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Mexico 2024 with Sheinbaum: insecurity or the lightning that does not cease

Mexico 2024 with Sheinbaum: insecurity or the lightning that does not cease

"The most perfect system of government is that which produces the greatest sum of happiness, security in society and political stability".

Simon Bolivar

Abstract:

This paper addresses the complex insecurity scenario in Mexico, highlighting the legacy of violence and militarisation inherited from the AMLO Administration and the challenges facing the new President Claudia Sheinbaum. Despite partial progress, such as the creation of the National Guard and social programmes aimed at combating the structural causes of crime, violence and institutional corruption remain significant challenges.

Sheinbaum's strategy focuses on the adjusted continuity of previous policies, with an emphasis on addressing the causes of violence, strengthening intelligence and consolidating the National Guard as the operational backbone. However, militarisation continues to generate criticism, while local security capacities remain limited.

The international context complicates the situation, with growing tensions in the relationship with the United States due to fentanyl and arms trafficking, as well as threats of punitive measures under a future Donald Trump Administration. This adds pressure for immediate results whilst defending national sovereignty.

In short, the Administration seeks to balance immediate actions and long-term reforms, facing complex internal and external dynamics. Success will depend on the ability to coordinate efforts, adapt strategies and promote international cooperation to address a crisis that remains one of the country's greatest challenges.

Keywords:

Mexico, AMLO (Andrés Manuel López Obrador), Sheinbaum (President of Mexico), Public security, Crime, Drug trafficking, Organised crime, Fentanyl.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Documents* are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) or the Ministry of Defence.

México 2024 con Sheinbaum: la inseguridad o el rayo que no cesa

«El sistema de gobierno más perfecto es aquel que produce mayor suma de felicidad, seguridad en la sociedad y estabilidad política».

Simón Bolívar

Resumen:

El documento aborda el complejo panorama de inseguridad en México, destacando el legado de violencia y militarización heredado del gobierno de AMLO y los retos que enfrenta la nueva presidenta Claudia Sheinbaum. A pesar de avances parciales, como la creación de la Guardia Nacional y programas sociales orientados a combatir las causas estructurales del crimen, la violencia y la corrupción institucional persisten como desafíos significativos.

La estrategia de Sheinbaum se centra en la continuidad ajustada de políticas previas, con énfasis en abordar las causas de la violencia, fortalecer la inteligencia y consolidar la Guardia Nacional como eje operativo. Sin embargo, la militarización sigue generando críticas, mientras que las capacidades locales de seguridad permanecen limitadas.

El contexto internacional complica la situación, con tensiones crecientes en la relación con Estados Unidos debido al tráfico de fentanilo y armas, así como las amenazas de medidas punitivas bajo un posible gobierno de Donald Trump. Esto añade presión para obtener resultados inmediatos mientras se defiende la soberanía nacional.

En síntesis, la Administración busca equilibrar acciones inmediatas y reformas a largo plazo, enfrentando dinámicas complejas tanto internas como externas. El éxito dependerá de la capacidad de coordinar esfuerzos, adaptar estrategias y promover cooperación internacional para abordar una crisis que sigue siendo uno de los mayores retos del país.

Palabras clave:

México, AMLO (Andrés Manuel López Obrador), Sheinbaum, seguridad ciudadana, criminalidad, narcotráfico, crimen organizado, fentanilo.

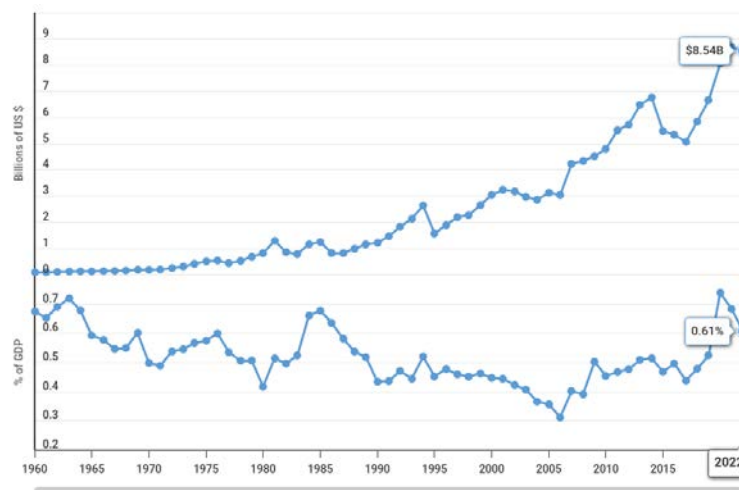
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Introduction

Insecurity in Mexico remains an open wound and the main concern for its citizens. A recent survey (2024) by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) shows that 60.7 per cent of adults consider security to be the country's most serious problem. Although popular, outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) leaves a bleak outlook: 171,085 murders were recorded in the first five years of his term, a record number that surpasses any previous Administration. This translates into 74 people killed or disappeared every day, illustrating the magnitude of the challenge that now falls to the new President, Claudia Sheinbaum.

Despite the assignment of substantial resources, including an annual defence budget of close to USD10 billion and more than 200,000 military personnel deployed in public security functions, Mexico has failed to contain a crisis that continues to spiral out of control. Violence not only threatens national sovereignty and weakens democratic institutions, but also undermines the country's economic prospects. This situation scares off foreign direct investment and stunts opportunities such as *nearshoring*¹, limiting their ability to exploit key competitive advantages.



Evolution of the Defence budget until 2022. Source: Macrotrends.net

¹[What is nearshoring? This is how it could benefit Mexico \(expansion.mx\)](https://www.expansion.mx).

In an Ibero-American context where visible results are highly valued, a tough approach has always been the preferred one. Military operations, the capture of organised crime bosses and extreme proposals such as "bombing the cartels" generate quick media victories and increase the prospects of electoral success. For this reason, every Administration since Felipe Calderón has implemented militarised tactics against organised crime, regardless of its political orientation. Even Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who took office with the curious slogan "hugs, not bullets", quickly militarised security policy, expanding the *role* of the Armed Forces in infrastructure projects, tourism and customs control.

Every week, new outbreaks of increasingly shocking violence (Guanajuato, Sinaloa, etc.) call for the deployment of troops. These responses manage to temporarily contain the situation, but they hardly extinguish a crisis that has spread over the years and seems to have become ingrained in the country. The last three Administrations, from different parties, have opted for containment through military deployments, supported by targeted police actions. However, the results have been questionable at best. A clear example is Felipe Calderón's (2006-2012) failed offensive against Los Zetas².

With the arrival of the new Administration, this logic of military action is expected to continue, but with a shift towards the integration of intelligence and investigative operations, marking a State approach. This change comes as the Armed Forces consolidate their role as the main public Security Force, following a constitutional reform that attached the National Guard to the Army, a decision that has been widely criticised by opposition and human rights groups.

This paper analyses the security strategies adopted by the outgoing Administration of AMLO, from the ruling MORENA (Movimiento de Renovación Nacional) party, and presents the policies announced by Claudia Sheinbaum, the new President, also from the same party.

² <https://1library.co/article/capítulo-los-zetas-como-insurgencia-criminal.yj74m.....vr6>



AMLO. Source: REUTERS.

National Public Security Strategy 2018: a comprehensive model for security

Since December 2018, Mexico's National Public Security Strategy³ has been advanced as a comprehensive solution to tackle violence and organised crime. This strategy, included in the National Development Plan 2019-20244, marked a departure from previous approaches by combining repressive measures with actions aimed at tackling the structural causes of violence, such as poverty, unemployment and marginalisation.

Fundamental Principles

The strategy was structured around eight pillars designed to transform Mexico's security sector:

1. Eradicate corruption. The priority was to clean up security institutions by purging Police Forces and strengthening a judicial system that currently solves only 1% of crimes. It is in this field that the 2024 judicial reform⁵ was intended to be framed. It is theoretically intended to address this systemic problem, but has been widely criticised for concentrating too much power in the executive, without fundamentally addressing impunity for crimes or judicial inefficiency.

³ <https://www.gob.mx/sspc/articulos/estrategia-nacional-de-seguridad-publica?idiom=es>

⁴ https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/487316/PND_2019-2024.pdf

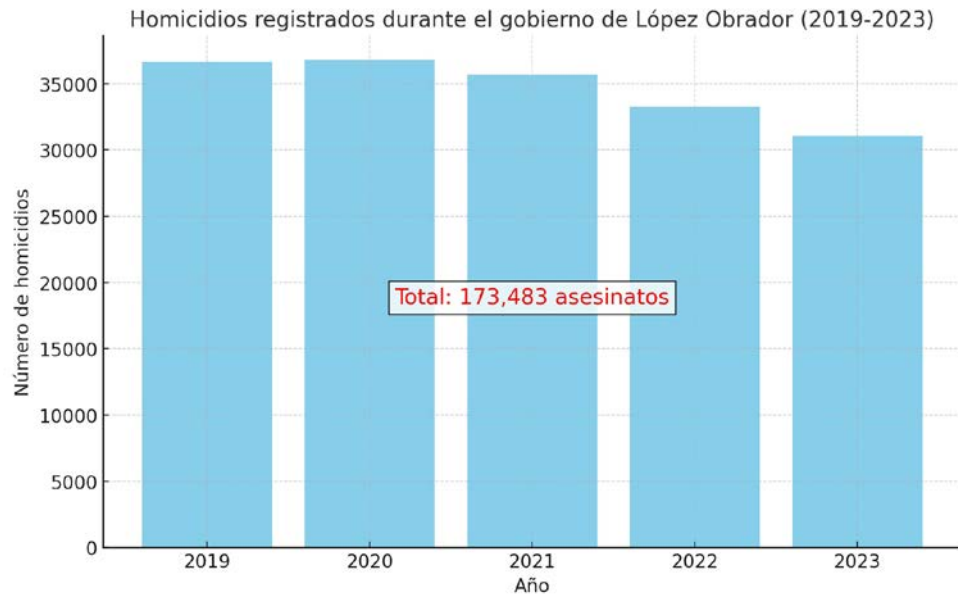
⁵ Mexico's 2024 judicial reform provides for a series of constitutional amendments that restructured Mexico's judiciary. The reform proposal was put forward by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on 5th February 2024, and published on 15th September of the same year. With this reform, Mexico became the first country in the world with the possibility of electing its judges by popular vote.

2. Ensuring employment and welfare. Initiatives such as Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro⁶ and Sembrando Vida⁷ aimed to offer employment and educational options to reduce the vulnerability of young people vis-à-vis organised crime.
3. Respect for human rights. Promote strict compliance with the legal framework, avoiding abuses such as those committed in previous Administrations under the pretext of combating insecurity.
4. Ethical regeneration. Promote a change in social values, fostering peace and honesty as guiding principles.
5. Re-framing the fight against drugs. Abandon the frontal war against drug trafficking, prioritising the prevention and treatment of addictions as a central axis.
6. Peace building. Create safe spaces in violence-affected communities through the deployment of social programmes focused on community development.
7. Prison control. Reform the penitentiary system to combat corruption and improve prison conditions.
8. Create the National Guard. This security force, created as a substitute for the Federal Police, became the central pillar of the operational strategy to reinforce public security. I will expand on this element later.

The National Public Security Strategy 2018 reflected an ambitious effort to reorient the fight against violence towards a more balanced approach, integrating immediate solutions with long-term structural changes. However, the challenges in implementation demonstrate that transforming a system deeply affected by corruption and impunity requires more than just good goals.

⁶ <https://jovenesconstruyendoelfuturo.stps.gob.mx>

⁷ <https://programasparaelbienestar.gob.mx/sembrando-vida/>



Source; own preparation

Social programmes as a pillar of the Public Security Strategy

The social approach has been one of the distinctive and original elements of the MORENA Administrations in terms of public security. This approach asserts that violence and organised crime are not only problems of repression, but also of lack of opportunities and adverse socio-economic conditions that push people, especially young people, into unlawful activities. In this context, the aforementioned social programmes such as "Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro" and "Sembrando Vida" have played a central role in the strategy to reduce the vulnerability of the sectors most affected by violence.

Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro, launched in 2019, has sought to provide job training and scholarships to young people aged 18-29 who are neither studying nor working, a group identified as particularly susceptible to recruitment by criminal organisations. This programme offers up to one year of training in companies, workshops, public institutions and social organisations, with a monthly remuneration financed by the Administration. So far, it has reached millions of beneficiaries across the country, and has generated opportunities aimed at discouraging youth involvement in organised crime.

In addition, Sembrando Vida addresses insecurity from a rural perspective, promoting job creation through reforestation and sustainable agriculture projects. This programme focuses on vulnerable communities where extreme poverty and lack of economic options often facilitate cartel dominance. In addition to providing employment, Sembrando Vida

also promotes food self-sufficiency, the rescue of traditional knowledge and ecological restoration, to generate positive impacts both economic and environmental .

Both programmes have been designed on the premise that combating violence requires not only tackling organised crime, but also addressing the root causes that fuel it. These efforts seek to build a more resilient social fabric, reduce marginalisation and offer viable alternatives for those who might otherwise be lured by the promise of quick returns from unlawful activities.

However, despite their merits, social programmes face significant challenges. They suffer from implementation problems, such as the lack of adequate follow-up of beneficiaries, insufficient coverage in some of the most violent regions and the persistence of corruption in some cases.

Moreover, while they have contributed to mitigating the risk of recruitment in certain sectors, their impact on overall rates of violence is still difficult to measure, in part due to the continuity of other structural factors such as corruption, impunity and effective territorial control by cartels.

In short, social programmes have been an innovative tool in the security approach of MORENA Administrations. While far from being a complete solution, they do represent a paradigm shift towards a policy that understands security not only as a problem of force, but also as a human development challenge. If strengthened and complemented by institutional reforms and greater coordination efforts, they could become a key component of Mexico's pacification, but only in the long term.

A new security corps: the National Guard

The creation of the National Guard⁸ in March 2019 marked a milestone in Mexico's public security strategy. This corps, made up of Federal Police, Army and Navy personnel, was rapidly deployed throughout the country.

In 2019, the National Guard consisted of a total of 82,747 members. Of these, 53,671 are veterans, 21,170 new recruits and 7,906 volunteers.

⁸ <https://www.gob.mx/guardianacional/articulos/guardia-nacional-5?idiom=es>

Most came from the Ministry of National Defence (SEDENA), which contributed 51,915 members. For its part, the Navy (SEMAR) contributed 12,837 members, while the Federal Police added 17,955 members to the new Security Force.

This number corresponds to the first year of operation only. In 2024, Mexico's National Guard has approximately 126,203 members, according to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). This number represents an increase of 21.1% in a single year. The expansion of the National Guard reflects the Administration's continued efforts to strengthen public security and the great importance it attaches to this new Police Force.

In its first years of operation, it made some progress in reducing specific crimes, such as fuel theft and kidnapping. However, the overall results have fallen short of initial expectations, exposing the structural challenges of the Security Strategy.

National Guard roles and priorities

The National Guard performs a wide range of functions, classified by levels of priority according to their relevance to the Security Strategy. Among the highest priority tasks, ranked at level 10, are prevention and investigation, which are key to the fight against organised crime and delinquency. They are followed, at level 9, by activities such as collaboration, monitoring, verification and inspection, which are also considered to be of high importance.

In contrast, the lowest priority tasks are at level 1. These include prison and customs surveillance, civil protection and cybersecurity, areas that the Security Force addresses with limited resources compared to its core tasks.

Other functions with a low priority, placed at level 2, include the maintenance of social order and peace, the generic fight against crime, intelligence, attention to victims and the protection of the integrity of persons, as well as administrative and traffic offences. Migration management is also at this level.

At level 3, tasks related to citizen complaints and asset preservation are placed, while at level 5, in the centre of the scale, are activities related to information. Detention operations occupy level 6 in the hierarchy of priorities.

The official document identifies investigation, intelligence, whistleblowing, cybersecurity and information capabilities as key areas for strengthening the National Guard, reflecting a focus on improving the strategic aspects of the Force to address the country's security challenges.

The paradox of militarisation

One of the most controversial aspects of the Strategy has been the growing role of the Armed Forces in public security. In 2022, the National Guard was formally incorporated under the operational control of the Army⁹. This measure was widely criticised by opposition sectors and human rights organisations. The Administration justified this decision by arguing that the high levels of violence required robust and operational responses.

However, critics warn that militarisation may increase abuses in operations against organised crime and delay the consolidation of civilian police forces capable of assuming these responsibilities. Moreover, this move has been seen as a step backwards from AMLO's initial strategy, which sought to limit military involvement in security matters and prioritise preventive and social approaches ("hugs not bullets").

Despite these concerns, the AMLO administration continued to defend the National Guard as a central pillar of its security policy. The integration of this corps with the Armed Forces was presented as an operational solution to deal pragmatically with crises of violence. However, at the end of the six-year term, security challenges remain, highlighting the limitations of the model.

Persistent challenges in public security

The transfer of powers between Administrations takes place in a security context characterised by persistent deficits in State and Local Police. These agencies, often poorly equipped, insufficiently trained and in some cases infiltrated by organised crime, have failed to become effective actors in the Security Strategy.

Corruption, especially at municipal levels of Administration, remains an entrenched problem that has undermined reform efforts. This endemic factor not only complicates the

⁹ <https://www.defensa.com/mexico/guardia-nacional-bajo-control-ejercito-mexicano>

implementation of security policies, but also perpetuates the lack of public and international trust in institutions.

The 2018 NES of AMLO's Administration has shown partial progress. While new security agencies such as the National Guard and social programmes aimed at tackling the root causes of crime have been structured, levels of violence remain alarmingly high. The militarisation of public security and corruption in local institutions remain significant points of contention.

In short, militarisation has proven insufficient to comprehensively address the development and governance problems that fuel violence. While there has been progress, such as the reduction of crimes like robberies and kidnappings and the unification of security structures, the task of materially reducing violence and restoring stability to the country will require a more comprehensive and coordinated approach in the years to come.

Homicidios por Estado

Cifras preliminares del INEGI para el año 2023

	Total de asesinatos	Asesinatos por cada 100 mil habitantes ▼
Nacional	31.062	24
Colima	883	117
Morelos	1.527	77
Baja California	2.642	69
Zacatecas	1.073	65
Chihuahua	2.396	62
Guanajuato	3.746	59
Guerrero	1.720	48
Sonora	1.453	48
Michoacán de Ocampo	1.865	38
Quintana Roo	691	35

Murders by State. Source: *El País*, INEGI

The new Administration's strategy

President Claudia Sheinbaum must quickly face one of the biggest challenges of her initial mandate: leading a country that has recorded an average of more than 30,000 murders

per year for the past eight years, in a context where extortion is common practice in large areas of the country.

Last October, the Administration presented its action plan under the name "National Security Strategy"¹⁰ (NSS), a project that seeks to address the crisis of violence in a comprehensive manner¹¹.

The paper, which follows basically the same lines of the previous strategy, reflects the new executive's intentions in terms of public security and is based on three fundamental pillars:

1. Attention to structural causes. The strategy has a comprehensive approach with an emphasis on families, with the continuation of the *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro* programme, designed to provide job training and prevent young people from being recruited into organised crime. In addition, new initiatives will be promoted under the banner of "actions that offer a different perspective on life". To reinforce this approach, a new Under-Secretariat for Prevention will be created within the Secretariat for Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC), which will be dedicated to designing and coordinating policies that address the socio-economic roots of violence.
2. Consolidation of the National Guard. This Security Force will remain central to the Administration's strategy. The Administration seeks to strengthen its operational capacity and improve its coordination with other security agencies, ensuring that it will be an "efficient and disciplined force at the service of the public".
3. Strengthening intelligence and investigation capabilities. A new National Intelligence System will be established, with the aim of more effectively coordinating the efforts of the SSPC, the Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of the Navy, the Attorney General's Office (FGR-Spanish acronym) and State Prosecutors' offices. The intention is that security tasks will be assumed under a scheme of "shared responsibility and unified response". To this end, the Under-Secretariat of Intelligence and Police Investigation is created, which will have a

¹⁰ <https://www.nmas.com.mx/nacional/seguridad/plan-nacional-de-seguridad-2024-2030-sexenio-claudia-sheinbaum-estrategia/>

¹¹ [Presidenta Claudia Sheinbaum presenta Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad | Presidencia de la Republica | Gobierno | gob.mx \(www.gob.mx\)](https://www.gob.mx/presidenta/secretaria-estrategia-nacional-de-seguridad)

multidisciplinary team composed of analysts, field and desk investigators, as well as technical specialists, who will work in close collaboration with the FGR.

These efforts will be complemented by the strengthening of the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SNSP), which will take on responsibilities for the training, education and evaluation of both federal and state agencies, ensuring that the latter meet the necessary standards to address security challenges.

Leadership in the implementation of these policies will fall to Omar García Harfuch, a close ally of Sheinbaum and her Chief of Police during her tenure in Mexico City between 2018 and 2023. Now, as head of the SSPC, García Harfuch will be in charge of coordinating and executing the actions necessary to fulfil the objectives of this comprehensive strategy, thus taking on a key role in the struggle to pacify the country.



The new Secretary of Public and Citizen Security, García Harfuch.
Source: La Información MX.

The Security Cabinet's approach: prioritising the most vulnerable regions

The security cabinet led by García Harfuch¹² has designed a strategy focused on the areas most affected by organised crime, such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Celaya and Acapulco. In these regions, the aim is to identify both those directly responsible for the

¹² <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/2024/07/04/perfil-quien-es-omar-garcia-harfuch-el-superpolicia-que-sera-secretario-de-seguridad-de-sheinbaum/>

violence and the criminal networks that sustain unlawful activities such as human trafficking and extortion. This dual approach aims to dismantle these structures through a combination of intelligence, tactical operations and institutional strengthening.

One of the pillars of the strategy is to establish clear standards to improve the capacities of police, prosecutors and prison systems in each of the 32 States. This aspect is considered crucial, especially in the context of the controversy over the role of the Armed Forces in public security tasks. In this, the newly created Under-Secretariat of Intelligence and Police Investigation, a key entity for strategic data collection and analysis, will play an essential role.

In addition, the strengthening of the National Intelligence Centre aims at a better integration of efforts between the different levels of Administration.

At the forefront of these initiatives will be trusted collaborators of García Harfuch, such as Omar Reyes, who headed Mexico City's Penitentiary Policy, and Francisco Moreno, former Under-Secretary of Transit. Marcela Figueroa, the new Executive Secretary of the National Public Security System, will be in charge of supervising the training and evaluation of local police and prosecutors' offices. In addition, thousands of National Guard officers will be transferred to the SSPC following their integration into the Army, with the intention of strengthening the operational capabilities of this key institution.

The integration of the National Guard into the Ministry of National Defence (SEDENA), implemented in 2022, remains one of the most controversial decisions of the previous Administration. Although Sheinbaum's Administration reaffirms its decision as a logical step, opponents warn about the risks of relying on a military command for public security tasks. Criticisms include the lack of transparency, the risk of abuse and the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, which could hinder the development of autonomous civilian police forces.

Strategic objectives: continuity with key adjustments

The new administration's main objectives remain the same as those of AMLO's Administration: to pacify the country and regain territorial control. To achieve this, Secretary García Harfuch has broad powers to implement bold policies, relying on the army and navy. His influence extends to appointments in the military leadership, such as

General Ricardo Trevilla Trejo in the Ministry of Defence and Admiral Raymundo Pedro Morales Ángeles in the Ministry of the Navy, as well as in key areas such as the Under-Secretary of Prevention, headed by Estela Damián Peralta, and the National Guard, now headed by Hernán Cortés Hernández.

The success of this strategy will depend largely on García Harfuch's ability to coordinate the Armed Forces with the Local Police Forces and the Attorney General's Office. Effective collaboration between these actors will be essential to confront systemic violence, guarantee respect for human rights and build a sustainable security model that will allow Mexico to regain stability.

The current scenario: a complex and dynamic landscape

Organised crime in Mexico remains dominated by two major players: the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation (CJNG). The two groups have an intense rivalry for control over the trafficking of opioids, such as fentanyl, as well as other criminal activities in strategic regions of the country. These disputes have generated significant violence at key points, including in urban areas and along trade routes.

Zonas de influencia de organizaciones criminales

- Región donde predomina el Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación
- Región donde predomina el Cartel de Sinaloa
- Región donde predomina el Cartel del Noreste

Presencia de organizaciones criminales:

- ◆ Cartel de Sinaloa
- ◆ Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación
- ◆ Cartel del Noreste
- ◆ Cartel del Golfo
- ◆ Los Arellano Félix
- ◆ La Familia Michoacana
- ◆ Cartel Nueva Plaza
- ◆ Cartel de los Beltrán Leyva
- ◆ Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima
- ◆ Los Rusos



Fuente: SSyPC.
PATRICIA SAN JUAN / EL PAÍS

The Pacific port of Manzanillo, considered the most important port in the country, is one of the most important. This port, with a state-of-the-art infrastructure capable of handling 2.5 million containers annually according to the Integral Port Administration (API)¹³, is also a critical point for the trafficking of precursor chemicals used in the manufacture of synthetic drugs, including fentanyl. The growing importance of this market, along with arms trafficking from the US, poses major challenges for the new Administration. According to official statistics, eight out of ten homicides in Mexico are committed with firearms illegally imported from the neighbouring country.¹⁴.

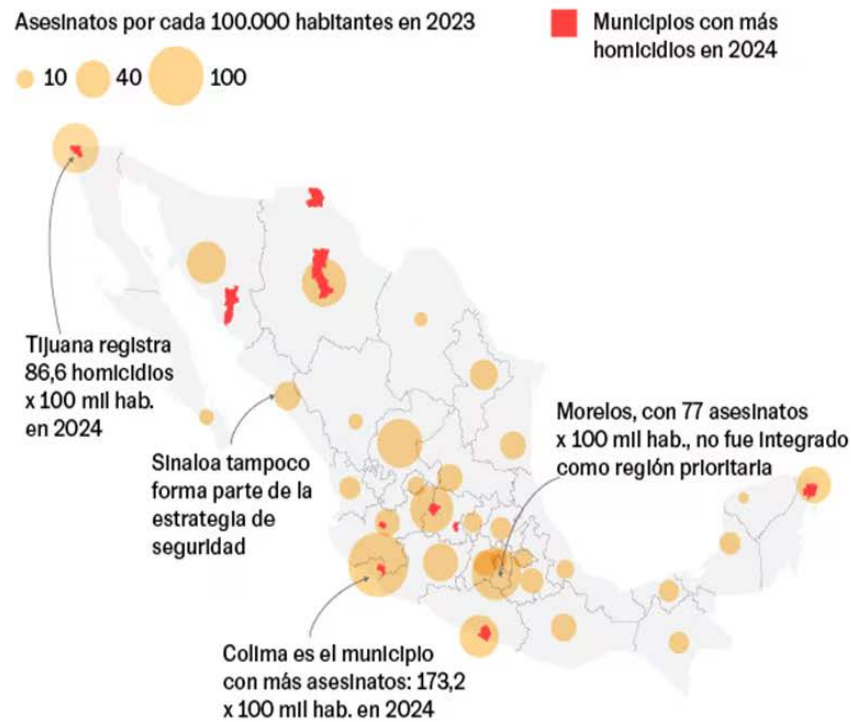
The territorial influence of the cartels has also expanded at an alarming rate. The Sinaloa Cartel dominates large areas in the north, while the CJNG controls much of the central region. However, they are not the only actors: smaller criminal organisations operate in

¹³ <https://www.puertomanzanillo.com.mx/espi/0000001/inicio.php>

¹⁴ https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/mortalidad/doc/defunciones_homicidio_2020_nota_tecnica.pdf

various parts of the country, relying mainly on extortion and kidnapping as their main sources of income, which has increased the feeling of insecurity among the population and the sensation of the existence of "administrations" parallel to the State.

Regiones con más asesinatos en México



Regions with more murders. Source: El País.

The Administration's response: joint forces and regional prioritisation

The Administration's plan to deal with this complex situation includes the deployment of "joint task forces". These units combine elements of the Army, the Navy, the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC) and the National Guard, focusing their activity on the regions most severely affected by organised crime. Part of this strategy also envisages the reassignment of thousands of civilian agents, previously incorporated into the National Guard, to investigative work to reinforce State capacities, especially considering that, as I have already mentioned, currently only 1% of crimes in Mexico are solved, which implies very high levels of public distrust in public institutions.

The Administration has identified ten priority cities for this intervention: Tijuana, León, Celaya, Acapulco, Cancún, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Cajeme, Tlajomulco and Colima.

The conflict regions of Michoacán and Chiapas will also be the focus of specific efforts to stabilise the situation. In addition, an initiative to improve road safety will be implemented, an area that could be overseen by Francisco Moreno, former Under-Secretary of Transit.

The security relationship with the United States: renewed tensions

Donald Trump's return to the White House represents a significant challenge to President Claudia Sheinbaum's plans.

Initiatives inherited and taken over from Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Administration, such as the promotion of *nearshoring*, social reintegration programmes to combat organised crime and a human rights-based approach to migration seem destined to clash with the heavy-handed policy likely to be promoted by the new US Administration. In this asymmetric relationship, the United States, with a much stronger economy and greater political influence, holds better cards.

For Mexico, trade dependence on its northern neighbour is very evident: more than 80 % of its exports are destined for the United States¹⁵. This link has been particularly positive for the country thanks to the *nearshoring* policy of many large US companies after the pandemic, which in 2023 made Mexico the United States' largest trading partner, surpassing China. However, this advantageous position could be threatened by political tensions. The renegotiation of the T-MEC, scheduled for 2026, will be a crucial element in this relationship, but Mexico arrives at this negotiation in a fragile economic situation, with a deficit of 6 % of GDP, annual inflation of 4.7 % and economic growth of barely 1.5 %¹⁶ and it is highly unlikely that it could withstand the likely tariff threats from its northern neighbour in a negotiation with an uncertain outcome for Mexico.

¹⁵ <https://vanguardia.com.mx/dinero/mexico-incrementa-su-dependencia-economica-hacia-estados-unidos-FQ13950014>

¹⁶ <https://expansion.mx/economia/2024/11/18/riesgos-impacto-economia-mexicana-paquete-economico>

Fentanyl and migration as critical issues

During the election campaign, Trump threatened to impose a 25 percent tariff on Mexican exports if Sheinbaum failed to stem the flow of fentanyl and migrants to the US.

These threats are not new: in 2019, a similar tariff forced López Obrador to militarise the southern border, setting a precedent that could be repeated. Trump has also proposed designating Mexican cartels as terrorist organisations, a move that would allow the US to act directly on Mexican territory, exacerbating bilateral tensions.

Resolution 18¹⁷, pushed in 2023 by Republican lawmakers such as Dan Crenshaw and Tim Waltz, reinforces this narrative. This draft legislation identifies fentanyl as the leading cause of death among men aged 18-45 in the United States and blames Mexican cartels for its trafficking. It also details serious incidents such as the 2019 "Culiacanazo"¹⁸, the downing of a military helicopter in 2015 and attacks on the US Consulate in Nuevo Laredo¹⁹ as examples of "instability exported from Mexico". The proposal would allow the US President to use "necessary and appropriate force" against drug trafficking organisations, further straining the bilateral relationship.

A comprehensive strategy for dialogue

President Sheinbaum will probably seek to build a posture that will attempt to strike the difficult balance between cooperation with the US and cooperation with the EU. The US and the defence of Mexico's sovereignty. López Obrador has already set a precedent by pointing out that the fentanyl problem cannot be solved by punitive measures alone. During one of his daily morning lectures, he emphasised the need to address the social causes of consumption in both countries, pointing to lack of opportunity and social neglect as key factors. "It is hypocritical to fight the problem with bullets while neglecting young people," he said.

Sheinbaum, in line with this vision, could argue to the Trump Administration that the long-term solution lies in a broader partnership that includes social and economic development

¹⁷ [Text - H.J.Res.18 - 118th Congress \(2023-2024\): AUMF CARTEL Influence Resolution | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)

¹⁸ <https://forbes.com.mx/noticias-culiacanazo-batalla-gano-crimen-organizado-fuerzas-federales/>

¹⁹ <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/12/08/asi-fue-el-ataque-al-consulado-estadounidense-adjudicado-al-cjng-y-sus-repercusiones/>

programmes in both Mexico and the United States. However, the success of this stance will depend on its ability to manage the pressures that Washington will exert while pushing for a domestic strategy that reduces violence and strengthens Mexican institutions while maintaining some coherence with its original strategy.

Conclusions

Mexico's security scenario remains one of the most significant challenges for Claudia Sheinbaum's Administration. The crisis of violence, fuelled by the power of organised crime, institutional corruption and socio-economic challenges, requires a multifaceted approach.

The new Administration has prioritised the consolidation of the National Guard, the strengthening of intelligence and investigation, and the implementation of social programmes that seek to attack the structural causes of crime. However, success will depend on its ability to coordinate efforts between the Armed Forces, Local Police and Prosecutors' Offices in the face of resistance from sectors critical of the militarisation of public security.

At the regional level, the Administration has identified priority areas that will be the focus of "joint task forces", which combine resources from the Armed Forces and the Secretariat for Security and Citizen Protection. In addition, the trafficking of fentanyl and arms from the US presents itself as an urgent bilateral challenge that Mexico must address through a coordinated and diplomatically firm strategy.

The relationship with the United States adds a layer of complexity. The Trump Administration, with its emphasis on heavy-handed policies, is threatening to impose punitive measures such as tariffs and terrorist organisation designations on Mexican cartels, which could further strain bilateral cooperation.

Against this backdrop, Sheinbaum faces the challenge of balancing the defence of national sovereignty with the need for collaboration to address problems such as migration and drug trafficking. Proposals, such as Resolution 18 in the United States, highlight the growing pressure on Mexico for immediate results in the fight against organised crime.

Ultimately, Sheinbaum's Security Strategy seeks a balance between immediate action and building sustainable structural solutions. While progress has been made in creating social structures and programmes, persistent levels of violence, mistrust of institutions and lack of local capacities remain critical challenges. The success of this approach will depend on the Mexican Administration's ability to implement bold policies, adapt to a changing political and social scenario, and promote international cooperation that will allow Mexico to move towards a more secure and stable future.

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