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U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation: From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework

Elevated drug overdose deaths in the United States and homicide rates in Mexico have led some in Congress to question the efficacy of U.S.-Mexican security cooperation. U.S. drug overdose deaths rose from 27,700 in 2007 to some 107,450 in 2023, 69.4% of which were linked to fentanyl. Since 2019, Mexico has surpassed China as the United States' primary source of fentanyl (with precursor chemicals coming mostly from China). Crime groups battling for control of drug and other illicit markets have fueled violent crime in Mexico. The homicide rate in Mexico tripled from 2007 to 2023. These trends have continued despite U.S.-Mexican security cooperation under the Mérida Initiative, an effort for which Congress appropriated \$3.5 billion from FY2008 to FY2021.

Congress may use lessons learned from the Mérida Initiative to inform funding, oversight, and potential conditions on U.S. security assistance to Mexico under the new Bicentennial Framework.

The Mérida Initiative

Prior to FY2008, Mexico did not receive large amounts of U.S. security assistance, partially due to Mexican sensitivity about U.S. involvement in the country's internal affairs. In March 2007, then-Mexican President Felipe Calderón asked for more U.S. cooperation to fight drug cartels. In response, the Mérida Initiative, a package of U.S. antidrug and rule-of-law assistance to Mexico, began. As part of the Mérida Initiative's focus on shared responsibility, the Mexican government pledged to tackle corruption. The U.S. government pledged to address drug demand and the illicit trafficking of firearms and bulk currency to Mexico. Both governments have struggled to fulfill those commitments.

First Phase: FY2008-FY2010. Congress appropriated \$1.5 billion, including \$420.7 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), which enabled the purchase of equipment, including aircraft and helicopters, to support Mexico's federal security forces (military and police). Congress required the State Department to withhold 15% of certain U.S. aid for the Mexican military and police until the agency submitted an annual report stating that Mexico was taking steps to meet human rights requirements. U.S. assistance focused on counternarcotics, border security, and counterterrorism; public security; and institution building. U.S. intelligence supported Mexico's strategy of arresting (and extraditing) kingpins from each of the major drug trafficking organizations, which inadvertently contributed to intra-cartel violence.

Four Pillars: FY2011-FY2017. In 2011, the U.S. and Mexican governments broadened the scope of bilateral efforts under four pillars: (1) combating transnational

criminal organizations (TCOs); (2) strengthening criminal justice sector institutions while protecting human rights; (3) creating a 21st-century U.S.-Mexican border, while improving immigration enforcement in Mexico; and (4) building resilient communities through pilot projects aimed at violence prevention and reducing drug demand.

Observers initially praised the initiative's breadth but later concluded that the governments adopted new priorities without allocating adequate funding for them. For example, pillar two received significant U.S. funding for courtroom infrastructure, training, and equipment to support Mexico's 2008-2016 transition to an accusatorial justice system at the federal and state levels. The new criminal justice system has thus far failed to reduce impunity rates, possibly due to subsequent underinvestment in improving the investigative capacities of Mexican police and prosecutors.

Final Phase and Demise: FY2018-FY2021. U.S.-Mexico security cooperation decreased after President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office in December 2018. López Obrador criticized the Mérida Initiative. He gradually reduced federal security cooperation with the United States, with the exception of migration enforcement (a key priority of the Trump Administration). In 2019, the López Obrador administration disbanded the federal police, which had received significant U.S. equipment and training under the Mérida Initiative. Instead, the government created a National Guard drawn mostly from the military with limited investigative capacity that the defense ministry directed.

Security cooperation further declined following the October 2020 U.S. arrest of a former Mexican defense minister on drug charges based on investigations by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. In response, Mexico's Congress enacted a law requiring foreign law enforcement officials to share information they gather with designated Mexican federal authorities. The Mexican federal government stopped approving most Mérida Initiative programs. Nevertheless, intelligence sharing and cooperation continued in some states and municipalities, including in Mexico City, when President Claudia Sheinbaum then served as head of government.

Bicentennial Framework (2021-Present)

The Biden Administration has sought to rebuild the U.S. security relationship with Mexico. In October 2021, Mexico hosted the first High-Level Security Dialogue (HLSD) since 2016. After the dialogue, the governments announced a new Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities (the Framework) with three pillars:

1. **Protect people** by investing in public health solutions to drug use, supporting safe communities, and reducing homicides and other high-impact crimes
2. **Prevent transborder crime** by securing modes of travel and commerce, reducing arms trafficking, targeting illicit supply chains, and reducing human trafficking and smuggling
3. **Pursue criminal networks** by disrupting illicit financiers, strengthening justice sector actors to prosecute organized crime, addressing cyber threats, and cooperating on extraditions

The Framework envisions a coordinated, “whole of government” approach to combating shared security challenges; however, the July 2024 arrest of Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada by the United States has caused tension. In March 2023, U.S. and Mexican officials announced “phase two” of the Framework, focused on combatting fentanyl production, arms trafficking, and TCOs. Since then, Mexico has enacted a law to detect and punish illicit synthetic drug production; dedicated federal prosecutors to work on fentanyl cases; and extradited Ovidio Guzmán, a major fentanyl trafficker. At the 2023 HLSD, U.S. and Mexican officials highlighted increased interdictions, arrests, indictments, and sanctions for arms and fentanyl trafficking. As a candidate, President Sheinbaum suggested her administration would prioritize addiction prevention programs and binational working groups to address fentanyl.

Key questions remain about the Framework, including the extent to which it should include migration control as a major focus, as discussed at the 2023 HLSD. Some observers have argued that the Framework provides insufficient U.S. support for anti-corruption efforts and institutional strengthening in Mexico. A September 2023 Government Accountability Office report questioned how the Framework’s efficacy would be evaluated.

Human rights groups assert that the Framework does not prioritize addressing impunity for past and ongoing grave human rights abuses committed by Mexican security forces. They have urged U.S. agencies to push for transparency and human rights safeguards as Mexico has increased reliance on the military to perform public security, customs, and other traditionally civilian functions. A September 2024 constitutional reform moved the National Guard under the authority of Mexico’s defense ministry, further limiting the force’s accountability to civilian oversight. If Mexico’s Congress approves another constitutional reform to dissolve the entity in charge of access to public information, public transparency and accountability may further suffer.

Congressional Action

Congress could influence the Framework through appropriations, withholding requirements or restrictions on foreign assistance, other legislation, and oversight. Most security assistance to Mexico has been appropriated through the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and, to a lesser extent, Economic Support Fund (ESF) accounts. INCLE assistance to Mexico averaged \$100 million from FY2015 through FY2021

before falling to \$64 million in FY2022 and an estimated \$48 million in FY2023.

The Biden Administration requested \$127.1 million for Mexico in FY2024, including \$48 million in INCLE and \$60.7 million in ESF funds. The FY2024 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 118-47) does not specify a total appropriations level for Mexico. The act directs that not less than \$125.0 million in global ESF and INCLE funds “shall be made available for programs to counter the flow of fentanyl ... [and] other synthetic drugs into the United States,” including in Mexico.

The act requires the State Department to withhold 15% of any security assistance (including INCLE) made available for Mexico until the Secretary of State certifies that the Mexican government has taken certain actions. Prior to obligating any INCLE assistance for Mexico, S.Rept. 118-71 requires the Secretary of State to submit a report to the Appropriations committees on the Mexican government’s efforts to address a number of human rights issues, as well as how U.S. assistance contributes to such efforts. Other reporting requirements include (1) a report not later than 60 days after enactment of the act to relevant committees on how U.S. assistance to Mexico is supporting efforts against fentanyl and synthetic drugs and (2) a report to the same committees not later than 90 days after enactment of the act on the outcomes of the Framework.

Congress has not completed action on the Administration’s \$109.7 million FY2025 request for foreign assistance to Mexico. The House-passed version of the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations bill (H.R. 8771/H.Rept. 118-554) would not specify a total appropriations level for Mexico. It would restrict most assistance to Mexico, except funds to counter fentanyl and synthetic drugs, until the Secretary of State certifies that the two countries have reached an agreement to balance the deficit of water deliveries to the United States by Mexico under a 1944 water treaty. The bill also would stipulate that “not less than” \$175 million of funds appropriated for ESF and INCLE globally “shall be for programs to counter the flow of fentanyl and synthetic drugs.”

The Senate-introduced version of the FY2025 SFOPS bill, S. 4797, includes a similar provision that would make available global funds for efforts against fentanyl and would provide \$10 million in INCLE for technology to combat human trafficking. The bill would withhold 15% of ESF and INCLE to Mexico until the Secretary of State certifies that the Mexican government has taken steps to improve its security and antidrug efforts. S.Rept. 118-200 would require a report on security at the U.S.-Mexico border within 60 days of enactment of the act, a briefing on how to prevent illegal deforestation related to avocado harvesting, and a report on improving Mexico’s water deliveries. See CRS In Focus IF10400, *Illicit Fentanyl and Mexico’s Role*, and CRS In Focus IF12765, *Mexico: Key Issues for the Sheinbaum Administration and U.S.-Mexican Relations*.

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