

# International Cooperation and Security Mexico and the Challenges Of the Mérida Initiative

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The war against drugs has become one of this administration's priorities.

During their March 2007 meeting in Mérida, Presidents Felipe Calderón and George W. Bush decided to make it a priority to broaden out bilateral and regional cooperation toward common goals in the international fight against organized crime. The Mérida Initiative—or Plan Mérida, to echo the name of Plan Colombia—represents a new, more intense level of bilateral collaboration between the two neighbors. The Mérida Initiative outlines specific actions to:

- 1) strengthen domestic efforts in the administration of justice in Mexico;

- 2) strengthen domestic efforts in the administration of justice in the United States; and
- 3) increase bilateral and regional cooperation to deal with the threat of international crime.

In general terms and for Mexico, international cooperation around security issues is a government priority dealt with on both bilateral and multilateral agendas. The way this cooperation is carried out depends on the degree of overlap in the national interests involved and the specific challenges that must be met. Multilaterally, Mexico participates in developing a multidimensional, international security agenda for cooperation for development, which includes political, economic, social and human facets of security itself. One fundamental point of this international policy is low-

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ering the security threats through inclusive paradigms and reducing the use of military force.

Bilaterally, the kind of cooperation between Mexico and the United States on security issues is dominated by the U.S. view based on the old security paradigm and the defense against traditional threats using military force.

International cooperation models include several types of aid from more developed countries to less developed ones. Because it is a bilateral security and military aid model, the Mérida Initiative is often catalogued as a “tied aid” program. This is a notorious technique, highly questioned in the field of international cooperation. Tied aid is that which is given on the condition that the donor country either execute the program and/or supply the goods and services involved.<sup>1</sup> In other words, tied aid consists of linking the decision to offer aid to the receiving country’s buying goods or contracting services from the donor country. This kind of earmarking becomes an indispensable condition for getting the aid and is expressly set by the donor.

Although the Mexican government initially rejected some of the stipulations the United States established as preconditions for the assistance package (particularly around the issue of human rights),<sup>2</sup> the Mérida Initiative is essentially a gift of money to Mexico so it can purchase exclusively U.S. military equipment. The other executive arm implementing the initiative is the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which will manage funds for following up the Mexican government’s accountability and transparency programs.<sup>3</sup>

Despite being officially condemned by financial institutions and the UN because of its harmful effects, “tied aid” has increased globally over the last 20 years.<sup>4</sup> According to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports on tied aid to the less developed countries, the United States heads the list of nations using this practice.<sup>5</sup> UN reports state that 84 cents out of every U.S. aid dollar returns to it in the form of goods and services purchased. Almost 75 percent of Canadian aid is tied, while Germany, Japan, France and Australia run a close third behind it.

The United States is notorious as a donor of tied aid, particularly with regard to security and the military in Latin America. Though since 9/11 its military aid models have been changing, it has maintained a very clear structure of military assistance since the end of World War II. Originally, military aid had three main pillars: materials and machinery to increase production of military goods; direct transfer of military equipment; and help in production, equipment use and personnel training.<sup>6</sup>

The same concept is in place today, but the aid’s focus has been contextualized in the reality of the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking as the new permanent threats that require strengthening the principles underlying military aid.

It should be remembered that the guiding principles of U.S. military aid have been taken to the extreme since the 9/11 terrorist attacks under the two administrations of President George W. Bush: in the name of security imperatives, Bush justified a preventive war on terror using measures that violate international law (arbitrary presidential decisions and decrees, illegal domestic spying operations, violation of human rights using “legalized” torture in the case of Guantánamo, Cuba, etc.); he then extended these practices to the fight against organized crime. The consequences of these policies included the creation of a scenario of indefinite, undefined war, without spatial or temporal frontiers, and one of the stages of Bush’s perpetual war in Latin America has been Mexico. Here, just like in Colombia, U.S. intervention took the form of the war on drug-trafficking-related terrorism through the Mérida Initiative, the sister to Plan Colombia.

At the same time, U.S. bilateralism in the form of tied aid and its security area is an inevitable result of the “securitization” of the drug trafficking and drug-trafficking-related terrorism agenda, which easily positions itself in a regional Latin American context in which there is no strong, consolidated cooperative security regime. This means that the U.S. agenda of militarization in the fight against the drug cartels is imposed despite its clear failure over the last 20 years. Although the magnitude of the Mérida Initiative is unprecedented in Latin America, the cooperation strategy is a model the United States has used on several occasions without any effective results.<sup>7</sup>

This is due to several things. First of all, it is based on a failed strategy that bans drugs and tries to eliminate them on their way to its borders, which has not been successful in controlling violence, much less corruption. It is a form of unilateral cooperation that does not include one of the most

important points in the strategy of the fight against drugs: the reduction of domestic demand. The United States continues to be the world's biggest consumer of drugs.<sup>8</sup> In the second place, the Mérida Initiative provides the tools and training to law enforcement agencies in Mexico when one of the country's serious internal problems is the need for a comprehensive reform of the police and judicial systems to reduce corruption and impunity.

The third factor that should be taken into account in analyzing the initiative involves the fact that the anti-terrorist struggle and 9/11 have increased the "securitization" trend in Official Assistance for Development (OAD), understood as just another foreign policy instrument for reducing the terrorist threat. The United States, the European Union and other developed countries have changed both their geographic and sectoral aid priorities. For example, the U.S. National Security Strategy and the USAID White Book underline that assistance must contribute to security and anti-terrorist strategies.<sup>9</sup>

In the field of international cooperation on security issues, the U.S. doctrine of preventive war and aid has two immediate repercussions. The first is linked to the aforementioned geographical changes in focus for aid. Every state that demonstrates it is "cooperative" in the fight against the threats to national security receives greater economic aid and debt relief from the United States and other donors. Many development agencies have expressed their concern about the growing earmarking of aid for security objectives. Resources that in the early 1990s went to poverty reduction or to foster the defense of human rights have been redirected to rebuilding fragile states, to the promotion of opportunities for people in strategic areas of instability, or to support interventions or bilateral plans like the Mérida Initiative.<sup>10</sup>

Pakistan, for example, stopped receiving aid in the mid-1990s as punishment for its nuclear testing and military regime, but after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it turned into the world's fourth largest destination for U.S. bilateral assistance. Turkey was tempted with offers of debt cancellation and aid in exchange for allowing troops to move through its territory against Iraq during the war, and for permitting the continued existence of NATO military bases within its borders, given its strategic geographical location. At the same time, multilateral funding agencies operate based on these priorities.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee itself changed the definition of OAD, bringing it closer to security. According to the DAC, cooperation can serve the fight against

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terrorism and drugs if it is oriented toward prevention and tries not to abandon development objectives. For example, this can be made to work by putting funds into achieving stronger, more stable political structures (states), helping moderate reformers create bridges among different communities, collaborating in the restructuring of certain countries' educational systems and combating inequality and exclusion, among other things.<sup>11</sup>

The other fundamental attitude change about international cooperation and aid given the U.S. polarization in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking is linked to the agenda for democratization, human rights and good government. This directly affects Latin America, the region of the world where developing countries have made the biggest advance in the transition to democracy. The new international security scenario once again poses the dilemma between freedom and security, which implies severe restrictions on democratic freedoms. For the international cooperation system, democracy and good government—governance—become the clear criteria for assigning international aid, relatively unrelated to development. New conditions are being imposed on countries for receiving economic aid at the cost of compromising national development goals based on other needs.<sup>12</sup>

These two points condition the fulfillment of the so-called Millennium Development Goals and the goals for poverty reduction.<sup>13</sup> These reflections on the trends in international cooperation in security matters promoted by the United States prompt an important question about the success of the Mérida Initiative: What might the implications be for Mexico of participating in this kind of an initiative in the context of unilateral cooperation that opens up the possibility of the issue's growing militarization as a response to deficiencies of the state instead of offering a paradigm of comprehensive aid cooperation that also touches on the country's development problems?

In this sense, it is appropriate to point out that the Mérida Initiative is by no means a new form of cooperation, for several reasons. On the one hand, it is part of a technocratic security agenda that permeates the U.S. vision and fight

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against the threats that it has faced throughout its contemporary history (the Cold War/Communism, drug trafficking, terrorism). Adopting this agenda implies a mountain of practices, regulations, certifications and other instruments that in the U.S. logic are functional to the global fight against terrorism, but, from the standpoint of a receiving, developing country like Mexico, are not.

In the second place, the Mérida Initiative imposes a pattern of international cooperation that is de-contextualized from the practice of international cooperation in security

matters. The military aid policy and cooperation proposed by the Mérida Initiative has a clear unethical dimension divorced from the international community's multilateral effort regarding security and that Mexico itself promotes in the world's main international cooperation forums. Since the mid-1990s, all international security initiatives must include the human security paradigm as a working part of the practices in international cooperation and security projects. Clearly, the Mérida Initiative includes none of these aspects. ■■■

#### FURTHER READING

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Intermón Oxfam, *La realidad de la ayuda 1999-2000* (Barcelona: Oxfam, 2000), p. 38. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) uses the same term.
- <sup>2</sup> The biggest irony in the Mérida Initiative is that the preliminary assistance package included a "human rights" condition, involving guaranteeing that deputy public prosecutors and civilian judicial authorities investigate and judge federal police and members of the military who violate fundamental rights, periodically consulting civil society organizations about implementation of the initiative, enforcing the ban on using statements made under torture or during other degrading treatment, and improving police forces' transparency and accountability.
- <sup>3</sup> Antonio O. Garza, "Fluyen fondos de la IM: se otorgan 99 millones de dólares a México a través de la Agencia de Cooperación en Defensa y Se-

guridad," U.S. Embassy press release (Mexico City), January 7, 2009. Available on line at [http://mexico.usembassy.gov/boletines/sp090107\\_MeridaUpdate.html](http://mexico.usembassy.gov/boletines/sp090107_MeridaUpdate.html).

- <sup>4</sup> Some effects of tied aid are receiving countries being denied the chance to get the same goods and services at a lower price elsewhere; transferring inappropriate, more costly skills and technologies to the receiver country; lack of responsibility about the control of the weapons sold; and high transaction costs for receiving countries when the donor applies restrictive norms on what is sold.
- <sup>5</sup> Development Assistance Committee (DAC), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *The United States: DAC Peer Review* (Paris: OECD, 2006), p. 32.
- <sup>6</sup> Carlos Borrachina Lisón, "La ayuda militar de Estados Unidos en América Latina: permanencias, continuidades e intereses," *Revista fuerzas armadas y sociedad* no. 1 (Santiago, Chile) year 20, pp. 109-140.
- <sup>7</sup> The Mérida Initiative will come to a total of US\$1.4 billion over the next two or three years. The Bush administration requested US\$500 million for the first year (fiscal year 2008) as part of its supplementary budget request for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is more than 10 times the amount of anti-drug aid the United States currently gives Mexico yearly.
- <sup>8</sup> The long-term solution for the illicit drug problem includes the reduction of demand in the main consuming country. The United States and the European Union bear co-responsibility for drug-related problems in Latin America since it is their markets that are the biggest consumers of the drugs produced there.
- <sup>9</sup> Borrachina Lisón, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup> This priority placed on security objectives in assigning development funds is what is called the "securitization" of aid. José Antonio Sanahuja Perales, "Seguridad, desarrollo y lucha contra la pobreza tras el 11-s: los objetivos del milenio y la 'securitización' de la ayuda," *Documentación social: revista de estudios sociales y de sociología aplicada* no. 136 (Madrid), 2005, pp. 25-42.
- <sup>11</sup> Development Assistance Committee, "A Development co-operation Lens on Terrorism Prevention: Key Entry Points for Action," OECD, 2003, available on line at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/4/16085708.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Juan Pablo Prado Lallande, *El lado oscuro de la cooperación internacional. Condicionabilidad y sanciones a la ayuda al desarrollo* (Mexico City: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 2009).
- <sup>13</sup> "Objetivos de desarrollo del milenio" (New York), 2008, available on line at [http://www.un.org/spanish/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG\\_Report\\_2008\\_SPANISH.pdf](http://www.un.org/spanish/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_Report_2008_SPANISH.pdf).