

# The Many Faces of Mexico

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by David J. Danelo

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*Abstract: This article will reexamine basic assumptions about the geopolitics and character of the United States-Mexico border, take a closer look at current events that have affected the drug war and, finally, discuss possible policy responses beyond those routinely voiced in the public domain.*

September 2010 was a special time in Mexico. Billboards from Chihuahua to Chiapas celebrated the “*bicentenario*,” or the bicentennial celebration of Mexico’s declaration of independence from Spain. The patriotic festivities culminated on September 15, when revelers crowded the plazas of Mexico’s cities, cheeks painted in the *tricolor* of green, white and red. Just before midnight, in accordance with Mexico’s annual custom, city leaders read Father Miguel Hidalgo’s 1810 proclamation against colonial tyranny, and the crowd affirmed its conclusion with thunderous cries of “*Viva México!*” The Grito de Dolores, as the commemorated event is called, felt like a cross between July 4<sup>th</sup> in Washington, D.C. and New Year’s Eve in Times Square.

Mexico’s *bicentenario* unfolded against the backdrop of the nation’s brutal and complex drug war. Although specific numbers are murky, Mexico’s drug cartels, in the country’s most unstable regions, clearly have expanded their scope of influence beyond the smuggling trade. In addition to revenue from drugs and human trafficking, narcotics groups bring in a growing share of income from extortion and kidnapping. This evolution in their business model has made their future ambitions difficult to predict. Will cartel leaders pursue their dominance of local areas towards political ends, or will they relinquish control to proxies once they have fought back rivals? If the government cannot provide security for daily commerce, who will?

The terrain of the drug war is especially perplexing. Baja California, which was a hotbed of violence in 2009, appears to have stabilized, becoming one of the more peaceful states in Mexico. The Rio Grande Valley, in contrast,

has gone from tranquil to perplexingly uncontrolled. In Nuevo Laredo, a border town controlled by Los Zetas, “policemen” often extort \$300 peso tariffs from selected drivers traveling south. Local businesses in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León routinely pay 10 percent or more of their monthly income in protection charges to whatever cartel controls the region. Migrant workers and illegal immigrants deported from the United States are pressed into service or massacred if they fail to submit.<sup>1</sup> According to media workers in troubled Monterrey, threatening phone calls from unknown sources to station producers prevent them from reporting, on average, one of every five murders they uncover.<sup>2</sup> If these statistics are accurate, then the body count in northeastern Mexico is at least 20 percent higher than what is reported.

The problems along the Rio Grande were confirmed in October 2010, just two weeks after Mexico’s bicentennial celebration. David and Tiffany Hartley, a married couple who had moved to the border from Colorado three years earlier for a job in the oil industry, ventured illegally on jet skis into the Mexican waters of the Rio Grande. As the Hartleys searched for an abandoned Catholic church they had previously toured for recreation, Mexican bandits allegedly ambushed them in speedboats. The husband, David, was missing after the encounter and, according to Tiffany, was wounded and killed.

The incident illustrated the lack of an effective cooperative security strategy between Mexico and the United States. Although both nations have pushed forward diplomatic platitudes, the current absence of security along the U.S.-Mexico frontier is both unacceptable and unsustainable. Indeed, the furious reactions of Texans to the Hartley incident appear similar to the response of Arizonans in April 2010 to the death of rancher Robert Krentz, whose murder preceded the state legislature’s passage of SB 1070, Arizona’s controversial illegal immigration law.

Despite the well-publicized capture of Mexican cartel kingpins, there are no signs that the anarchy south of the border will soon abate. Mexico’s inability to control the cartels has exposed fundamental weaknesses in the Mexican state, particularly in the north. Regional kingpins continue to seek authority over local governments and businesses in addition to control over smuggling routes. These developments are a natural consequence of many forces—including NAFTA, migration, economic inequality, law enforcement corruption, and political repression—that have plagued Mexico for decades. The outcome of this twenty-first century irregular war, which may become even more violent during the course of this decade, will have far reaching consequences for the United States. Barring an unlikely increase in Mexico’s nationwide security capacity, the anarchy will continue unchecked. This has

<sup>1</sup> The worst massacre of migrants chronicled by international media happened in August 2010 in Tamaulipas, where the bodies of 72 migrant workers were discovered. Members of Los Zetas were reportedly held responsible.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics reported in northeastern Mexico, September 2010.

the potential to threaten both the legitimacy of the state and the fabric of Mexican society.

### **Toward a Better Understanding of Mexico**

To understand what is happening in Mexico, we must first step back from what we think we know about our southern neighbor. The geography, culture, economics, demographics, and politics of Mexico are as complex and diverse as the varied players in the drug violence. Even though the two North American nations are economic, political, and cultural rivals, officials on both sides at state and local levels have long histories of working together.

When most Americans look at a map of Mexico, they usually describe the geography from one of two orientations. The first common approach is to look south from the U.S.-Mexico border. At first glance, northern Mexico appears as a vast undeveloped expanse of mountain and desert, terrain that is difficult to tame. And, indeed, there is truth in this assessment. Mexico's most important geographic features are its three mountain ranges, all named with a variation of *Sierra Madre*, a Spanish phrase whose literal translation means Mother Highlands. Mexico is so mountainous that if the country were flattened, it would be the size of Asia.

But seeing northern Mexico as a desolate, bandit-filled wasteland obscures the influence and overall importance of northern Mexico's economic engine and major population centers north of Mexico City, the place that represents the second primary orientation Americans typically use to understand Mexico. As the political center of the state, Mexico City's cultural history often dominates the landscape and conversation. Americans hear stories of the Aztec's god Quetzalcoatl and Tenochtitlan, Montezuma's legendary temple, and think these myths and structures explain the whole of Mexico's cultural landscape.

The actual fusion is far different. Although modern Mexico is certainly defined by its traditional native and Spanish heritage, Mexico's six geopolitical regions—particularly the three distinct areas in the north—have also become characterized by their proximity to the United States.<sup>3</sup> Mexico's Core and Outer Core form the traditional geopolitical center of Mexico, while the Yucatan Peninsula is Mexico's eastern (and formerly Mayan) naval flank. Mexico's Core, Outer Core, and the Yucatan each have distinct cultures and characteristics, and each has their own security challenges. But anarchy in these areas does not have the same impact on the United States as violence does in Mexico's north. For this reason, we will focus on northern Mexico (Figure 1).

<sup>3</sup> Identifying Mexico by six geopolitical sub-regions is a modification of "The Geopolitics of Mexico," a 2009 report available at Stratfor.com. The Stratfor article divided Mexico into four geopolitical sub-regions as Core, Outer Core, Sea Approaches, and Northern Frontier. The Stratfor report has been widely read and distributed, and thus is a useful starting point for discussions on Mexico's geopolitical regions.

Figure 1. Mexico's Geopolitical Sub-Regions, modified from Stratfor.com template



Mexico's six northern states bordering the United States, as well as portions of other states deeper in Mexico's heartland, are essentially understood as parts of geopolitical sub-regions: Baja California, the Sierra Madres, and the Rio Grande Basin. Baja California is the rugged peninsula south of the U.S. state of California. The Sierra Madres include the deserts, mountains, steppes and coasts of Sonora and Chihuahua. The Rio Grande Basin covers the eastern mountains, plains and tropics of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, as well as portions of Chihuahua and Durango. Along with their geographic differences, each of these three regions has distinct economic, political, and security interests. These drive the creation of coalitions with local U.S. counterparts that share similar regional goals.

As illustrated above, conditions in Mexico's three northern geopolitical regions have more importance to the United States than Mexico's southern areas. NAFTA has given these areas an outsized significance to the U.S. economy. Out of every 100 units made in a Mexican *maquiladora* and shipped into the United States, 87 are manufactured in Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, or Tamaulipas. Nearly 20 percent of Mexico's 106 million citizens live in the six states bordering the U.S. southwest. Over 85 percent of all trade between the United States and Mexico passes

through a Mexican border state. And more than half of all of Mexico's drug-related killings have occurred in these six states.

This illustration of geopolitical sub-regions is not intended to diminish the significance of Washington, D.C.'s relationship with Mexico City. State and local regions are hardly managed without direction from federal authorities. Mexico City and Washington represent the political power centers of two nations cut from the same continent and born with limbs and organs united; despite protestations, the fate of one inexorably impacts their North American Siamese twin. Although this part of Mexico—"la frontera del norte"—is of greatest relevance to Americans, it is rarely examined as a distinct entity. For these reasons, and the obvious geographic proximity of northern Mexico to the United States, these regions merit closer scrutiny.

### **Baja California**

Shaped like a miniature of mainland Mexico, Baja California is to Mexico as Alaska is to the United States. Like Alaska, Baja California is isolated from the rest of Mexico; the barren isthmus of the Altar Desert connects the Baja peninsula to "Continental Mexico." Like Alaska, Baja California is useful as a strategic buffer against potential land or sea threats. And, like Alaska, Baja California has the distinction of being the final addition to the Mexican Republic, advancing from territory to state status in 1952.

But in Alaska, Russia has no habit of demonstrating overt ambition or territorial claim, nor does the Alaskan business community show a pattern of subversive political maneuvering to become part of another country. Both dynamics have been at play for over a century between Baja California and the United States. Tensions date back to the Mexican War, when, as part of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States relinquished all claims to the Baja peninsula. This did not sit well with American sailors, soldiers and marines occupying the Baja coast, most of whom had established U.S. forts, seized land, and taken Mexican wives. In March 1848, prior to the Treaty's passage, Senator Sam Houston, President Andrew Jackson's close friend and hero of the Texas War of Independence, wanted to incorporate Baja California and much of what is now northern Mexico into U.S. territory.<sup>4</sup> After passing the treaty without Senator Houston's resolution, the United States deployed secondary brigades of troops to the new American territories. Responsibilities included quelling uprisings from formerly Mexican citizens in the new U.S. territory of California, as well as forcibly evicting American settlers who refused to relinquish land claims in Mexico. Until 1850, the U.S. Army occupied a restive San Diego under martial law.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Robert Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), p. 433.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Griswold, "The U.S.-Mexican War in San Diego," *Journal of San Diego History*, Volume 49, Number 1, 2003.

Although the fear of U.S. aggression creates concerns throughout northern Mexico, nowhere is that greater for Mexico City than the Baja peninsula. As noted in a recent report, Mexico gains a nautical defense in depth with control of the Baja peninsula, insulating the sea lanes into valuable Pacific Ocean ports from attack.<sup>6</sup> Baja California is much easier for an antagonist—either the United States or an Asian power—to invade and conquer than northern Mexico.

The United States has not acted unilaterally in pursuing the Baja peninsula. Although the peninsula is divided into two states (Baja California Norte and Sur), Baja California's population is concentrated along the U.S.-Mexico border. Nine out of every ten Baja residents live within twenty-five miles of the United States. In every other border state, less than half of the population lives on the line. Unlike Mexico's other border states, Mexicali, Baja California's state capital, sits directly adjacent to the United States.

As a result, Baja California has a disproportionate tie to their northern neighbor—even for a border state. In the early 1900s, private U.S. companies funded and developed Baja's local infrastructure. Mexicali, the capital, was built in 1903 by the U.S.-owned Colorado River Land Company, which also developed Baja California's northern border while building the All-American Canal. With trade and irrigation located on the border, Baja California is anchored permanently to California's economy.

These anchors extend into local politics, with implications that are often troubling for Mexico City. During the Mexican Revolution, the Baja California business community actively backed a movement for the United States to annex the Baja peninsula. Both Prohibition and Pancho Villa quieted the discussion; one by halting unfettered U.S.-Mexico trade, the other through the political instability following his 1916 incursion into Columbus, New Mexico.

Because of Baja California's overall strategic importance to Mexico, an undue level of familiarity with the United States breeds concern in Mexico City. In early 1942, the United States proposed a joint defense with Mexico against a Japanese invasion, perceived as a real threat by both nations. The plan called for the United States to jointly station troops alongside Mexican soldiers along Baja California's western coast. Although Mexico City's diplomats approved the plan with Washington, the government appointed former Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas—an iconic Mexican leader whose political stature mirrored F.D.R.'s—as the general of Baja California's military zone. Cardenas, a fervent nationalist, issued orders after assuming command to defend Baja California at all costs—both against the Japanese and the *norteamericanos*. While the joint defensive concept was never put to the test, the plan approved in Washington did not seem possible to implement on the ground despite Mexico City's stated consent.

<sup>6</sup> Stratfor, *ibid.*

The fence marking the U.S.-Mexico border between San Diego and Tijuana is often seen as a sign of cultural oppression. For Mexico City, however, the hard wall north of Baja California indicates a certain relief. Historically speaking, when the demarcation line becomes porous and investment flows into the south, Mexico City's concern increases, worrying that their northern neighbor may again be coveting their prized peninsula. Although state and local partnerships will always exist, joint policies leading to robust, overt U.S.-Mexico security cooperation are unlikely to evolve or endure in this zone of northern Mexico. For both sides—and unlike other U.S.-Mexico border regions—the jagged metal dividing Alta and Baja California will probably be as good as it gets.

### **Sierra Madres**

Because popular images of the U.S.-Mexico border include deserts, urban fences, or the Rio Grande, it is easy to forget how mountainous Mexico is. Jagged terrain defines Mexico. The Sierra Madre Occidental—known simply as the Sierra Madres because it is three times the size of Mexico's other mountain ranges—is northern Mexico's key terrain feature. It has historically been the least stable region in northern Mexico, which has also generally offered the greatest political opportunity for security cooperation between Mexico City and Washington, D.C.

The Sierra Madres region is an expansive stretch of tropical coastline, desert, savannah and steppe bisected by the forested Sierra Madre mountain range. Properly called the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Sierra Madres of Sonora and Chihuahua carve the Pacific Coast and Sonora Desert from the Mexican Plateau. Plunging into Sinaloa and Durango, this mountain range funnels south, where it joins Mexico's two other "Sierra Madres," Oriental and del Sur, near Mexico City's valley. Geologically, these mountains are the southern extension of the Rocky Mountains in the western United States.

This rugged frontier was nearly impossible for the Spanish to tame, and it remains difficult for Mexico City. From the sixteenth century until Mexico's independence, Sonora y Sinaloa was the largest province in New Spain. The two western states were partitioned in the 1830s, although Sonora remained enormous until the Mexican War. No Mexican state lost more territory to the United States in 1848 than Sonora.

Arizona's illegal immigration law notwithstanding, Sonorans in certain respects bear a lesser grudge against the *norteamericanos* than towards Mexico City, whom they hold responsible for the northern frontier's nineteenth century vulnerability and conquest. During Mexico's War of Independence (1810-21), Spanish troops cut off supply lines to the north, effectively starving Sonora's ranchers and miners. Rather than mount an offensive, Mexico City's insurgent leaders campaigned against the Spaniards throughout central Mexico, leaving the northern frontier destitute. An estimated 50,000

Sonorans abandoned homesteads during the war, depopulating the region and returning control of the mountains to their natives. A display at the Sonora State Museum in Hermosillo suggests—perhaps more with *machismo* than logic—that if Mexico City had invested additional resources towards the north, the Sonorans could have defended their territory from the eventual American Intervention.

Chihuahua, the eastern state in the Sierra Madres region, also has a history of dissent with Mexico City. Significant events in both of Mexico's major political cataclysms—the 1810 war for independence from Spain and the 1910 Mexican Revolution—occurred in Chihuahua. After Miguel Hidalgo began his 1810 uprising against Spanish rule, he was arrested and deported to Chihuahua City, where he was executed by firing squad in July 1811. An eternal flame burning in the Chihuahua governor's building marks the spot where Hidalgo died. A century later, political rebel Francisco Madero sparked the Mexican Revolution in Chihuahua and Pancho Villa, who remains revered in the state, fanned the flames as governor and *generallísimo*.

Notwithstanding a serious disagreement with Pancho Villa prior to World War I, the U.S. and Mexican governments have a history of security partnership in the Sierra Madres. From 1881 to 1910—just one generation removed from the Mexican-American war—Mexico's president, Porfirio Diaz, joined with a series of American presidents to patrol much of this geopolitical region together. In west Texas, along the eastern edges of the Sierra Madres, Mexican *rurales* rode with Texas Rangers who were pursuing Comanches. In Arizona Territory, Mexican and American soldiers mounted joint campaigns against Apache warriors and Chinese immigrants. Cooperation ended during the Mexican Revolution, and rum-runners violating Prohibition led Congress in 1924 to create the U.S. Border Patrol.

On the eastern reaches of the Sierra Madres is one of the most important, and overlooked, terrain features in North America. The headwaters of the Río Conchos, the primary source of the Río Grande, lie in western Chihuahua. The river flows down the mountains to the east, picking up runoff from tributaries to the north and south, meeting the Río Grande at Presidio, Texas and Ojinaga, Chihuahua. In hydrological terms, this is the same pattern as South America's Amazon River. Most of the water flowing out of the Río Grande and into the Gulf of Mexico has journeyed from west to east, instead of north to south.

Most official literature defines the Río Conchos as a tributary of the Río Grande, which implies that the Río Grande is a river whose full source originates comfortably in the United States. That's not entirely correct. If cartographers and geographers were to describe precisely the water's source—absent any discussion of national boundaries—they would say that the body of water north of Presidio is actually a tributary of the river running east from the Sierra Madres in northwestern Mexico. If the political line between the United States and Mexico did not exist, the thick blue line

Figure 2. The Rio Grande and Rio Conchos, highlighted to reflect water flow



marking the river would run east through Mexico into Texas, not south through Colorado (Figure 2).

Since the Río Conchos is the main source of the Rio Grande, the river that separates Texas and Mexico north from Presidio is not grand at all. In most places, it is barely a creek. This body of water north of Presidio might also be the origin of the name of the Mexican river to the west—Río Conchos means Crude River in English. As this geopolitical discussion moves east, the Northern Rio Grande will refer to the river that runs south from Colorado to Presidio, Texas. It is important to distinguish between these two parts of the river because they both have different characteristics, which will become relevant when examining the Rio Grande Basin.

Finally, the Sierra Madres represent the heart of the *norteño* culture, an ethos separate from Mexico City and Guadalajara. Just as the U.S. southwest has a distinctive Mexican character, and, similarly, northern Mexico exhibits an intriguing combination of American and frontier behaviors. *Norteños* see themselves as the rugged antithesis of southern city slicker *chilangos*, the common nickname for residents of Mexico's Core and Outer Core. In the Sierra Madres, as in other parts of northern Mexico, American sports, particularly football, basketball, and baseball, receive priority showing at sports bars and at parties. Northern Mexican families, like their U.S. counterparts, exchange Christmas presents on December 25; in Mexico City and Guadalajara, the preferred giving day is January 6, or *Día de Los Reyes*. For a U.S. parallel, try to imagine the cultural difference if Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. ate Thanksgiving turkey in November, while Los Angeles,

San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle feasted two weeks later. The cultural similarities between Mexicans and American become even stronger as we move into the Rio Grande Basin.

### **Rio Grande Basin**

The Rio Grande Basin refers to the plains, hills, and tropics east of the Rio Conchos and the Rio Grande delta, which is divided between the U.S. and Mexico and flows into the Gulf of Mexico. In economic and cultural terms, this region is more interconnected than any other along the U.S.-Mexico border. According to United Nations human development statistics, the states within the Rio Grande Basin—Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and parts of Chihuahua and Durango—have the highest per capita standard of living in Mexico. Put together, these states average a GDP that is 2.3 times greater than the rest of Mexico combined.<sup>7</sup>

The most important city in the Rio Grande Basin is Monterrey. Both the state capital of Nuevo León and the regional capital of the Rio Grande Basin, Monterrey, is the third-largest metro area in Mexico, just below Mexico City and Guadalajara. It is also the financial capital of Mexico; a city intimately connected with American banking, manufacturing, and energy industries, especially those across the border in Texas. Despite an oligarchy of families that have held local power for four centuries, this region has the largest and wealthiest middle class in Mexico.

One important characteristic of Monterrey is its difference in origin from Mexico City. Unlike Mexico City, which was a thriving Aztec city prior to Spanish conquest, Monterrey did not exist before 1596, when European immigrants named the first settlement Santa Lucia. Consequently, Monterrey's cultural history has evolved differently from Mexico City, where a mixture of pride and shame about the consequences of pillaging a native culture engenders a constant awareness that continues to this day. Monterrey takes little pride in the accomplishments and failures of the Aztec civilization; other than small bands of nomadic hunters whose tribal status remains unknown, no indigenous culture shares any history or cultural affinity with Nuevo León.

To a much larger degree than Mexico's other geopolitical regions, the Rio Grande Basin has charted its economic rise with that of the United States. The fortunes of the Texas economy have played a particularly significant role in Monterrey's development. When Texas became independent in 1836, Monterrey was a sizable but relatively unimportant city; one of many stopovers on trading routes leading through San Antonio and the western reaches of the United States.

This changed during the Civil War, when the Union Navy's blockade of the Confederacy made Texas an important route for exports to Europe. As an

<sup>7</sup> Mexican-American Free Trade Alliance, San Antonio, Texas; October 17, 2007.

international waterway, the Union could not block traffic down the Rio Grande without risking the ire of Mexico, which was governed by Maximilian I of the Hapsburg dynasty and backed by the French military. Although the Union was loyal to Mexico's rebel general Benito Juarez, they lacked the naval resources and political interest to prevent Mexico from trading with the Confederates. With the Rio Grande filled with cotton bound for Europe, Monterrey became an important mercantile exchange, leading to the city's eventual development as the financial capital of Mexico.

Monterrey's energy and manufacturing industries grew alongside those of Texas during the twentieth century, and no area has benefited more from the North American Free Trade Agreement. As a result, the Rio Grande Basin is Mexico's only geopolitical sub-region with the capacity, wealth, and infrastructure to form a political bloc that could, theoretically, disrupt the internal structure of the Mexican state. Although such a scenario is extremely unlikely, it is relevant to acknowledge this area's political significance, particularly given the current challenges Mexico City faces to its writ of authority, which we will now look at closer as we analyze the state's capacity to continue confronting the ongoing specter of drug violence.

### **The Drug War by Geopolitical Region**

Understanding the geopolitics of Mexico is necessary if the United States is to develop policies to address conditions that will help Mexico restore security to its citizens. First, developing the geopolitical framework is important for understanding current events. Just because a strategy has been effective in one particular region, as in the case of Baja California, does not mean it will be effective in another. Second, and more importantly, the geopolitics are essential to understanding how the United States and Mexico develop cooperative strategies in the regions where the current approach is clearly not working. As we know from the headlines, the strategies in the Sierra Madres and Rio Grande Basin have been catastrophic failures. Can the successes in one region translate to another? If not, are there any guiding principles U.S. and Mexican authorities can use as they develop strategies?

In less than a year, Baja California has gone from being one of the most violent regions of Mexico to one of the safest. Local businesses are not being extorted, as was once the case. Shoppers and tourists are returning. The shift began to occur in January 2010 after authorities captured Teodoro García Simental, a drug lord with a fondness for boiling his enemies in lye. Additionally, although the Mexican military maintained a regular and visible presence, commanders made a strategic decision to not conduct operations in Baja California's major cities of Tijuana, Ensenada, and Mexicali.

Two things are noteworthy about Baja California. First, Mexico's federal and state police were the lead agencies in attacking García Simental's cartel, and their effectiveness is admirable and worthy of commendation.

Operations appear to have been closely coordinated though Baja California's former interior minister, Jose Francisco Blake. Second, it is important to acknowledge what did not happen. Neither the United States nor Mexico significantly changed any gun or drug laws. Mexico's police and military, in Baja California, successfully developed the capacity to address the security problem.

Although Mexico has taken down other cartel kingpins, Baja California's subsequent turnaround and stabilization represents the only strategic success story in northern Mexico. President Calderon, it should be noted, appointed Jose Francisco Blake as interior minister for all of Mexico in July 2010, after his National Action Party (PAN) was defeated in congressional elections. Blake, who is also a PAN member, was given the implicit and explicit task of translating his success in Baja California to all of Mexico.

Mr. Blake will have a difficult task. Baja California has a small population, and authorities had both the capacity and will to apply sufficient resources to built operations that supported Mexico's counter-narcotics strategy. The actual and perceived legitimacy of federal and state police in Baja California, and the willingness of the military to play a supporting rather than supported role—especially in urban areas—made the strategy effective. Mexican soldiers stationed in the region operated primarily as screeners at fixed checkpoints or as a quick reaction force for federal police.<sup>8</sup> While maintaining a discreet presence in the background was important in Baja, the Mexican military should not necessarily keep the same low profile in the other two regions.

The Sierra Madres remain in anarchy. As the Caucasus and the Scottish Highlands have illustrated, the mountains have often been difficult for governments to tame. The Mexican military and federal police do not have enough personnel to secure the rugged terrain in Sonora and Chihuahua, which is not any easier for vehicles to traverse than it once was for horses. Because of the absence of the authorities, most of the area is under de facto control of the Sinaloa Cartel. Headed by Joaquin "Shorty" Guzman, #937 on the 2009 Forbes roster of the world's 1000 wealthiest billionaires, the Sinaloa Cartel is widely seen as Mexico's most powerful drug cartel.

Because the Mexican military does not have the resources to win a protracted fight with the Sinaloa Cartel, the "hands off" strategy in rural Sonora and Chihuahua is more problematic. Mexico's defense secretariat has orga-

<sup>8</sup> I reached this conclusion from published reports, interviews with off duty Mexican soldiers stationed in Baja California, and personal observations. One Mexican soldier stationed in Baja California said in two years of being deployed, his unit only encountered one combat engagement. In 2009, at a rural location, Mexican federal police requested military vehicles, weaponry, and personnel as covering fire for an immediate takedown of a cartel safe house. The soldier said he provided suppressive fire from a mounted .50 caliber machine gun for the federal police, who completed the entry and takedown of the safe house. In other cities (Ciudad Juarez; Nuevo Laredo), soldiers, not the police, took the lead in operations.

nized the Mexican Army divisions differently than the geopolitical regions identified in this article. Under Mexican Army structure, Baja California and Sonora have been placed under the same division command.<sup>9</sup> But unlike the case of Baja California, the terrain in Sonora, strength of the enemy, and nature of the threat requires significantly more troops available for rural patrolling. Mexico does not have these troops. This means the Sinaloa Cartel—as well as their rivals—can support operations in other areas indefinitely from their rural bases. This is what is taking place in Ciudad Juarez, where the lack of security in the surrounding highlands is only one of the many reasons why this city has become known as the murder capital of the world.

Issues north of the border also contribute to the security vacuum in the Sierra Madres. The six Mexican states bordering California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas have developed varying degrees of security partnerships with mirroring U.S. states. Many are ad hoc, and some have been formalized with political compacts. For example, Arizona and Sonora have an official police partnership, which once enabled authorities to share information, coordinate investigations, listen in on common radio frequencies, and develop joint operations at a direct state-to-state level outside of federal supervision.

But the Mexican state of Sonora now maintains a caustic and temperamental attitude towards Arizona, which has reduced security cooperation between state officials. Although intelligence sharing and operational partnership were once robust, cooperation became less effective when Sonora's government protested Arizona's passage of SB 1070. This development is a setback for everyone except drug cartels, who continue to fight over control of Ciudad Juarez and the surrounding regions.

The Rio Grande Basin has witnessed the sharpest shift in conditions on the ground. Violence has spiked significantly since February, when the Sinaloa Cartel declared an alliance between the Gulf Cartel and La Familia Michoacán against the regional power Los Zetas. The Zetas responded by establishing roadblocks on a major intercontinental highway and ambushing two downtown Monterrey hotels. Monterrey, the wealthiest city in Mexico, has not previously been impacted by the drug wars. Home to many of Latin America's most prestigious colleges, an informal "cease fire" had held for decades; both cartel leaders and government officials sent their children to universities like Monterrey Tech, a school seen as Mexico's equivalent to MIT. This status as safe zone no longer exists.<sup>10</sup>

The conditions that led to the deterioration of security in the Rio Grande Basin are much the same as those in Sonora and Chihuahua: federal

<sup>9</sup> Mexico is organized into twelve military commands, and the zones are identified by roman numerals. Baja California and Sonora are in Zone II. Chihuahua and Coahuila: Zone XI. Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas: Zone IV. See Mexico's government web site: [www.sedena.gob.mx](http://www.sedena.gob.mx).

<sup>10</sup> On March 20, 2010, Mexican security forces shot and killed two Monterrey Tech students thought to be involved in drug activity. The incident was the first of its kind in the history of the campus.

and state authorities cannot control rural areas, which gives cartel leaders the bases they need to conduct operations in cities. The biggest difference is this: instability in and around Monterrey is much more politically significant than chaos in Ciudad Juarez. Both literally and figuratively, the Sierra Madres are remote. Although President Calderon would certainly like to defeat the Sinaloa Cartel, he can tolerate their dominance of the mountains. But Mexico City cannot permit terror to rule Monterrey.

This is a vulnerability that Los Zetas have exploited. By attacking Monterrey this year, Los Zetas have forced the Mexican government into overreacting in urban areas throughout the Rio Grande Basin, exposing their lack of authority in the rural regions. This has enabled the weakened Los Zetas to fight back against the cartel alliance. It has also fueled an academic debate over whether or not Mexico is facing an insurgency, which has only served as fodder for Washington and Mexico City to snipe at each other instead of joining forces against their common enemies.

### **The New Colombia?**

During a September 8, 2010, speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton compared conditions in Mexico to Colombia's late twentieth century drug war, saying the Mexican situation was "morphing into, or making common cause with, what we would consider an insurgency."<sup>11</sup> Astonishingly, a day later, President Barack Obama publicly rejected her comments. "Mexico is a vast and progressive democracy with a growing economy," the president said in the Los Angeles-based Spanish newspaper *La Opinion*. "You cannot compare what is happening in Mexico with what happened in Colombia twenty years ago."<sup>12</sup>

Although President Obama is correct in saying the situations in Colombia and Mexico are not directly analogous, his rejection of Secretary Clinton's more accurate assessment is misleading. Since December 2006, deaths in Mexico have exceeded previous Latin American insurgencies in a dramatic fashion. Almost 30,000 people have died in four years, a staggering statistic of chaos. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 30,000 were also killed from 1980-1994 in Peru's war against the Shining Path. Estimates of Colombia's casualties from their 46 year war against the Medellin Cartel and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) are between 70,000 and 100,000 from 1963 to today.<sup>13</sup> Although Mexico has twice the population and size of Colombia and three times that of Peru, the pace of death has accelerated at a rate that is, respectively, 5 and 3.5 times higher.

<sup>11</sup> "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2010. Transcript archived at [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

<sup>12</sup> "Mexico drug war not comparable to Colombia: Obama," Reuters, September 10, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, Report on Global Conflict, 2009.

The volume of violence is where the similarities end. Unlike the FARC in Colombia, Mexico's drug cartels have no desire to reshape their country in accordance with Marxist ideology. In thought and behavior, Mexico's narcotics groups have more in common with Somali pirates than Colombian rebels: both groups seek to create anarchy so they can exploit the defenseless and dominate local markets. Like Somali pirates in East Africa's coastal villages, Los Zetas and their ilk have thrived in stateless voids, stealing money from merchants and becoming minor celebrities within their respective regions.

While Colombia faced a political insurgency, Mexico confronts something like land piracy. The drug kingpins are bandits, shameless and powerful, sailing untouched through the mountainous seas of the Sierra Madres and Rio Grande Basin, marauding wantonly in their fleets of pickup trucks and SUVs. The absence of politics does not make Mexico's problems any less virulent, and analysts should pause before dismissing the drug violence as "only a criminal problem" simply because the Sinaloa Cartel lacks a political ideology.

This is why the verbal differences between President Obama and Secretary Clinton are important. Even though Secretary Clinton may not have explicitly clarified the parallel, her acknowledgement of the scope and power of the lawlessness underscored an awareness of the problem and a need for the United States to move more forcefully towards developing constructive and cooperative solutions. By using the Colombia parallel, the chief diplomat signaled to the Mexican government a continuing willingness to help and a commitment to assist with achieving stability. By highlighting the success of Mexico's economy, President Obama seemed to be pandering unnecessarily to Mexico City's political elite, who themselves may lack a full understanding of the issues in northern Mexico and are content to wallow in self pity and blame the United States for the violence. Neither option is acceptable. Secretary Clinton must accurately diagnose the problem and President Obama (and Mexico's politicians) must fully acknowledge it for both countries to achieve results.

## **A Better Plan**

Since 2006, when the United States reached an agreement with Mexico on what is now called the Merida Initiative, critics have referred derisively to the cooperative effort as "Plan Mexico," comparing the effort to the U.S. assistance given to Colombia during the previous decades. Ironically, many policy experts are now offering Plan Colombia as a success story and suggesting the U.S. military partnership could be replicated in Mexico. Although building the Mexican military's capacity and offering technical assistance will be of some value, these proposals offer little substance in addressing the security issues that form the heart of the problem.

While U.S. military cooperation with Colombia has certainly enabled a reduction in the FARC's operational capabilities and diminished their influence

throughout the country, the Colombian example is not a useful model for structuring solutions in Mexico. Although institution building within Mexico's judiciary and federal police has paid dividends, most recently in Baja California, Mexico's government does not seek a robust partnership with the U.S. military. Most funding through the Merida Initiative has been designated for technical hardware, such as helicopters and unmanned surveillance aircraft. In contrast, Plan Colombia focused on training and "mentorship" through U.S. Special Forces, which granted wide ranging covert latitude for American troops to operate by, with, and through Colombian soldiers. If Mexico is working closely with the U.S. military—and recent reports suggest this is the case—they certainly do not want their citizens to know.<sup>14</sup>

It hardly seems conspiratorial to state that covert cooperation is active within elements of the U.S. and Mexican defense departments. But secret operations and public support of police reform are not adequate strategies. Indeed, covertly approaching the problem prevents both the U.S. and Mexican governments from taking the necessary steps. On Mexico City's side, the political class has focused too much on diplomatic sensitivities and too little on practical and public cooperation. In one disproportionate response, Mexican politicians castigated an American cartoonist in September 2010 for his depiction of Mexico's national flag. Angry officials said the cartoon, which illustrated the eagle on Mexico's banner as being killed by machine gun bullets, desecrated Mexico's sacred honor, likening the event to unholy sketches of the prophet Muhammad in a Dutch newspaper. Mexico City missed the point: Americans are fully aware of northern Mexico's crisis, and do not wish to suffer the consequences of the security collapse they see evolving to their south.

But the U.S. national security establishment would also prefer to avoid dealing directly, and publicly, with tangible solutions. Thorny domestic dilemmas like immigration reform, gun control, intelligence sharing, security cooperation, and especially marijuana legalization must be addressed on the U.S. side of the border for security forces to have any real impact. U.S. security assistance, particularly through state and local partnerships in the border regions, would have short and long-term benefits for both Mexico and the United States. A more stable Mexico reduces long-term incentives for illegal immigration and fuels North America's economic engine. But U.S. manpower and materiel are now committed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Great Recession has reduced U.S. economic flexibility. Neither Americans nor Mexicans seem eager for the United States to invest in a nation-building project across the Rio Grande.

If military assistance and institution building are insufficient, what else is left? The answer is to develop an overt legal and diplomatic framework for security cooperation along the U.S.-Mexico border. In the past 60 years, the

<sup>14</sup>Tim King. "Mexico Denies US Special Forces Presence South of the Border", *Salem News.com*, October 5, 2010.

United States and Mexico have designed supranational treaties that strengthen both sides of the border. The U.S.-Mexico Water Treaty in 1944, the La Paz Agreement, in 1983 and the NAFTA Free Trade Zone in 1994 created cross-border corridors, established bi-national authorities, and provided geographic structure to partnerships. These treaties have been imperfect, but they have succeeded in unifying policy efforts at local, state and federal levels.

An appropriate legal framework for permanent border cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican security forces does not exist. The forum for crafting such an agreement should be the International Boundary and Water Commission, a bi-national organization responsible to the State Department for delineating the border. Advised by commission representatives, U.S. and Mexican defense officials could demarcate a series of joint operating regions ten miles from any city. Peacekeepers would function both as a deterrent and a humanitarian presence. Using military forces in a limited capacity frees more officers and Border Patrol agents to walk beats. Police and policia can partner in the cities, while soldiers and soldados jointly guard the badlands.

The United States should not unilaterally deploy soldiers to the border; Mexico City would justifiably protest such a move as a threat to Mexican sovereignty. A mutual resolution, in contrast, emphasizes shared responsibility, particularly in the Sierra Madres and Rio Grande Basin. Historically, the United States and Mexico have cooperated in these regions. By establishing joint federal authority in the desert and mountains, the United States and Mexico could address smuggling both north and south. A border deployment also gives Mexican soldiers a clearer mission than a vague mandate to “beat the cartels”—a goal that, despite their patriotism and valor, is not being achieved.

The goal of U.S. policy should be partnership with Mexico that seeks not only to build institutions, but also to restore security to the Sierra Madres and Rio Grande Basin. Achieving this objective will require trust and resources from both countries, something often easier said than done. “Most Mexicans are aware, North Americans less so, that fate has placed both nations upon the same continent,” wrote historian T. R. Fehrenbach. “The people of the United States like to believe that political will and good intentions can solve most human dilemmas. They often find it hard to understand Mexicans, who know better. Yet both heritages are vital parts of the American whole, and together they will forge its future.”<sup>15</sup> The United States and Mexico must hang together, or the instability of their common frontier will eventually hang them separately.



<sup>15</sup>T.R. Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973, 1995), quoted from the forward, September 1994.