



Testimony

U.S. House of Representatives Task Force to Combat Mexican Drug Cartels

Testimony from Joshua S. Treviño, Chief of Intelligence and Research at the Texas Public Policy Foundation

I. Introduction and background.

Thank you to the Task Force, and especially to Chairman Crenshaw, for this opportunity to speak. My name is Joshua Treviño, and I am the Chief of Intelligence and Research at the Texas Public Policy Foundation in Austin, Texas. In my role at the Foundation I have spent much of the past decade researching events in Mexico, which are of obvious interest to a Texas-based policy institute. In this role, I have been privileged to work alongside many outstanding scholars and conservatives at sister institutions in both the U.S. and Mexico, most notably those in the U.S.-Mexico Conservative Policy Coalition, including the Heritage Foundation, the Center for Renewing America, Patria Unida, and more. I am also a proud native of south Texas, with roots extending back to the Spanish colonization of the Rio Grande in the 1750s.

I will give you the bottom line up front, in three parts:

- **First**, the Mexican state is not a friend to the United States.
- **Second**, the Mexican state and the Mexican cartels exist in conscious synthesis.
- **Third**, as the relationship with Mexico no longer possesses a base of common interest, it must proceed from a base of transactionalism *backed by American hard power*.

These are not easy conclusions to reach. They are not easy because, like every Texan — and, I think, like nearly every American — my preferred approach toward Mexico has always been a position of charity and goodwill. That approach remains intact where the ordinary people of Mexico are concerned. My own modern-era roots in towns and settlements across Tamaulipas and Nuevo León — places like Mier, Agualeguas, and Nuevo Laredo — remind me that the goodness and industry of the ordinary Mexican remain signal and enduring virtues of that longsuffering nation.

Those same places, however, are now bywords for violence, murder, corruption, and — let us be forthright — war. That war now extends its reach into Texas, and much beyond. That isn't because Mexicans abruptly lost their virtue: it is because their governance, in the Mexican state at large, lost its own. Mexican civics was never a metonym for good stewardship and good government, but neither was it always what it is today: a signifier of blood, suffering, criminality, and exploitation that rivals the very worst war zones, and the very worst atrocities, on the planet.

Let me give you one other item up front: the four policy approaches that we, at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, believe ought to be applied *vis à vis* Mexico:

- **First**, trade and security must be directly linked. Mexico ought not enjoy the benefits of trade while failing to deliver security along its own northern frontier.

- **Second**, Mexican elites and officeholders must be held to account. The Section 353 List of Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador — the so-called Engel List — must be expanded to include Mexican nationals as well.
- **Third**, Mexican cartels must be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.
- **Fourth**, the Mexican state must understand clearly that the United States Armed Forces may be brought to bear if it continues to fail — deliberately or not — to exercise full sovereignty over its own territory. Those same U.S. Armed Forces may also be brought to bear if the Mexican state continues to ally itself with its own criminal cartels.

To repeat: all this is transactionalism backed by American hard power, and it is the only way forward given the nature of the Mexican state now.

II. The Mexican state's turn against the United States.

This past weekend, Mexico celebrated the 213th anniversary of its declaration of independence. The occasion was marked by a military parade in the Zócalo, Mexico City's historic main plaza, where the Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador personally saluted the forces in review. The majority on parade were of course Mexican armed forces, but there were contingents of foreign military, invited by the President, who also participated. Several were ordinary and to-be-expected contingents from other Latin-American nations. But two stood out: a unit of Russian infantrymen from the famed 154th Preobrazhensky Regiment, and a unit of ceremonial guards from the Chinese Communist People's Liberation Army. Both the Russian and Chinese contingents marched through the Zócalo, saluted as they passed by the President of Mexico — who had, after all, specifically invited them.

It seems utterly extraordinary that Mexico, a nation whose economic life is almost wholly dependent upon the United States, and which until very recently professed friendship with the United States as near-reflexive dogma, would invite and showcase armed forces from America's two great-power rivals. It is a spectacle to be expected in Havana, Caracas, or Managua. When we see it in Mexico City, we ought to take notice — and take it seriously. The moment illuminates two phenomena that exist hand in hand: first, that the Mexican state has moved toward a position of antagonism versus the United States; and second, that the Mexican state neither respects nor fears the United States any longer.

The present *state* — not *popular* — antagonism toward the United States has its roots in the modern cartel war. You will see various intellectuals and historians assert that the roots run much deeper, to a variety of real and alleged wrongs done Mexico by the United States in centuries past. This is partially true. (Let it however be entered into the record here that among those alleged injustices, the Texas Revolution of 1835-1836 was wholly justified, and Mexico had the opportunity to avoid the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-1848 by simply respecting the Treaties of Velasco.) However, the reality is that Mexican popular nationalism has not been meaningfully anti-American for nearly a century now: too many Mexicans live in the United States, and too many Americans live in Mexico, for a deep hostility among peoples to flourish. For several generations, the Mexican state regarded its security priorities as essentially synonymous with an American partnership. A short list of examples will suffice:

- Mexico fought as an ally of the United States in the Second World War, dispatching in 1944 the valorous Escuadrón 201 to the Pacific Theater.
- Mexico aligned its strategic fortunes with the United States with the implementation of NAFTA (later USMCA) in 1994.
- The Mexican army delivered much-needed humanitarian aid to Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.
- The Mexican state sought American support and engagement versus its own criminal cartels in the Mérida Initiative of 2007.

This era of fruitful cooperation and mutual goodwill is *over*.

The post-2006 cartel violence in Mexico has brought about a tremendous change in the formerly pro-American and pro-cooperation attitude of Mexican officialdom. I want to be very clear on the nature of that change. What began in that year as an approach of militarized confrontation with the cartels under the pro-American Mexican presidency of Felipe Calderón — which included the aforementioned U.S. security partnership — has, seventeen years later, transformed into a full-on Mexican-state partnership with the very cartels it used to fight. I wish to be direct: in the fight of state versus cartels, *the cartels won*. We now must understand them, state and cartel alike, as two facets of the same problem.

This cartel strategic victory happened in three broad phases, which roughly concur with the past three Mexican presidencies:

- **First**, there was the failure of the Calderón administration to defeat the cartels. What began in 2006 as a wholesale effort to suppress them was significantly amended by 2012 into merely an effort to attack certain targeted cartels, on the theory that elimination of the worst — however defined — was all the state could achieve. The Calderón era has since been revealed as one in which several of the top-tier men in government were themselves in cartel pay. Most notable is the case of Genaro García Luna, the rough equivalent of an FBI Director, presently in an American prison for his own role as a recipient of cartel bribes ([Feuer, 2019b, para. 10](#)).
- **Second**, the 2012-2018 administration of Enrique Peña Nieto saw a pivot away from a security partnership with the Americans. Early in his presidency, Peña Nieto curtailed American intelligence gathering within Mexico, and effectively ended American vetting of senior Mexican personnel ([Seelke & Finklea, 2017](#)). Violence and cartel activity significantly worsened in this *sexenio* (the six-year single term of a Mexican president), and cartel capture of the state came to the fore. Incidents like the 2014 Ayotzinapa massacre, in which police and army personnel acting at cartel behest slaughtered forty-three college students ([Kryt, 2021](#)), illuminated the extent to which the Mexican general population was increasingly at the mercy of an emerging state-cartel synthesis.
- **Third** and finally, the 2018-present administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (otherwise known as AMLO) has seen the Mexican state at the highest levels — including the president himself — go over into public alliance with Mexican criminal cartels, *against the United States*.

III. The AMLO / MORENA era.

This trajectory of the U.S.-Mexico security relationship across the past seventeen years — from alliance, to arm's-length engagement, to antagonism — must be understood if we are to make sound policy on Mexican cartels. The AMLO regime's record in this vein since 2018 deserves elaboration at length. A handful of items will illuminate the whole:

The Sinaloa Cartel is widely known to have acted as enforcers for the ruling MORENA coalition — AMLO's own — in the Sinaloa state elections in 2021. Those same elections were the deadliest in over a century for political candidates in Mexico, thanks largely to criminal cartels' campaign of assassination ([Beith, 2011](#)). AMLO later said that the cartels in the election “behaved better than white-collar criminals,” and characterized media reports of cartel killings of Mexican candidates as sensationalism meant to discredit him.

- **At a speech in Veracruz in May 2023**, AMLO stated that Mexico would not accept any U.S. intervention against, nor confrontation with, organized crime or drug traffickers in Mexico. ([O'Boyle, 2023](#))
- **AMLO in April 2023** lashed out against the U.S. for a reported investigation into the Sinaloa Cartel — which included U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration infiltration of that cartel — calling it “abusive, arrogant interference that should not be accepted under any circumstances.” ([“AMLO criticizes DEA,” 2023](#)).
- **AMLO this past summer** rhetorically blasted the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for publicly estimating the size and reach of the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation Cartels. He disputed the contention that cartels have world-wide reach, asserting that the U.S. government lacked “good information” and “has a lot of problems.” ([“Mexican president disputes, 2023](#)).

- “**AMLO in May 2023** boasted that drug cartels respect the teams promoting his government’s social programs, revealing that those teams have permission to pass through cartel checkpoints. ([Conferencia de prensa matutina, 2023](#))
- **AMLO in May 2023** welcomed a proposal to form a “social pact” with criminal cartels. ([Jilani & Lambert, 2023](#)).
- **AMLO in August 2023** mocked journalists asking questions about a shocking tape, produced by a cartel in Jalisco, showing five young men — friends from school — forced to kill one another for cartel propaganda purposes. ([Velázquez, 2023](#))
- **AMLO in March 2020** made a pilgrimage to meet with and pay respects to the mother of infamous drug lord “El Chapo.” ([Linthicum, 2020](#)).
- **AMLO in December 2020** mounted a full-court press to compel the United States to return General Salvador Cienfuegos, arrested in the United States on charges of cartel leadership as “El Padrino.” That same month, his ruling coalition passed legislation effectively ending the last vestiges of independent American intelligence gathering against cartels in Mexico. ([Lopez, 2021](#)).

What we see, consistently, from AMLO and the MORENA regime is a pattern of deference toward, defense of, and positive cooperation with Mexico’s criminal-cartel infrastructure. We also see consistent hostility toward the United States and its interest — which was not so long ago a *shared* interest — in combating Mexican criminal cartels.

IV. American policy and realism.

This is not, to be clear, a relationship amenable to normal cooperation, nor is it the relationship that made possible the binational collaboration and years of amity resulting in NAFTA, USMCA, and the Mérida Initiative. We are, instead, in a fundamentally new relationship with the Mexican state: one has to go back a full century, to the immediate aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, to visit an era characterized by comparable Mexican official antagonism toward the United States.

Unfortunately, the current policy of the Administration of President Joseph R. Biden appears to be predicated upon the belief that meaningful cooperation remains possible. This is a forgivable error: it is true that elements of cooperation remain, as shown by the apprehensions, across the past two years, of now-minor drug lords Rafa Caro Quintero and Ovidio Guzmán. But we must face the reality of the Mexican state *now* in understanding these items as transactional, rather than an expression of genuine common interest. The Mexican state is now turned decisively toward a synthesis with its own criminal cartels, and a concurrent hostility toward American action against those cartels, with all that implies. We get to the spectacle of Russian and Chinese military units marching through the Zócalo this past weekend precisely because the Mexican state abandoned the American partnership — to say nothing of alliance — some time ago. It began with the strategic victory of the cartels, and it progresses into areas that are increasingly threatening.

The Mexican elections of 2024 do not promise a meaningful change absent an electoral overthrow of the MORENA regime, helmed by AMLO, that is exceptionally unlikely. Although the primary opposition candidate, Xóchitl Gálvez, is unexpectedly charismatic, the reality is that MORENA has suppressed enough of Mexican civil society — with violent aid from its cartel partners — that a victory for its candidate, former Mexico City head of government Claudia Sheinbaum, is overwhelmingly probable. We may hope for, but we cannot rationally expect, a restoration of the relationship based upon the change of presidents.

We therefore face a situation in which the challenges to the United States that emanate from Mexico — from illegal migration, to fentanyl, to corruption, and beyond — all emanate *with the active cooperation of the Mexican state*, at nearly every level. We should note that this is *casus bellum*, as it exists: an extraordinary statement to be sure, but one also vindicated by events. We do not, however, advocate for war with Mexico. Instead, we recommend focusing upon the points of American leverage versus Mexico, including but not limited to:

- Mexican economic dependence upon trade with the United States.
- Mexican economic dependence upon remittances from the United States.

- Mexican military and intelligence inferiority to the United States.
- Mexican-elite preference for access to the United States.

These items deliver to the United States significant points of useful advantage, *if we choose to use them*. A nakedly transactional relationship — one defined by the Mexican state itself — is amenable to the measures recommended at the opening of this testimony:

- **First**, trade and security must be directly linked.
- **Second**, Mexican elites and officeholders must be held to account.
- **Third**, Mexican cartels must be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.
- **Fourth**, the Mexican state must understand clearly that the United States Armed Forces may be brought to bear if it continues to fail to exercise full sovereignty over its own territory.

Every American of goodwill and good sense desires a positive relationship with Mexico. But reality, not wishes, must form our policy. The reality is that the Mexican state now is an antagonist. In prudence and deliberation, we must respond.

I am happy to take any questions.

References

- AMLO criticizes DEA for unauthorized operations in Mexico. (2023, April 17). *Mexico News Daily*. <https://mexiconews-daily.com/news/amlo-criticizes-dea-for-unauthorized-operations-in-mexico/>
- Beith, M. (2011, November 29). A broken Mexico: allegations of collusion between the Sinaloa cartel and Mexican political parties. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22(5), 787–806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.620813>
- Feuer, A. (2019b, December 10). Architect of Mexico's war on cartels is accused of taking bribes from one. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/world/americas/genaro-garcia-luna-mexico-arrest.html>
- Jilani, Z., & Lambert, E. (2023, June 2). Mexican president open to peace deal with drug cartels. *News Nation*. <https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/immigration/border-coverage/cartels/mexican-president-open-to-peace-deal-with-drug-cartels/>
- Kryt, J. (2021, October 10). Chilling new text messages point to deadly collusion between police and organized crime in the infamous case of the missing Mexican students. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/we-finally-know-how-43-ayotzinapa-students-on-a-bus-vanished-into-thin-air?ref=scroll>
- Linthicum, K. (2020, March 30). Mexican president flouts coronavirus protocol to shake hands with mother of 'El Chapo'. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-30/mexican-president-flaunts-coronavirus-recomentations-to-greet-el-chapos-mother>
- Lopez, O. (2021, January 14). Mexico exonerates ex-defense chief who was freed by the U.S. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/15/world/americas/mexico-defense-minister-cienfuegos.html>
- Mexican president disputes DEA estimates of cartel strength (2023, July 28) Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexican-president-refutes-dea-estimates-cartel-strength-2023-07-28/>
- O'Boyle, B. (2023, March 9). Mexico president rejects U.S. lawmakers' calls for military intervention. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-president-rejects-us-lawmakers-calls-military-intervention-against-2023-03-09/>
- Seelke, C. R., & Finklea, K. (2017, June 29). *U.S.-Mexican security cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and beyond*. Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41349.pdf>
- Velázquez K. (2023, August 16). Oposición condena chistes de AMLO para evadir preguntas de los cinco desaparecidos en Lagos de Moreno *Vanguardia MX*. <https://vanguardia.com.mx/noticias/oposicion-condena-chistes-de-amlo-para-evadir-preguntas-de-los-cinco-desaparecidos-en-lagos-de-moreno-BJ8931065>
- Versión estenográfica de la conferencia de prensa matutina del presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2023, May 29) <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2023/05/29/version-estenografica-de-la-conferencia-de-prensa-matutina-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-970/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joshua S. Treviño is the chief of intelligence and research at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, in which role he explores pathways for future Foundation action and develops forecasts for Texas and the nation. Prior to his service as CIO, he was vice president of strategy at the Illinois Policy Institute in Chicago. Prior to that, he was vice president of communications at the Foundation for six years. His other experience includes an independent media consultancy, a consultancy at Booz Allen Hamilton, vice president of policy at the Pacific Research Institute in San Francisco, service as both a speechwriter and an international-health professional in the administration of George W. Bush, and a United States Army officer.

