8000-muertos-en-dos-anos-en-canada.
**3** Drug Enforcement Administration, Department of Justice, 2019 *National Drug Threat Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: December, 2020), p. 142.
**4** Ibid., p. 99.
**5** Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/01/homicidios-2019-violencia-asesinatos-record/.
**6** Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas, Secretaría de Gobernación, *Informe sobre fosas clandestinas y registro nacional de personas desaparecidas o no localizadas*, January 6, 2020, http://www.alejandroencinas.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/REGISTRODEPERSONASDESAPARECIDAS.pdf
**7** Customs and Border Protection, *Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2020*, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics.
**8** Andrew Selee, *Vanishing Frontiers. The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).
**9** U.C. San Diego, *U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: 2018-2024*, March 2019, https://usmex.ucsd.edu/_files/Whitepaper_Security_Taskforce_March_26_Covers.pdf.