FROM A MODERNIZING FIGHTING FORCE TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STEWARDS:
MEXICO'S ARMED FORCES UNDER AMLO

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Iñigo Guevara Moyano

With a foreword by Cecilia Farfán Méndez

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Glossary of terms and acronyms

AMLO — Andres Manuel López Obrador, President of Mexico 2018-2024

Gendarmerie — A military-trained/civilian-led paramilitary force, part of the Federal Police, est. 2014

GN — National Guard

PM — Military Police, deployed in support of law enforcement

PN — Naval Police – originally similar to Military Police, but in its recent form a Marine infantry force deployed in support of law enforcement

SCT — Secretariat of Communications and Transports

SECTUR — Secretariat of Tourism

SEDENA — Secretariat of National Defense, comprising Army and Air Force

SEGOB — Secretariat of Governance, similar to a Ministry of Interior

SEMAR — Secretariat of the Navy

SEMARNAT — Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources

SSPC — Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection est.2018

UIN — Naval Intelligence Unit, est. 2009

UNOPES — Naval Special Operations Unit

UAV — Unmanned Aerial Vehicle

Foreword

Designed for national security, the Mexican Armed Forces –Army, Air Force, and Navy– have in recent years acquired a more preeminent role in Mexican politics and policy. While never entirely absent from public life, their role in counternarcotic and counterinsurgent operations has been amply documented. Today the armed forces build airports, clean up seaweed, and lead the "fight against organized crime."

Their rising preeminence and involvement in the "war on drugs" has been accompanied by growing concerns of Mexico's militarization and egregious human rights violations. For over a decade, international organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International[1] have documented abuses committed by the armed forces while combatting organized crime. Mexican scholars and civil society organizations have also voiced their evidence-based concerns toward issues ranging from the high levels of lethality[2] –the Army kills more people than it wounds or detains– to increasing homicides against women[3] and expanding duties that are hard to justify under national security or even public safety tasks.

Yet, the question of Mexico's militarization and the expanding role of the armed forces is not as straightforward as public debates would suggest. This article by Iñigo Guevara is an indispensable intervention on current discussions about militarization in the country. Guevara's work shifts the focus from whether the Armed Forces should be involved in combatting organized crime and its consequences to understanding the Army and Navy's modernizing ambitions and how they are linked to their role as an increasingly active and more visible player in Mexican political life.

The reader, whether an expert on security or broadly interested in Mexican affairs, will find at least three takeaways in this article:

First, it shows that militarization is not a process being directed from the Executive branch and blindly followed by the Army and the Navy. Popular narratives about Mexico's "war on drugs" often include discourse around "Calderón's war" and, more recently, the closeness of President López Obrador with the armed forces. However, as evidenced by their own internal documents analyzed by Guevara and presented in this article, the armed forces are aware of the concerns their expanding role generates among scholars and civil society, crafting their message and budget requests accordingly. For instance, the purchase of equipment used in maritime patrols and intelligence gathering was requested as Assets of Rescue Operations. In this sense, it is imperative we start thinking about the agency the armed forces exercise vis-à-vis the Executive and Legislative branches. As evident as it may seem that the armed forces actively

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[1] See for example "Surviving death: Police and military torture of women in Mexico" (2016) https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/4237/2016/en/ ; "Neither Rights Nor Security: Killings, Torture, and Disappearances in Mexico's "War on Drugs"" (2011) https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/11/09/neither-rights-nor-security/killings-torture-and-disappearances-mexicos-war-drugs

[2] See "La letalidad del Ejército mexicano" (2022) available in: https://politicadedrogas.org/documentos/20220223_130037_ct39letalidaddelejercitomex.pdf

[3] See: "The Two Wars:The Impact of Armed Forces Confrontations in the Murders of Women in Mexico (2007-2018)" (2020) available in: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WgbPwyXtmTaesXGLXm0a-Y6JcbVNJUbB/view

pursue their own agenda, Guevara's work sheds light as to how this process has been conducted and how to keep track of it.

Second, and building on the notion of agency, Guevara's work challenges the idea of militarization as a continuous process bolstered during President Calderón's administration and uninterrupted up to the current López Obrador presidency. Guevara compellingly shows that while the Army and the Navy are increasingly involved in more tasks, from building railways and welfare banks for distributing social benefits, this has come at the expense of an agenda that sought to modernize and acquire more material capabilities. This, Guevara shows, is an important departure from the Calderón and Peña years where the armed forces could pursue their modernization efforts. The trademark, therefore, of the López Obrador administration is the inclusion of the armed forces into an economic agenda that has created revenue generating opportunities. Consequently, while we can discuss what currently seems like an ever-expanding role of the armed forces, the evidence presented here denotes that this process of militarization has been more complex and less linear than assumed.

Third, Guevara's work is an invitation to examine critically why the Army and the Navy enjoy the highest levels of trust among the general population. The most recent data from Mexico's Victimization Survey[4] shows that 90.2% and 87.8% of the population trust "a lot" or "somewhat" the Navy and the Army respectively. Currently, these high levels of trust are explained in relation to perceived low levels of corruption. This is to say that to the extent that the Army and the Navy are seen as incorruptible institutions, the general population will trust them more.

Data from the Survey on Democratic Quality[5] (ENCADE per its Spanish acronym), however, suggests dynamics are more complex than corruption alone. For example, 77% of the general population trusts the armed forces for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, 67% trusts them to fight criminal groups, while 56% trusts them to build a new airport. Notably, 52% believes the armed forces cut deals with organized crime. Considering the agency the armed forces exercise and the revenue-generating opportunities they continue to receive, it is important to analyze under which circumstances they enjoy high levels of trust. This is not only relevant for understanding when citizens trust the armed forces but also whether conditions for transparency and accountability will exist or be undermined.

As lethal violence remains unabated in Mexico and the functions of the armed forces continue to expand, Guevara's research is an essential read in debates of militarization. The reader will find robust research shared in an accessible and compelling manner.

Dr. Cecilia Farfán-Méndez

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[4] Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE 2021) https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/envipe/2021/
[5]See www.mexicandemocracy.org

From a Modernizing Fighting Force to National Development Stewards: Mexico's Armed Forces under AMLO

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Toward a Global Middle Power Force: Mexico's Military Developments Prior to 2018

With no direct nation-state external threats, the Mexican military has traditionally focused on internal security, conducting counterinsurgency and later counter-narcotics. Since 2006, the latter role has seen an increasing emphasis specifically on counter-cartel operations, taking on the fight against the "cartel enforcers" and cartel leadership rather than just the smugglers or supply chain. With an extension of activities into urban centers, military operations came more and more in touch with the urban population. With higher visibility came a new set of requirements for the Mexican military, forcing it to professionalize in several of its facets, such as significantly developing its civil military outreach and its political military relationships.

Living in a globalized world, the international dimension became as important as the local one. International media coverage of Mexico's military can influence local or regional perceptions, and (some elements of) the Mexican military also learned how to play in this field. As part of a dramatic shift in tradition, during this transformation period, the Mexican military engaged in multiple levels with the United States military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies. Within a decade of working with U.S. counterparts, Mexican military officers' personal experiences transformed their key questions from a skeptical *why should we cooperate with the Americans?* to *How should we cooperate with the Americans?* to *What else should we do with the Americans?*

In the past decade, the Mexican military expanded and cultivated its operational capabilities, growing beyond its historically narrow and internal roles and toward a modern mindset of international participation. The seeds of change planted during the Calderon administration flourished during his successor's mandate.

The administration of President Peña Nieto drifted away from the isolationist, non-interventionist Estrada doctrine in 2015 when it announced its intention to participate in multi-lateral UN Peacekeeping missions. The Mexican military was launched into a period of profound modernization that aimed to develop it into a modern, inter-operable force capable of projecting power at a regional level and with the mindset to grow so that it could protect Mexico's interests globally. With the modest ambitions of a historically constrained and insular, inward-looking force, the Mexican military leaders of the 2010s aspired to eventually transform Mexico's military to that of a Global Middle Power aligned with the country's G20 status and its international responsibilities.[6]

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[6] Reflexiones generales y elementos destacados del seminario México en el mundo: diagnóstico y perspectivas de las relaciones internacionales, p.2, Senado de la Republica, 11 March 2015

All of Mexico's military branches received attention during this period. The Army continued to be mostly preoccupied with supporting the internal security, initially setting up a vast network of highway roadblocks and choke points to contain cartel movements and then moving onto blanket-size stabilization operations. The need for a gendarmerie-like light infantry counter-cartel force was evident and after some organizational frustration regarding operational and administrative control of such a force, this eventually led to a significant expansion of the Military Police Corps (PM). Beyond the traditional and relatively universal military police roles of installation security and enforcing military laws and regulations, the PM was re-tasked with a much broader law enforcement mandate and deployed throughout the country.

Armed and Dangerous: Mexican Army Developments

Since 2012, the Army has sought to continue its relatively modest modernization process akin to a light infantry force model, announcing a large deal to procure over 3,300 High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (Humvee) from the United States,[7] establishing a production line for 1,000 DN-XI light armored vehicles, and ramping up production of the FX-05 assault rifle.[8]

In parallel, the Army also embraced an outward-looking role and beefed up its regional cooperation mechanisms with the U.S. military and other USG agencies on the border by increasing participation in the Border Commanders Conferences. The Army-controlled Department of National Defense (SEDENA)'s external outreach also included stepping up its international representations worldwide: it opened defense attaché offices (DAOs) in an additional 13 countries, taking its global presence to 42. It eventually shut down operations in the Vietnam DAO in October 2020 and the Trinidad and Tobago DAO in May 2021, but currently maintains a presence in 40 countries.[9]

Taking Flight: Mexican Air Force's 2030 Modernization Plans

The Mexican Air Force (FAM), which traditionally served an Army support role, received significant resources to begin partially modernizing its air mobility, airspace surveillance and enforcement, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. The FAM published plans to procure some 275 aircraft between 2015 and 2030, comprising over 100 combat aircraft and close to 150 helicopters, with the remainder being transport and ISR assets, including Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft. While most of these assets would be procured from the U.S., the plans also called for procurement of 48 Russian helicopters, 7 Spanish transport aircraft and 3 Brazilian-Swedish AEW&Cs.[10]

Along with the list of requirements to update its fleet, the FAM drafted a course for its evolution, via a territorial re-organization that included the creation of new air regions, an airbase

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[7] Mexico - M1152 High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), U.S. DSCA 16 May 2014
[8] Meet the 'Fire Serpent': Why Mexico's FX-05 Xiuhcoatl Assault Rifle Is a Beast, The National Interest, 17 April 2020
[9] SEDENA, 3er Informe de Labores 2020-2021, P.130
[10] Fuerza Aérea Mexicana, La aviación militar, un sigo de historia, p. 265-266 SEDENA, 2015

expansion plan, and participation in a set of international cooperation exercises, mainly with the United States Air Force (USAF). Starting in 2015, the FAM, U.S. Air Force North (AFNORTH), Northern Command (NORTHCOM), and North American Air Defense (NORAD) launched the Amalgam Eagle series of exercises designed to promote trust and interoperability. Amalgam Eagle very soon grew to include civilian agencies from both countries in a truly binational endeavor.[11]

SEDENA also announced plans as early as 2013 to bolster its ground-based airspace surveillance capabilities by building five radar sites on its northern border and linking them to a network of manned and unmanned electronic intelligence aircraft by 2018. The northern network would increase national radar coverage from 32% to 72%, providing Mexican forces with situational awareness of illegal flights entering and exiting the U.S. without having to rely on U.S. radars, which significantly reduced interdiction reactions times.

As early as 2008, the FAM branched out to increase its engagement with Mexico's booming aerospace industries and organized the FAMEX series of bi-annual defense and aerospace fairs in an effort to attract foreign direct investment for this growing sector. Within a decade, the Mexican aerospace industry became the tenth largest in the world, growing an average of 14% per year from 2010 to 2019 and creating some 110,000 jobs.[12] The industry expanded from 100 manufacturing firms to 368 by mid-2020 according to estimates from the Federation of Mexican Aerospace Industries.[13] U.S. and European aerospace companies vastly increased their footprints in Mexico, taking advantage of high-skilled/acceptable-cost labor, adherence to dual-use international trade regulations, a mature services industry, and a growing supply chain infrastructure based on Mexico's five aerospace clusters.

Mexican Navy's Blue Water Roadmap

The Mexican Navy, embodied in its unique cabinet-level department known as the Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR), also defined a clear path for the development of its capabilities, with the establishment of a Coast Guard-type organization and a blue-water conventional naval force, both of which could be responsible for internal security and national defense.

Given the large gaps of a maritime law enforcement presence throughout Mexico's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), coasts, and ports, the internal-security-tasked Coast Guard clearly had priority. SEMAR was tasked with the challenge of establishing a presence on Mexico's 100-plus ports to control (or at least have some level of awareness of) "what comes in and what goes out" of the country. The Navy's intervention in the port of Lazaro Cardenas had provided a nightmarish glimpse of the chaotic scenario that could be taking place in other Mexican ports.[14] The task would be quite ambitious, requiring not just a significant number of personnel to be assigned as "authorities" and "maritime law enforcement" in Mexico's ports, but

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[11] La FAM en los ejercicios Amalgam Eagle, Mexico Aeroespacial, 23 July 2017
[12] FEMIA Feria Aerosespacial Mexico,consulted 15 January 2022
[13] Mexico - Country Commercial Guide – Aerospace, International Trade Administration, 2 September 2021
[14] Crimen e Impunidad: las trampas de la seguridad en Mexico, John Bailey, 2014

also a technological Command and Control (C2) infrastructure to implement security measures and share information.

The Calderon administration's naval focus on developing land elements had inadvertently sidelined Navy construction projects. Yet in 2013, the SEMAR set out to modernize the Navy-run ASTIMAR shipyards so that it could re-launch those key naval construction programs, including a marine infantry, special forces, coastal Search and Rescue (SAR) network, and naval intelligence unit. A "return to the sea" focus intended to realign SEMAR's priorities and decrease growing competition and tension with the Army. ASTIMAR shipyards were tasked with building a new fleet of Swedish-designed interceptor craft, Dutch-designed coastal patrol craft and auxiliary vessels as well as indigenous ocean patrol vessels. But the piece de resistance of the naval construction strategy was the launch of a program to locally build a new generation of foreign-designed multi-role frigates that would replace the ageing former U.S. Navy destroyer escorts and frigates in service. The Long-Range Ocean Patrol (POLA) program, as the frigate project became known, would become the most important effort for the Mexican Navy to establish a modern naval deterrent and power projection capability.

Unlike the Army, the Mexican Navy had an existing relationship with both the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, which was only strengthened and intensified by the bilateral defense-wide rapprochement. In 2008, the Navy had begun investing in drastically expanding its internal-security oriented marine infantry force, creating 32 light infantry battalions, which from 2015 onwards began to take on a more outwards-facing perspective, with Mexican and U.S. marines holding combined beach assault exercises.

Pending Requirements and a Way Forward

All armed services significantly increased their footprint by posting liaison officers in a myriad of U.S. agencies as well as international multi-lateral organizations such as the Inter-American Defense Board, Inter-American Defense College, and the International Maritime Organization. Mexican and U.S. defense cooperation began to look at beyond trans-border issues, with intelligence sharing protocols taking the bilateral relation to historic levels.[15]

The need for modern and reliable satellite communications network, cyber-defense infrastructure, an air defense network to include modern ground-based radars, AEW aircraft, a new generation of multi-role fighters, new generation of NATO-compatible ground vehicles, a DIA-style intelligence agency, modern air mobility assets, space-based ISR platforms and a broad range of unmanned systems was evident, and Mexico clearly sought after it.

Identifying that the vast capability gaps would not be able to be funded in the short term, the Mexican military set about to draft the first –and still to be published– National Defense Policy, which articulated the new directions for the armed forces. The policy also laid bare need to increase resources from the average 0.5 per cent of GDP to a minimum of 1 per cent of GDP – in effect, a request to at least double defense spending so that the military could cope with the

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[15] Agreement with the Mexican Navy Concerning Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Information, U.S. Department of State, 15 September 2008

myriad of roles it was being tasked to perform.[16] For context, global military spending averages around 2.0% of GDP; the U.S. spends 3.4%, Canada 1.3%, and South America 1.7%.[17]

Lack of a Defense Culture in Social and Political Circles

The lack of a modern defense culture in Mexican society is prevalent, with most Mexican or Mexico-focused researchers, analysts, media commentators, watchdogs/NGOs, and think tank community experts focusing almost exclusively on the military's internal security functions. The debate during this period continued to dwell on the legality –or rather illegality– of employing the military internally, with most forums, seminars, colloquia usually concluding on the urgent need for police-sector reform. Concerns for human rights (HR) violations dominated the conversation, with more than 3,000 complaints reported to the National Human Rights Commission between 2014 and 2019. These concerns prompted Congress and the military to adopt a series of reforms, mainly to require that HR abuses committed by members of the military against civilians be prosecuted in civil courts rather than military ones.[18]

The lack of this "defense culture" was also evident in Mexico's Congress. During the past decade, the armed forces resorted to a diplomatic/soft approach to obtain funding for their procurement priorities. To bypass what otherwise would be difficult congressional scrutiny to fund "national defense" programs –which lawmakers would likely be label as "belligerent" and reject on the budget discourse floor– the Mexican armed forces resorted to creative approaches:

- When trying to procure a fleet of Sikorsky UH-60M Black Hawk military helicopters specifically outfitted for assault functions and a fleet of Beechcraft King Air 350ER's twin turboprops modified for maritime patrol and intelligence gathering, the Mexican Navy resorted to label them as "Assets for Rescue Operations."

- FAM procurement of Beechcraft T-6C+ Texan II-armed trainer aircraft for interdiction, close air support, light attack, and reconnaissance was labeled as "air surveillance assets" purchases.

- Similarly, the Navy's program to build missile-armed multi-role frigates at local shipyards was renamed from the "Light Multi-Role Frigate" program, to the less belligerent "Long-Range Ocean Patrol" (POLA) program. The POLA program comprised the construction in Mexican shipyards of Damen-designed SIGMA 10514 frigates from the Netherlands, creating hundreds of jobs in Oaxaca, one of Mexico's poorest states, and leading to technology transfers that would significantly increase the capabilities of the national ASTIMAR shipyards.

The POLA frigates would be equipped with U.S. weapon systems in an effort to attain commonality with the U.S. Navy: RGM-84L Harpoon anti-ship missiles, RAM tactical missiles and Mk54 torpedoes were selected.[19] However, the most significant (and expensive) asset

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[16] La Necesaria Política Nacional de Defensa, Javier Oliva Posada, Vertigo, 30 July 2020
[17] Based on 5-year (2016-2020) averages available at the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database
[18] Mexico events 2020, Human Rights Watch, accesses 4 January 2022
[19] Mexico –Harpoon Block II Missiles, RAM Missiles and MK 54 Torpedoes, U.S. DSCA, 5 January 2018

onboard each POLA would be an embarked multi-role helicopter capable of conducting anti-submarine warfare and anti-surface ship operations. The Navy did not hide its clear preference for Sikorsky's MH-60R Seahawk, the U.S. Navy's main embarked helicopter, and began negotiations to procure a batch of up to eight helicopters over the course of the POLA construction program. The original plan was to order the helicopters in pairs and phase in their delivery alongside the POLA ships until 2030. Seahawks would therefore serve Mexico as an important component in deterrent to external threats, including the ability to detect and respond to the presence of extra-regional submarines.[20] In brief, the fleet of POLAs would be NATO-compatible and equipped with U.S. weapons and helicopters and would constitute a dramatic increase in capabilities.

The first POLA ship was launched (unfinished) before the end of the Peña Nieto administration; however, several other projects did not achieve their 2018 targets, mostly due to lack of funding. The most significant interruptions for the military's capability development plans included: 1) the apparent termination of the northern airspace surveillance network; 2) delay in procuring a new family of 6x6 or 8x8 armored fighting vehicles; and 3) only partial/two-thirds fulfillment of the FAM's relatively modest requirements:

Supplier	Platform	Description	Country	2013-2018 Plan	Actual
Sikorsky	UH-60M Black Hawk	Helicopter	USA	24	18
Russian Helicopters	Mi-17	Helicopter	Russia	24	
Bell Helicopters	B407AH	Helicopter	USA	36	18
Beechcraft	T-6C+ Texan II	Armed Trainer	USA	48	48
Grumman	Gulfstream	Transport	USA	1	3
Beechcraft	King Air 350	ISR	USA	8	8
Boeing	737-700	Transport	USA		3
				141	**98**

Source: Fuerza Aérea Mexicana, La aviación militar, un sigo de historia, p. 265-266 SEDENA, 2015.

This left an important number of clearly articulated national defense programs to be funded by the incoming 2018-2024 administration.

Enter the AMLO Administration

With Presidential elections looming in 2018, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's campaign took on direct criticism of the armed forces' human rights record, arguing against the use of the military as part of the security strategy and noting, "One can't fight fire with fire." On the campaign trail, while he decried the proximity of the political-military relationship, he also obscured what the military's role would be if he were to become president.[21]

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[20] Mexico – MH-60R multi-mission helicopters notification to Congress, U.S.DSCA, 18 April 2018
[21] López Obrador choca con el Ejército mexicano en su camino a las presidenciales de 2018, El País, 22 March 2017

Furthermore, six months after assuming the presidency, AMLO stated: "If it was up to me, I would disappear the army and convert it into a National Guard. I would declare that Mexico is a pacifist country that does not need an army, and the defense of the nation –if necessary– would fall on all Mexicans… the Army and Navy would be converted into a National Guard to guarantee security for all Mexicans… I can't do it because there are resistances (sic)."[22]

While the Navy was not on AMLO's radar or discourse during most of the presidential campaign, the publication of the U.S. Defense and Security Cooperation Agency's (DSCA) notification to the U.S. Congress on the potential sale of eight MH-60R Seahawk helicopters to Mexico changed that. The April 2018 publication announced the potential sale at an optimistic value of USD 1.2 billion, a figure that drew immediate criticism from various analysts in Mexico's mainstream media, which, uninformed, misrepresented the fact of the notification as a done deal. The notification became cannon fodder amid the heat of presidential campaigns. Lopez Obrador's campaign came out hard against the deal. After being elected President of Mexico on 1 July 2018, he announced on July 10 that the negotiations for the deal would be cancelled.[23]

Testing the Waters for Potential Direction Change

While there was no firm order to cancel, the announcement led to an end in negotiations and raised concern that the Navy's 2030 development plans would be likely suffer significant disruptions. In a swift reaction to the president-elect's comments, the Navy published a cost-benefit analysis (ACE) for the procurement of two NH Industries NH90NFH Sea Lion embarked helicopters – the pan-European competitor to the Seahawk-.[24]

In parallel, the Navy published another ACE document seeking procurement of three Mi-17 transport helicopters from Russia.[25] These are not competitors to the Seahawk or Sea Lion but rather cargo versions that would serve as attrition replacements for the existing Mi-17 fleet, which the Mexican Navy has operated since 1993.

While procurement of three helicopters from Russia or two from Europe would not constitute a shift in Mexico's strategic defense partnership with the U.S., it would have provided some clarity for the armed forces as to whether the AMLO administration was interested in revisiting Mexico's military supplier relationships.

The response was tantamount or worse than no response: it begot austerity.

Whereas this account regarding helicopters may seem extremely tactical, it helps to encapsulate AMLO's vision of Mexico's defense requirements and commitments: austerity. This would likely mean that the long-awaited list of requirements would need to wait another six years and that force development plans would now be interrupted.

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[22] Si por mi fuera, desaparecería al Ejercito y declararía que México es un país pacifista: AMLO, la Jornada, 30 June 2019

[23] Mexico's president-elect will cancel planned U.S. helicopter order, Reuters, 11 July 2018

[24] Adquisición de helicópteros para Operaciones Embarcadas de Largo Alcance, SEMAR, June 2018

[25] Adquisición de helicópteros Versión Transporte, SEMAR, June 2018

The incoming AMLO administration's vision of national security was initially a puzzle for the military, as it was more akin to public safety than even to internal security. It did not consider Mexico to face any external threats and therefore would not be supportive of continuing its up-to-then development track towards becoming a military with Middle-Power capabilities.

Supplier	Platform	Description	Country	2013-2018		2019-2024		2025-2030		2013-2030
				Plan	Actual	Plan	Actual [26]	Plan	Plan	Actual
Sikorsky	UH-60M Black Hawk	Helicopter	USA	24	18	24			48	18
Russian Helicopters	Mi-17	Helicopter	Russia	24		24			48	0
Bell Helicopters	B407AH	Helicopter	USA	36	18	12	1		48	19
Beechcraft	T-6C+ Texan II	Armed Trainer	USA	48	48	30	1		78	49
Grumman	Gulfstream	Transport	USA	1	3				1	3
Beechcraft	King Air 350	ISR	USA	8	8			3	11	8
Airbus	C295M	Transport	Spain			7			7	0
Lockheed Martin	C-130J Hercules II	Transport	USA			3			3	0
Boeing	737-700	Transport	USA			3	4		4	3
TBD	Fighter Aircraft	Fighter	TBD					24	24	0
EMBRAER	EMB-145AEW	AEW&C	Brazil					3	3	0
				141	**98**	**104**	**2**	**30**	**275**	**100**

Source: Fuerza Aérea Mexicana, La aviación militar, un sigo de historia, p. 265-266 SEDENA, 2015 and author's research/accounting of procurement

The FAM's original plan, published in 2015, to modernize its force by 2030 is therefore likely to be negatively affected due to the lack of resources allocated to fund it. Indeed, the 2018 objectives were not met, and the current administration has not signaled an intention to continue working toward them.

Organizational Changes

An organizational adjustment of the SEDENA command structure had long been in preparation since 2013. The creation of an Army Command would separate the chain of command between the land forces and SEDENA. The AMLO Administration instituted this change in August 2021 with two tandem goals: first, to provide strategic direction through

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[26] Equipment procurement during the AMLO administration has been mostly through insurance policy coverage to replace attrition and does not represent a response to requirements

enhanced doctrine, education, training, and equipment for the land forces; second, to divorce and clarify the dual political-administrative function that SEDENA currently exercises. By establishing Army Command, there is now a (clearer) relay in the line of command between the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Army. This created a structure for the land forces similar to that of the FAM.

The Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional (Chiefs of Staff for National Defense) will also transform to become the Estado Mayor Conjunto de la Defensa Nacional (Joint Chief of Staff for National Defense, EMCDN). The term "Joint" represents the Army and the Air Force, but excludes the Navy, which continues to be part of the Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR).[27]

Following AMLO's initiative to transfer the National Guard under SEDENA from 2023, it appears likely that the command structure will then integrate the Army, National Guard, and Air Force under the EMCDN.

There are no indications that the AMLO administration is considering a restructuring of the cabinet-level agencies to form a unified Department of Defense, which would include SEMAR. SEMAR's administrative independence is therefore likely to remain intact until 2024.

The "AMLO Vision" for the Mexican Military

For the Mexican armed forces, the 2019-2021 period has featured significant adjustment and reorganization to align with the current administration's national security vision. This vision lacks a clear intention to continue developing the Mexican armed forces into a modern and capable military with an external role. Instead, the AMLO Administration's primary goals for the armed forces are twofold:

1. First, to take the lead for the return of tranquility to all regions of the country; and

2. Second, to assist in the population's welfare and become a co-participant in the country's economic development.

For the first objective the military has been tasked with significantly expanding its internal security role by directly supporting and enabling the re-establishment, expansion, and operation of the National Guard.

For the second objective, the military has been appointed to become a sort of *state steward* for a broad range of national development programs that range from transforming the main military airbase into Mexico City's new international airport, to cleaning up beaches and coasts of algae to building a national network of government-run banks.

The latter has been the most radical divergence from previous political-mandated mission-shifts as it has put the military at the center and focus of supporting the AMLO Administration's economic agenda including supporting tourism, social welfare, national

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[27] El Sol de Mexico, Propone Ejecutivo iniciativa para crear la Comandancia del Ejercito, 23 November 2021

infrastructure, and energy programs which marks a significant departure from the Mexican military's traditional national defense and internal security roles.

As part of the re-organization of the armed forces under AMLO, the most radical change was the dissolution of the Presidential Guard, one of the most visible military institutions in Mexico's public life given its role in protecting the President, his family, and other high-level cabinet members. Along with the end of this 100-year-old institution, AMLO declined to use the Boeing 787 Dreamliner Presidential Transport (TP-01) aircraft delivered in February 2016 and announced he would sell off the USD 218 million plane. The VIP-configured 80-seat aircraft has not had any takers, and AMLO launched a very public campaign to raffle off the aircraft. The results of the raffle were inconclusive –or at best confusing– failing to pass off the aircraft to a new owner. It is still posted for sale at around USD 130 million, and the latest news included an offer to trade the aircraft for helicopters that can fight forest fires.[28] For context, practically all helicopters can be used to fight forest fires, so this narrative suggests continuing to support the national development/civil support focus to obtain military assets.

An Expanded Law Enforcement Mandate

The single most important change to the armed forces organization during AMLO's tenure has been the creation of the National Guard. To *return tranquility to all regions of the country*, via an expansion of the armed forces' internal security role, AMLO's plan saw the re-establishment of Mexico's National Guard as the predominant law enforcement agency, absorbing and replacing the former Federal Police.

Prior to 2018, the National Guard was a military institution that existed only on paper and reported administratively to SEDENA – also only on paper. Re-established under the civilian Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana (SSCP), it was "assembled" by blending together battalions from the Army's Military Police, the Naval Police Unit, and the former civilian-controlled Federal Police. The Federal Police itself included a myriad of former military and paramilitary units, including an Aviation Directorate equipped with military-grade aircraft and helicopters, a gendarmerie – created under the Peña Nieto administration to also take over certain Army tasks– federal highway police, federal support forces, intelligence, and scientific police elements, including forensic and cyber police units. Hastily organized in late 2018, the originally planned chain of command placed the National Guard under administrative control of the Army and direct

SEDENA personnel commissioned to the National Guard by rank	
Major General	3
Brigadier General	23
Colonel	62
Lieutenant Colonel	89
Major	130
First Captain	184
Second Captain	312
First Lieutenant	782
Second Lieutenant	355
First Sargent	1,037
Second Sargent	4,572
Corporal	9,573
Private	44,229
Total	**61,351**

Source: SEDENA 1 September 2021

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[28] [Avión presidencial se cambiaría por helicópteros o lo manejaría SEDENA si no se vende: AMLO](#), Zeta Tijuana, 7 January 2022

operational command of the president. However, in early 2019 the SSPC secretary announced that the National Guard would be a civilian institution under direct control of the SSPC.[29]

While the National Guard on paper reported to the SSPC, organization and training was entrusted to SEDENA. Highly respected two-star army General Luis Rodriguez Bucio, who had a track record working with the Federal Police as well as with the civilian intelligence center (CISEN) was selected to command the National Guard on 30 May 2019. Furthermore, some 61,351 troops and 5,700 marines have been commissioned by their services to form part of the National Guard. Recruitment of 29,263 civilians into the Military Police and assigned into the National Guard began in January 2020.[30] The National Guard also became a second career for recently retired military officers.[31] Therefore, the "civilian" National Guard is effectively under a military commander and formed to a large degree by current or former military personnel. To equip the National Guard, SEDENA was tasked with producing 130,000 uniforms and 45,000 FX-05 assault rifles.[32] Further deviating from the status quo, AMLO announced in June 2021 that he would propose a constitutional reform to transfer the National Guard (back) to SEDENA in 2023.[33]

Migration and Border control

In June 2019, the Mexican military was ordered to support a new mission: detaining undocumented migrants that were flowing across Mexico's southern border and making their way up to its northern border with the United States. The Army National Guard deployed some 8,700 troops initially and these later increased to around 14,000 and were joined by some 900 Navy personnel assigned to support the National Guard. The orders were issued by AMLO as then U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to impose a unilateral 5% tax on Mexican products.[34]

In April 2021, SEDENA deployed an additional 13,600 troops to support Mexican government immigration officers in both the southern and northern borders. These were supported by 32 aircraft and have been credited with "rescuing" (the Mexican government's formal term for detaining migrants) over 220,000 migrants as of July 2021, comprising 180,000 on the southern border and 40,000 on the northern border.[35] The vast majority of undocumented migrants were from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador according to the Navy.[36]

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[29] Fuerzas Armadas, Guardia Nacional y Violencia en México, p.32, CASEDE, July 2020
[30] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, p182-183, 1 September 2021
[31] Militares y marinos en retiro serán convocados para Guardia Nacional, CBS News, 4 March 2019
[32] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.181, 1 September 2021
[33] La Guardia Nacional de AMLO: de cuerpo civil a formar parte de la Sedena, Expansion, 16 June 2021
[34] Enviarían a más de mil elementos a reforzar la contención de migrantes, El Economista, 12 April 2021
[35] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.190, 1 September 2021
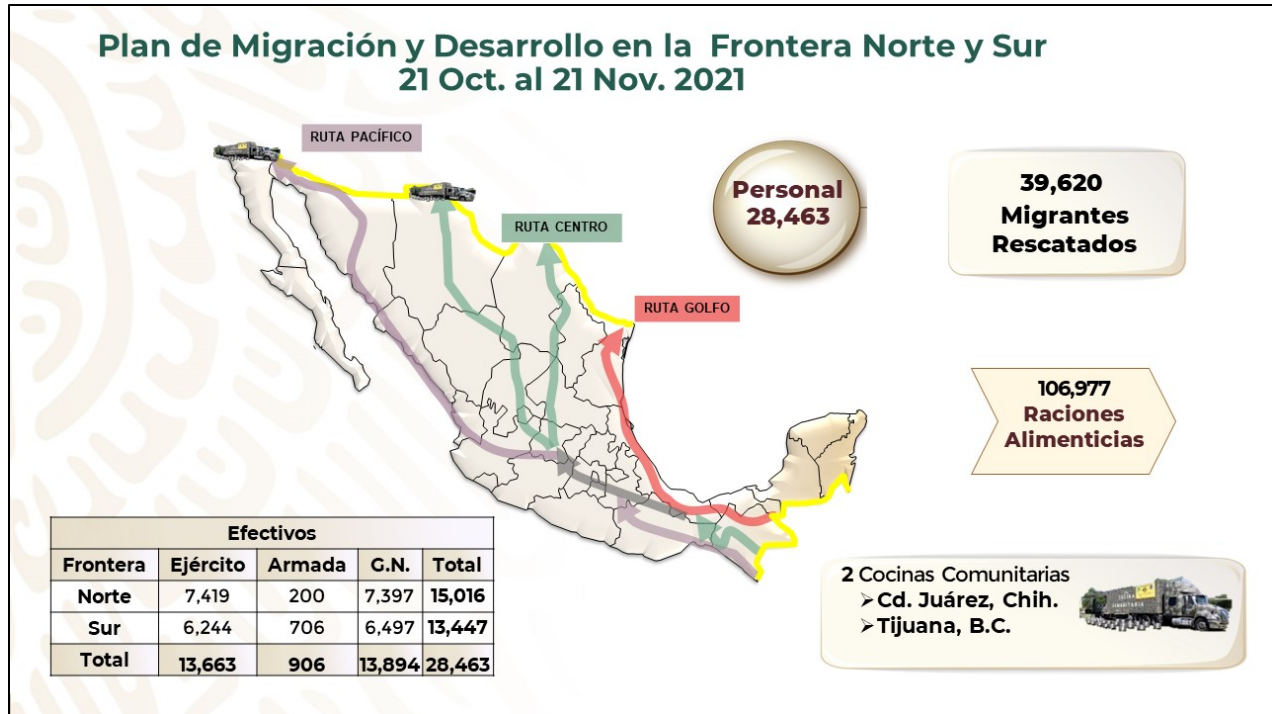[36] Tercer Informe de Labores SEMAR 2020-2021, P.48, 1 September 2021

Figure 1 Source: SEDENA

Ports and Customs: from Enforcement to Administration

SEMAR took over the role of National Maritime Authority from the SCT back in 2016 and from 2017 took on a more relevant role in Mexico's Ports Captaincies.

From July 2020, SEMAR took on an even deeper role by taking over management of the customs agencies of Mexico's ports. Along with the administrative infrastructure of Mexico's ports, the Mexican Merchant Marine, which had been operating as part of the civilian SCT since 1976, was officially transferred back to SEMAR in June 2021.[37] The measures were highlighted by AMLO as part of the government's strategy to combat both organized and "white collar" crime, mentioning that the Navy's presence –along with legal attributions– was needed to counter smuggling and fight corruption.[38]

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[37] SCT efectúa traspaso de la Coordinación General de Puertos y Marina Mercante a SEMAR, SEMAR 7 June 2021

[38] Semar tomará control de puertos y de Marina Mercante desde el sábado: AMLO, Milenio, 1 June 2021

Figure 2 Source: SEDENA

Similarly, in March 2021, SEDENA launched the Strategy to Strengthen Border Customs deploying military personnel to support international Trade Officers on four border customs offices in the Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon border with Texas. This was later followed by deploying troops to ten border customs offices in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Chihuahua, and Sonora in July and finally the five remaining border crossings in Baja California and Sonora as well as the single customs offices in Chiapas and Quintana Roo in mid-July 2021.[39]

Securing Mexico's Energy Leaks

The use of Mexico's military to provide security for PEMEX, the government-owned oil company, is not new. SEDENA traditionally deploys some 1,300 troops along with 12 manned aircraft and 48 MINI-UAVs[40] while SEMAR deploys over 1,200 sailors and marines along with a ship, six interceptor craft, four minor craft, and 22 land vehicles to provide security for PEMEX's infrastructure.[41]

What changed under the AMLO Administration was the use of the military, mainly the Army, to 1) specifically combat fuel syphoning and fuel trafficking gangs; and 2) provide logistical transport in the form of fuel tankers, drivers, and security teams.

To the 2,500 troops deployed on energy security tasks in PEMEX's strategic installations, the army reinforced this number with 2,300 troops to combat fuel syphoning along six pipelines.

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[39] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.138, 1 September 2021
[40] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.184, 1 September 2021
[41] Tercer Informe de Labores SEMAR 2020-2021, P.18, 1 September 2021

Beside these standard security roles, SEDENA deployed 820 troops to combat fuel trafficking on the northern border with the U.S. In 2021, these troops interdicted close to 80 million liters (20 million gallons) of fuel smuggled from the U.S. into Mexico, mostly aboard train carts. [42]

During the first few months of the AMLO Administration, some 300 military personnel were assigned to provide logistics support to the fleet of fuel tankers that transport gasoline and diesel throughout the country. Additionally, SEDENA subcontracted over 1,800 civilian fuel tanker drivers to operate the 637 fuel tankers that were employed to guarantee fuel supply to 19 cities in Mexico in 2020-2021. [43]

Planes, Trains, and Tourism: Airport and Railway Construction and Administration

The cancelation of the New International Airport - Mexico City (NAICM) project, which had been launched in 2014 by the Peña Nieto Administration, became one of the most media-charged decisions of the incoming AMLO Administration. Claiming environmental, urban, social, technical, and economic impacts –the latter being a projected cost increase from USD 13 billion to USD 16 billion– AMLO delivered on his campaign promise to cancel the NAICM and announced an alternative plan to transform the FAM's main airbase into a new international airport.[44]

Known colloquially as Santa Lucia in reference to the ex-hacienda where the base's headquarters are established, Mexico's main Military Airbase (Base Aérea Militar No.1 or BAM-1) is located in Tecamac, Mexico State. The base has been the most important FAM installation since 1952, hosting the largest number of FAM units, including the Army's airborne brigade.

The new airport, known as the Felipe Angeles International Airport (AIFA), was inaugurated in March 2022 and will be a dual-use civil-military airport. According to SEDENA plans, the AIFA will have three airstrips as part of its first phase and should be able to handle nearly 20 million passengers per year.

Transforming BAM-1 into AIFA requires significant enhancements to its infrastructure to meet standard operational requirements: logistics, air surveillance, communications, air traffic control, security, fuel depots, maintenance hubs, and emergency services for the hospitality-sector infrastructure, which will include hotels, restaurants, duty free and other shops, parking, and private and public transportation to and from the major commercial airport. Modifications for the highway network that will connect the AIFA to Mexico City and other surrounding cities will also be critical. In February 2019 SEDENA was ordered to create a fully state-owned company, AIFA SA de CV, which was formally constituted in December 2020 with the goal of managing the project and its various components.[45] Because the AIFA presents such a massive

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[42] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.185, 1 September 2021
[43] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.184-185, 1 September 2021
[44] Razones para la cancelación del proyecto del Nuevo Aeropuerto en Texcoco, Gobierno de México, 29 April 2019
[45] DOF 14 December 2020

undertaking, SEDENA has subcontracted over 106,000 civilian employees over the course of the program. As of late 2021, over 25,000 subcontracted employees are actively working on AIFA.[46]

Security for the AIFA will be provided by new National Guard units, which were created in March 2021 and designated as Airport Security Battalions to ultimately form a part of the Military Policy Corps.[47]

In October 2020, the AMLO Administration announced it had tasked SEDENA with the construction of a second dual-use airport, this time in Felipe Carrillo Puerto, adjacent to Tulum, Quintana Roo. Operations are set to begin in 2023.[48] Besides this new construction, SEDENA has also been put in charge of two smaller airports in Mexico's southeast: Palenque in Chiapas and Chetumal in Quintana Roo. Both Palenque (inaugurated in 2014) and Chetumal (inaugurated in 1974)[49] have been the focus of counter-narcotic operations, with cocaine-loaded business jets being seized there repeatedly. As a result, both will now house permanent military units.[50]

The argument that AMLO used to transfer these infrastructure projects to SEDENA was that if they had been assigned to the Communications and Transportations Secretariat (SCT) or the National Fund for the Development of Tourism (FONATUR), *they would not stand the first onslaught* in a future privatization process. AMLO furthermore announced in November 2021 that 75% of AIFA SA de CV's profits will be used to fund the armed forces' pensions, while the remaining 25% will fund other government pensions.[51] After journalistic investigations into what appeared to be corrupt –or at least opaque– management of AIFA SA de CV's business practices called into question how 70% of 966 contracts had been assigned directly without a tender, a presidential decree classified all contracts and procedures related to the construction of national infrastructure as matters of national security. This decree also created a mechanism to fast-track contracts within 5 days' time.[52]

SEDENA has also been tasked with building three tranches totaling 40% of the Maya Railway project. The 1,525 km railway project is intended to interconnect the main tourist regions and metro areas in the Yucatan Peninsula and is the centerpiece of the AMLO Administration's economic development plan for Mexico's southeast region. The project shifted from an initial public-private partnership to an all-public project. There are claims that an impact study elaborated by a group of 30 academics from Mexico's National Science and Technology Council (CONACYT) has been classified and buried for the next 5 years as it highlighted potential risks to ten natural reserves and over 1,200 archeological sites identified significantly increased risks for drug smuggling and human trafficking in the region.[53]

SEDENA will build the following railway tranches:

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[46] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.186, 1 September 2021
[47] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.184, 1 September 2021
[48] Definen nuevo aeropuerto en Tulum; Sedena pide 950 mdp para construcción, Milenio, 3 November 2021
[49] Duro golpe al narco: decomisaron en Chetumal un jet con 1.5 toneladas de cocaína, infobae, 27 October 2020
[50] Operaría el narco desde el aeropuerto de Palenque, A tiempo noticias, 18 June 2020
[51] AMLO creará una empresa para que la Sedena administre las obras del sureste, Expansion, 4 November 2021
[52] DOF 22 November 2021
[53] Opinión: El Tren Maya aún tiene muchas preguntas sin respuesta en México, Washington Post, 27 May 2020

Railway Tranche	Destinations	Railway Length
Tranche 5	Playa del Carmen to Cancun IAP	49.8 km
Tranche 6	Tulum to Chetumal	249 km
Tranche 7	Bacalar to Escarcega	310 km

Securing the Trans-Isthmus Corridor

Another one of the AMLO Administration's landmark projects is the development of transportation infrastructure along the Tehuantepec Isthmus, the narrowest region of Mexico. The project aims to reactivate a railway along the 300-kilometer corridor, linking the ports of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca on the Pacific coast and Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, making Mexico a viable alternative to the Panama Canal as early as 2023.

Figure 3 Source: DOF

In May 2021, AMLO vowed that once completed, the project would not be a concession to private or foreign investors, but rather handed over to (the administration of) the Navy.[54] Given the previous guidance around the AIFA SA de CV, it is likely that AMLO expects the Navy not to just provide security but also to establish a government-owned company to administer international trade operations along the Tehuantepec Isthmus.

Building Welfare Banks and Distributing Textbooks

SEDENA was tasked with building 2,700 bank branch offices for the AMLO Administration's *Banco del Bienestar* (Welfare Bank), a transformation and replacement of the government-owned Bansefi (established in 1950). The project is aimed at creating a national network of government-run bank branches that will offer "ethically and socially responsible"

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[54] Corredor Transístmico no será concesionado; quedará a cargo de la Marina: AMLO, Milenio, 9 May 2021

financial services to Mexico's least affluent population. Each bank branch has an area of 635 square feet and includes two teller counters and an ATM. Up to September 2021, SEDENA's Corps of Engineers had built slightly over 1,000 bank branches, although more than half of these were still waiting to be outfitted with the necessary equipment to operate.[55]

Another one of the "new missions" assigned to SEDENA was to provide logistical support to transport and distribute free textbooks in key states throughout Mexico where security conditions required a military escort. In 2019 SEDENA and SEMAR signed a collaboration agreement with the Department of Public Education (SEP) and the National Free Textbook Commission (CONALITEG) to support their distribution.[56] In preparation for the 2020-2021 school year, the Army distributed over 462,000 textbooks.[57]

This undertaking turned out to use minimal armed forces resources in 2021: 22 personnel and four vehicles that distributed close to 20,000 textbooks in both Chiapas and Veracruz.

Gulfweed Clean-Up Force

The Navy was tasked to support the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) as well as the Department of Tourism (SECTUR) with the collection and removal of gulfweed on the coasts of Quintana Roo. Vessels would collect the floating seaweed while tractors and sweepers would remove the seaweed that washed on the beaches.

With this task becoming a national priority, SEMAR launched an exhaustive research project to identify the different techniques and technologies available to collect and process gulfweed. Between March and August 2021, the Navy removed over 27,000 tons of gulfweed, some 96% of which was collected on the beach.[58]

Naval Construction Shifts Toward a National Development Fleet

Since the early 1980s, the Navy has succeeded in developing a relatively modern shipbuilding ability and is now capable of internally producing the 1,680-ton Oaxaca-class Ocean Patrol Vessels, as well as a production license for 2,500-ton frigates, coastal patrol vessels, 3,000-ton logistics ships, and modern interceptor craft. The 2020-2024 Maritime Sector Program outlined the need to reinvigorate the naval construction sector.

The PSM specified that the previous administration had built 16 vessels, and following the instruction to adopt austerity measures, the Navy's planners hoped to be able to –at a minimum– to produce the following 12 vessels:

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[55] Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.191, 1 September 2021
[56] Sedena y Semar ayudarán a distribuir los libros de texto gratuitos, Government of Mexico, June 2019
[57] Personal Militar trasladó libros de texto gratuitos en apoyo a la S.E.P. en Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, Tabasco y Tlaxcala, SEDENA, 14 August 2020
[58] Tercer Informe de Labores SEMAR 2020-2021, P.85, 1 September 2021

Vessel class	Type	Shipyard	Number
Oaxaca	Ocean Patrol Vessel	ASTIMAR 20 Salina Cruz	2
Tenochtitlan	Coastal Patrol vessel	ASTIMAR 1 Tampico	4
Polaris-II	Interceptor Craft	ASTIMAR 3 Coatzacoalcos	5
Isla Madre	Logistics Ship	ASTIMAR 6 Guaymas	1

Source: Programa Sectorial Marina 2020-2024 p.19

The naval construction projects would allow for the creation of 2,000 direct jobs and 8,000 indirect jobs according to SEMAR, and most of these would be created in the Southeast and would be able to maintain at least a minimum pace of the Navy's long-running permanent vessel replacement program.

The AMLO administration's requirement for the Navy to support SEMARNAT and SECTUR in algae collection tasks added the need to design and build four 46-meter Ocean Algae-Collection vessels and twenty smaller 15-meter Algae-Collection craft. At least one ship (BSO-101 Natans) and five of the 15-meter craft have been built, the latter at the No.11 Naval Repair Centre in Chetumal, Campeche.[59]

Furthermore, the Navy was tasked in 2021 to build three low-environmental-impact tourism-class Catamaran ferry's to support academic and cultural tourism in and around the Maria Islands archipelago. The ferries will provide guided ecotourism tours and will be manned by specialists in adventure tourism and biosphere conservation.[60] The charge to build ecotourism ships suggests that the Navy will be required to implement and operate tourism services, which – at a much smaller scale than with the SEDENA cases– again places the armed forces in a revenue-generation industry. Construction of the military-grade vessels has not yet begun as of April 2022, and there are no indications that these will take place. Instead, SEMAR has launched a new USD 276 million program to locally build up to 30 Immediate Response Craft (of a yet to be announced type) to begin replacement of the Polaris I interceptor crafts.[61] If this project obtains funding, these would likely be the only military or military-like craft built during the AMLO administration.

Broad Public Support

The Mexican Armed Forces' roles and missions have changed substantially over the first three years of the AMLO Administration, forcing them to reorganize –and in some cases reinvent– themselves to support the administration's agenda. These changes have expanded the armed forces' roles to include law enforcement, infrastructure construction, and ecological cleanup capacities. Despite these improvisations, Mexican public support for the armed forces continues unabated. The Mexican Navy and Army remain the most highly trusted institutions in

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[59] Tercer Informe de Labores SEMAR 2020-2021, P.78, 1 September 2021
[60] Estudio de Factiblidad Tecnica 21132110006 Adquisición de tres buques tipo ferry para turismo de bajo impacto ambiental en el archipiélago Islas Marias, SEMAR, September 2021
[61] Estudio de Factiblidad Tecnica 21132110002 Construcción de Embarcaciones de Respuesta Inmediata (ERI), SEMAR, September 2021

Mexico according to the latest polls by INEGI. The level of trust that Mexicans have in their public authorities include the following:

Institution	2019	2020	2021
Navy	83.7	90.1	90.2
Army	80.2	87.4	87.8
National Guard 2020	-	82.8	82.7
Federal Police until 2019	58.2	-	-
Attorney General's Office	51.4	65.2	65.8
State Police	45.7	57.6	58.6
Municipal Police	38.6	52.9	55.1
Transit Police	35.2	45.2	47.2

Source: INEGI ENVIPE 2019 to 2021

Furthermore, with the disbandment of the Federal Police and creation of the National Guard, the public's trust in the latter is almost on par with that of the Army, jumping 25 points up from the last perception poll on the Federal Police.

Technical Assessment of the State of the Mexican Armed Forces in Terms of Quality and Quantity as a Modern Fighting Force.

Under AMLO, the Mexican military is rapidly drifting away from its previous roadmap to become a modern and professional military force capable of representing Mexico abroad or defending Mexico's interests from a foreign power. In that regard, to properly assess the military capability of a mainly defensive, non-expeditionary force, the following nine categories offer a helpful rubric:

1. Air Surveillance and Enforcement
2. Air Mobility
3. Airborne ISR
4. Subsurface Defense capability
5. Surface Warfare capability
6. Amphibious Deployment capability
7. Armored Forces
8. Artillery
9. Cyber
10. Combat experience

1. *Air Surveillance and Enforcement: Modern but underdeveloped*

Mexico operates four ground-based radars in the southeast of the country providing a 32% coverage of Mexico's airspace. SIVA's range has allowed Mexico to share intelligence with neighboring countries, leading to interdictions mainly Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. Its 2015 modernization plan foresaw the expansion of this early warning infrastructure with five additional ground-based radars, which are to be placed in the north of the country and would

have increased coverage to 72%. The latter plan was not executed, and Mexico continues to have a large part of its airspace (68%) uncovered by military radars. Local development of a new generation of air surveillance radars, beginning with the joint SEDENA-SEMAR Tzinacan 74-kilometer range gap-filler radar has led to the development of the 220-kilometer TPS Camazot radar.

Air enforcement or the ability to intercept and force down intruders is in the hands of a very small number of obsolete fighter jets and an adequate number of relatively capable turboprop armed trainers. Being able to intercept bogeys flying low and slow has been more important than high and fast. The latter, however, appear to now be a trend in terms of smuggler operations.

In terms of ground-based air defense, only the Mexican Navy deploys a small number of tactical surface-to-air missiles. Cartels have begun to use unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) for drug smuggling as well as tactical reconnaissance and attacks using improvised explosives. Mexican army counter-drone capabilities have been deployed around critical infrastructure and some VIP special events.

2. *Air Mobility: limited strategic reach, sufficient tactical resources*

Logistical capabilities to project power or even deploy forces on humanitarian relief operations are severely limited by a lack of long-range aviation resources. The FAM operates three ageing but upgraded C-130 Hercules and four newer Boeing 737 commercial airliners with a relatively long range. Lack of investment in its air mobility fleet has begun to show, especially as COVID-19 response requirements have meant FAM and Navy aviation assets have been pressed to provide logistics support. The relatively modern tactical transport aircraft (C-27J and C295M) and medium-size helicopter (UH-60M, EC725) are usually well-maintained fleets, which has meant that –for now– the inventory holds and there are enough available aircraft to support local air transport requirements. However, there are worrying concerns that lack of appropriate maintenance, particularly from the manufacturers, will hinder their long-term serviceability or accelerate their out of service dates.

3. *Airborne ISR: Modern yet insufficient*

Both the FAM and naval aviation boast relatively modern and well-maintained fleets of maritime patrol and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. The FAM's capabilities reside mainly on a fleet of relatively modern airborne platforms: a single EMB-145AEW&C, two EMB-145PM, and eight King Air 350ER plus MALE and tactical UAVs. The FAM does need to upgrade the existing fleet of EMB-145 platforms. It should concentrate on the Erieye AEW radar, where a sensor upgrades would help it expand its coverage from the current 200 kilometers to 450 kilometers and the number of targets to be tracked from 300 to 500. The Navy boasts a less adequate number of aircraft as procurement of a second batch of the longer-range maritime patrol aircraft, such as the Persuader, has not taken place. Both services deploy indigenous tactical UAVs and there are ongoing R&D programs to augment their numbers and enhance their capabilities.

4. *Subsurface Defense capability: Modern but very limited*

Only the new ARM Benito Juarez frigate has an anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability. Project SIVISO was an internal R&D project that equipped an OPV with a variable-depth podded sonar system that could provide a force multiplier adding submarine detection capabilities to the Navy's relatively large fleet of ocean patrol vessels (OPVs).

5. *Surface Warfare capability: Modern but very limited*

Again, the full measure of surface warfare capabilities is pressed on the ARM Benito Juarez, which is the only missile-armed ship in Mexico. The rest of the surface fleet is armed for Coast Guard patrol duties.

6. *Amphibious Deployment capability: Obsolete and sufficient*

Possessing the ability to deploy troops and cargo alongside Mexico's coasts and potentially on foreign expeditions to supply and resupply peacekeeping operations, the Mexican Navy deploys a pair of relatively old (1960's vintage) LSTs and multipurpose logistics ships.

7. *Armored Forces: Obsolete and insufficient*

The Mexican Armed Forces possess a relatively small number (compared to other motorized or mechanized forces) of armored fighting vehicles and these are mostly obsolete. Given the nature of their roles and missions, the Army and Navy have traditionally been issued soft-skinned wheeled armored vehicles. Relatively new are the 4x4 SandCat and its local development, the DN-XI, which provide its crews with a moderate amount of protection, mostly from small arms fire. With some cartels employing increasingly sophisticated firepower – including anti-materiel weapons as well as a limited number of landmines[62]– increasing armored protection should be a necessity.

8. *Artillery: Obsolete and insufficient*

The Army's artillery corps is composed of nine regiments equipped with significantly outdated light field howitzers and mobile recoilless rifles. The Mexican Army and Navy lack modern direct and indirect fires.

9. *Cyber: Nascent but delayed*

There is a need for enhanced collaboration between SEDENA and SEMAR's cyber units to develop a joint cyber operation. Most of the cyber defense and cyber security activities at SEDENA's Cyber Operations Center (COC) are centered around participation in training courses, seminars, and conferences, the majority of which were sponsored by OAS organizations including the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB),the IADB Foundation, and the CICTE. Cooperation with the U.S., specifically U.S. NORTHCOM has by far the largest part of the

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[62] Drones y escudos humanos en guerra de México contra el narco, LA Times, 25 November 2021

lion's share followed by cooperation with Colombia, Spain, and Peru. The COC was meant to have been in full operation as far back as 2018 but did not receive the required funding.

In May 2021, the Navy's UNICIBER published the 2021-2024 Institutional Cyberspace Strategy, which dictates the need to create and gradually build up a Cyber Naval Task Force. SEMAR trained 232 personnel cyber operations during 2020-2021 and implemented Program Calipso to strengthen communication security for the Naval Intelligence Unit and the CC2 of the Navy's General Staff.

10. Combat experience: Adequate

Mexico maintains a relatively token presence in peacekeeping operations since 2015, deploying scores of officers as observers on United Nations missions in Mali (MINUSMA), Western Sahara (MINURSO), Colombia (MVNUC), and Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Therefore, out of area deployment experience is limited. However, a large proportion of military personnel –including most of the Army and Navy's Special forces– have been mobilized over the past 15 years to undertake counter-cartel operations, which have been –in some cases– similar to rural and urban warfare environments known locally as high-impact operations.

State of U.S.-Mexico military relations

Military cooperation between Mexico and the United States has grown and strengthened so much in the last decade that it was difficult to imagine a setback. The bond between both militaries was so strong that it remained relatively intact in the face of then-President Trump's ignorant and racist insults, the election of a left-wing populist in Mexico, and the potential for disruption caused by the arrest of General Cienfuegos.

During his administration, Trump managed to intimidate AMLO, trapping him in what can only be explained as some sort of Stockholm syndrome. AMLO tried to pass off fear as respect but succumbed to unilateral demands on migration and trade, deploying the armed forces to conduct border security and migration control operations for the first time in their modern existence.

Starting from the understanding that military cooperation, although different from cooperation in security and justice issues, these –like everything else in this complex relationship– are closely related. It is worthwhile, therefore, to draw a table that allows to monitor the different levels in the "scale" of cooperation:[63]

- **Acquisition of military equipment:** The United States only sells equipment to its allies and partners, so sales require congressional approval. Between 2012-2018, Mexico was a transcendental client, buying more than USD 3 billion worth of equipment, including Black Hawk helicopters, Harpoon missiles, T-6 Texan aircraft, and Humvees. Having modern and compatible equipment makes it easier for the Mexican Armed Forces to interact better and even allows them to create educational, commercial, and industrial

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[63] [Redimensionando la cooperación militar Mex-EU](#), El Heraldo de Mexico, 24 November 2020

links with their peers in the U.S. This dimension has been underestimated by the austerity measures of the current administration

- **Training**: the purchase of common equipment leads to joint training schemes that strengthen understanding between forces, transferring knowledge and trust. This dimension of cooperation continues, albeit in a more limited fashion.

- **Military education:** Beyond training, education goes deeper as it includes opening military academic institutions to share doctrine, perspectives, fostering trust and empathy. This remains to this day.

- **Military diplomacy:** physical presence, sometimes symbolic, in bi- or multilateral organizations is necessary. During the Peña Nieto administration, the presence of Mexican military personnel in institutions such as the Inter-American Defense Board or the Inter-American Defense College increased considerably. This remains to this day.

- **Regional and Border Commander Conferences / General Staff Boards:** regular meetings that go beyond the High Command to establish trust at the regional and border levels. These remain in place.

- **Liaison Officers**: consists of establishing liaison offices within foreign facilities to facilitate the exchange of information and denotes a need for constant and close contact. These remain in place.

- **Exchange of information:** this is one of the ultimate goals of cooperation and requires a lot of trust. It is fragile, takes years to establish and is lost in a second. It must be a priority for both countries to maintain flow and quality. This remains in place but was temporarily negatively impacted by the AMLO administration's initial position on cooperation with foreign partners.

- **Joint exercises:** participating in binational or multinational training is a milestone in the relationship since training together enables fighting together.

- **Coincidental or joint operations**: this is moving from training to operation and requires advanced trust measures to carry out actions either in coordination or jointly.

- **Joint expeditions:** this is the highest level of cooperation between the two countries and notably occurred during World War II, when the 201 Squadron of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force traveled to the Pacific and fought alongside U.S. forces. Today there are other types of "expeditions" –humanitarian and peacekeeping operations– in which Mexico can participate.

In a nutshell: the binational military cooperation holds despite political rollercoasters.

About the Author

Iñigo Guevara is the managing director of Janes Strategic Services where he is responsible for the growth and expansion of its global aerospace and defense consulting practice and adjunct professor at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

He is a subject matter expert in Latin American armed forces, focusing specifically on the Mexican military including arms trade trends, defense industry developments, and procurement policies. In addition to his work for Janes, he has been widely published and quoted in various mainstream media and academic journals and is repeatedly called on as speaker in U.S. and Mexican forums, including both Houses of Representatives.

He is the author of Mexico's National Guard: When police are not enough (Wilson Center 2020), More than Neighbors: New Developments in the Institutional Strengthening of Mexico's Armed Forces in the Context of U.S.-Mexican Military Cooperation (Wilson Center 2018), A Bond Worth Strengthening: Understanding the Mexican Military and U.S.-Mexican Military Cooperation (Wilson Center 2016), Sharp Around the Edges: A comparative Analysis of transnational criminal networks on the Southern Borders of NAFTA and the EU (Scientific Vortex/Open Society 2014), Adapting, Transforming and Modernizing Under Fire: The Mexican Military 2006-2011 The Letort Papers, published by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College (2011), and Latin American Fighters, a reference book of jet fighters in service with Latin American air arms (2009).

Before joining Janes, from 2010 to 2015, Inigo was a Senior Analyst for Defense and Security at CENTRA Technology, a DC-based company serving a broad range of U.S. and international clients with critical defense, intelligence, and security missions. Iñigo served as Director of Analysis in the Office of the National Security Council, Office of the President of Mexico, from 2008 to 2010, where he advised the Mexican government on infrastructure, technology, and equipment options available in the international market. Prior to this, since 2004 Iñigo served at the state-level law enforcement agency as chief of statistical analysis in Queretaro.

He is requested constantly to provide U.S. and Mexican government agencies in the defense academic and intelligence communities with sector specific expertise, including recent lectures at the U.S. Air Force Air War College, U.S. Navy Naval Post Graduate School and the Dwight Eisenhower School for national Security and Resource Strategy, U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute and the National Defense University's William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies (CHDS-NDU).

Iñigo has a MA in international security from Georgetown University's Security Studies Program; he is a graduate of the Strategy and Defense Policy course from the CHDS-NDU in Washington DC, and has BA in international business from the Tec de Monterrey (ITESM), Campus Queretaro.