

Armoring NAFTA: The Battleground for Mexico's Future

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In March 2005, the leaders of the three NAFTA countries, U.S. President George W. Bush, Mexican President Vicente Fox, and Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin met in Waco, Texas, and launched a regional defense-based initiative called the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP). The initiative, heralded as the next step in regional integration within the "NAFTA Plus" agenda, is described on its Web site (<http://www.spp.gov>) as "a White House-led initiative among the United States and the two nations it borders—Canada and Mexico—to increase security and to enhance prosperity among the three countries through greater cooperation." The official description of the SPP adds that it is "based on the principle that our prosperity is dependent on our security."¹

In April 2007, on the eve of the North American Trilateral Summit, Thomas Shannon, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs, described the SPP's purpose with remarkable candor: The SPP, he declared, "understands North America as a shared economic space," one that "we need to protect," not only on the border but "more broadly throughout North America" through improved "security cooperation." He added: "To a certain extent, we're armoring NAFTA."²

Mexicans and other Latin Americans have learned that adopting the U.S.-promoted neoliberal economic model—with its economic displacement and social cutbacks—comes with a necessary degree of force, but this was the first time that a U.S. official had stated outright that regional security was no longer focused on keeping the citizens of the United States, Canada, and Mexico safe from harm, but was now about protecting a regional economic model. Of course, Shannon didn't list political opposition as one of the threats to be countered; he simply argued that the new "economic space" needed to be protected against "the threat of terrorism and against a threat of natural disasters and environmental and ecological disasters." But the counter-terrorism/drug-war model elaborated in the SPP and embodied later in Plan Mexico (known officially as the Merida Initiative) encourages a crackdown on grassroots dissent to assure that no force, domestic or foreign, effectively questions the future of the system.

By extending NAFTA into regional security, Washington decided—and the Mexican government conceded—that top-down economic integration necessitates shared security goals and actions. Given the huge imbalance of economic and political power between Mexico and the United States, that meant that Mexico had to adopt the foreign policy objectives and the destabilizing, militaristic counter-terrorism agenda of the U.S. government. The Mexican government has received this new mandate with ambivalence, seeking, in the words of one official from the Foreign Ministry, to move the focus away from

security and toward development, while at the same time welcoming the military and police aid offered in the Merida Initiative.³

This “securitization” of the trilateral relationship under NAFTA has profound implications for Mexican civil society. By furthering Mexican President Felipe Calderón’s strategy of confrontation, it blocks avenues for development of civil society institutions, criminalizes opposition, justifies repression, and curtails civil liberties. At this critical juncture, Mexico’s shaky transition to democracy could regress to presidential authoritarianism, with explicit U.S. government support.

When NAFTA went into effect on January 1, 1994, then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari hailed it as Mexico’s entry into the first world. Although many trade barriers had already been eliminated, the agreement—a treaty under Mexican law—established Mexico’s full commitment to economic integration as defined by the Washington Consensus. NAFTA locked in the fundamentals of neoliberalism: an open market; an export-oriented economy; privileges for transnational corporations; withdrawal of the state from social programs to promote development; international labor competition and downward pressure on wages and conditions; and the commoditization of natural resources.

The agreement, hammered out behind closed doors and imposed on an uninformed society, led to the dismantling of many of the basic institutional relationships that had united Mexicans in the past. Even though a new generation of rulers from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ushered in the neoliberal model, notably presidents Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo, the neoliberal model attacked the PRI’s corporatist base. The corporatist social compact—administered by the PRI through its system of political patronage via national organizations of farmers, workers, and the popular urban sector—began to crumble as the abstract market replaced the state as the entity responsible for improving social welfare. Structural adjustment conditions by international finance institutions and the rules of NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO) reduced the state’s capacity to broker clientelist relationships with organized sectors of society, since it had fewer resources for special subsidy and support programs. Social benefits emanating from a paternal state began to disappear with the growing dominance of the international market.

The division of the economy into those who participated in this market and those who did not added structural exclusion to the age-old problem of poverty. Changes in laws preceding and following NAFTA, and the practical impact of the trade and investment agreement, eroded the ability of the poor to fight back by eliminating their social and territorial bases. Campesinos migrated off their land as much of it was privatized and as producer prices fell with the inflow of cheap agricultural imports. Workers were shunted into the atomized and insecure informal economy as small- and medium-size national businesses closed their doors.

In international relations, NAFTA ushered in political and economic dependency to a degree not seen since Spanish colonialism, with more than 85% of exports and the majority of imports oriented to the U.S. market. This form of dependent, neoliberal integration between a superpower and a developing country was bound to cause some conflicts and also inevitably dominate the political realm. The Mexican government, especially under the administrations of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), responded to this dependency by protecting “Americanized” interests, sacrificing Mexico’s historic doctrine of neutrality, and dropping issues that caused friction with the Bush government, most notably

support for Cuba and the regularization of migration to the United States—though it is worth noting that not even Fox could stomach the invasion of Iraq.

The NAFTA model exerted significant political pressure on Mexico in the international sphere to toe a U.S. line. But more devastating was what it did in the national sphere. The agreement presented constituted a grave threat to traditional concepts of national sovereignty and reweaving an already frayed social fabric. NAFTA dictated a sink-or-swim strategy of pushing Mexico into the world economy that led to the disintegration of many social-sector organizations. The few that refused to swim, or even get in the water, were forced to the fringes of political and economic life.

Rules against government intervention made it very difficult for the government to negotiate solutions to popular demands as it had in the past. Neoliberal policy makers' "market fixes all" ideology precluded attempts to help economic actors successfully negotiate the transition to a more competitive framework or to compensate the "losers" in the new economic wars. Migration was transformed from a temporary or cyclical escape valve to the motor of many local economies; families, along with entire communities and regional organizations, fractured.

When the Zapatista Army for National Liberation rose up on January 1, 1994, the rebels protested the social exclusion and marginalization of indigenous peoples and the poor, an exclusion that would later be exacerbated by the agreement. Social movements since then have drawn the lines of battle. There have been mobilizations against privatization, calls for national programs to recognize and support the contributions of "non-competitive" sectors, defense of indigenous rights and decision-making over ancestral territory, and demands for inclusive democracy. Although these movements for the most part lack a permanent and solid organizational structure and tend to coalesce on specific issues at specific moments, taken together they constitute a fundamental challenge to the NAFTA model and an alternative course for the nation.

No wonder, then, that NAFTA promoters saw the need to shield the agreement from potential attacks. As evidenced in Assistant Secretary Shannon's remark about "armoring NAFTA," the three North American governments have found it necessary to invent a mechanism to protect their "shared economic space": the Security and Prosperity Partnership. Although some SPP working groups have addressed natural disasters and health issues like bird flu, the "partnership" emphasis is on protecting property rather than people. Inexplicably, neither "security" nor "prosperity" is seen to include problems of malnutrition, infant mortality, or other human security issues critical to Mexico.

Aside from real doubts about their effectiveness, these programs also raise serious questions of national sovereignty and national priorities. There are simply few reasons to believe that U.S. security is synonymous with a strategic security plan for Mexico. In general, no one would deny that fighting international terrorism and organized crime requires mechanisms of global cooperation, intelligence sharing, and coordinated actions. But these mechanisms must be developed in the context of each country's national security agenda and defined by the confluence of particular priorities.

The SPP was born post-9/11 and reflects the priorities of the Bush counter-terrorism agenda. For Mexico, these priorities are expensive and politically threatening. Mexico has historically been reticent to allow U.S. agents to operate in its territory due to a history in which the

United States itself has posed the greatest threat to its national security. Given the lack of threats from international terrorism in the country, the war on terrorism is not a security priority.

But economic dependency and the military superiority of the United States have forced NAFTA's junior partners to adopt Washington's priorities. Measures designed to "push out the U.S. security perimeter" under the SPP have pressured Mexico to militarize its southern border and adopt repressive measures toward Central and South Americans presumably in transit to the United States, going against a history of relatively free transit, and increasing tensions with its southern neighbors. Another problem is the way the false conflation of undocumented immigration with homeland security in the United States has led to measures that have little or nothing to do with regional national security and have led to the deaths of thousands of Mexican migrants. Nonetheless, the Mexican government has implicitly accepted this conflation by accepting "border security measures" aimed at migrants in both the SPP and Plan Mexico.

In many ways, by taking on the U.S. security agenda Mexico puts itself at greater risk and violates historical precepts of international relations. The country has a policy of neutrality in international affairs that preempts its governments from becoming embroiled in conflicts that do not directly affect the nation. When the Mexican Congress dutifully presented a revised counter-terrorism law in Congress this year, an opposition congressman argued against the imposition of the vaguely defined category of "international terrorism," saying, "We don't want to be immersed in a cycle where the enemies of other nations are automatically put forth as our own enemies."[4](#)

The latest step forward in "integrating" regional security is Plan Mexico. This U.S. initiative, passed by Congress on June 26 and signed into law by Bush, allocates \$400 million to Mexico for 2008-09. The original plan foresees about \$1.4 billion over a three-year period to the Mexican military, police, and judicial systems for training and equipment.

A close review of the detailed proposal presented by the administration reveals that the basis for the new "Regional Security Cooperation Initiative" comprises three Bush policies that have utterly failed to meet their objectives in other settings.[5](#) These are (1) militarized border security that indiscriminately targets immigrants, drug traffickers, and terrorists; (2) unilateral, pre-emptive counter-terrorism measures; and (3) waging the "drug war." In Mexico, the first two objectives, which are widely viewed as counter to Mexican interests, have been downplayed and the initiative is billed exclusively as a counter-narcotics plan.

The irony is the United States' long history of failure in fighting its own drug war. It continues to be the largest market for illicit drugs in the world, and its burgeoning demand supports Mexico's ever more powerful drug cartels. While touted as a giant step forward in bilateral cooperation, the final bill contains no U.S. obligations or benchmarks to prevent illegal drug use, increase rehabilitation of addicts, stop the flow of contraband arms to Mexico, or prosecute money laundering.

The model of counter-narcotics work focused on the supply side through interdiction and enforcement measures was applied in Colombia beginning in 2000. Nearly seven years and \$6 billion after Plan Colombia began, the result is no appreciable decline in production of illegal drugs or in the flow to the U.S. market.[6](#)

Support for the use of the armed forces in the drug war within Mexican communities creates

a situation in which counter-narcotics programs extend into counter-insurgency efforts. The expansion of NAFTA into the security arena, first through the SPP and now through its offspring, Plan Mexico, indicates that the Calderón administration has chosen a path of authoritarianism and rule by force over one that might strengthen the country's democratic institutions. Instead of looking to overcome the polarization left in the wake of his questioned election, the president has set a course that relies on the armed forces for bolstering his presidency.

Three examples of the “collateral damage” to society under the drug-war model embodied in Plan Mexico suffice to demonstrate the risks at stake. First, there have been increased attacks on autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas, which have been documented by the International Civil Commission on Human Rights (CCIODH). The commission reports a rise in military incursions, arrests of community leaders using fabricated evidence, and physical abuse and torture of Zapatista militants. In an incident on June 4, more than 200 soldiers and police tried to enter the Zapatista regional government seat La Garrucha and then went into the villages of Hermenegildo Galeana and San Alejandro supposedly in search of illegal drugs. The pretense was both predictable and preposterous: Zapatista communities have a strict policy banning drugs and alcohol, and the armed forces did not produce any evidence of having found such substances. In addition to military activity, there has been in recent months a buildup of paramilitary activity against the Zapatista communities, related to attempts to take back land the Zapatistas had won in the period following the 1994 uprising. These attempts have been particularly intense in areas like ecotourism sites, water sources, and zones believed to contain important biodiversity resources, all of which are of interest to developers.⁷ An increase in militarization of Mexican society will very likely lead to an increase in the scope and activity of both the army and of paramilitary groups.

Second, there has been a countrywide increase of attacks on women by security forces. For decades, the relationship between war and violence against women has been documented and understood as the result of power built through force rather than social consensus. Rape and murder of women has been seen as both a symbol of conquest and the spoils that go to the victor. In the context of impunity in Mexico, where accusations of attacks on women by people with ties to power rarely make it inside a courtroom, the practice has been spreading since the war on drugs sent the army out into the streets.⁸ A particularly outrageous case is the rape and murder of an elderly indigenous woman in the Sierra Zongólica, proved by initial investigations and later covered up by the Calderón government and higher-up members of the security forces.⁹ There have also been numerous rapes of women by army agents in other parts of the country, including the western state of Michoacán and the northern border state of Coahuila.¹⁰ The lack of prosecution for the rape and abuse of women protesters in police custody following the conflict in San Salvador Atenco also demonstrates that Mexican women and their rights are suffering heavy casualties due to a spreading war mentality in Mexico.

A third example involves the murders of grassroots leaders in the state of Chihuahua. Shortly before the government's anti-drug Operation Chihuahua began, Armando Villareal, leader of the rural movement for fair electricity rates and against the privatization of fertilizer production, was assassinated.¹¹ When the operation began, four farmers, members of Villareal's organization Agrodinámica Nacional, were apprehended by officers of Mexico's Federal Agency of Investigation (AFI) and accused of “electricity theft” and later released thanks to pressure from the organization. Just days later, Cipriana Jurado Herrera, a

social activist and adviser to families of women killed in the border area, was violently detained and accused of “attacking general communication pathways” on the basis of a bridge protest in October 2005. Several other rural leaders have been picked up on the same charge and members of the social movement fear a general crackdown on social movement activists.

State representative and human rights activist Víctor Quintana calls this wave of criminalization “an attempt at threatening the leaders of three movements that have been at the forefront on a national level: the rural producers’ movement to get electricity at competitive prices and renegotiate NAFTA’s agricultural terms; the women’s movement against femicide; and the movement of indebted people against the banks and mortgage companies.”¹² Like the attacks on women, the repression in the context of an operation that has some 3,000 extra army and police members in the streets of northern cities sends a signal that dissidence will be harshly treated as delinquency.

Mexico’s U.S.-style anti-terrorism laws have already been invoked against members of social movements, since the definition of “terrorism” is sufficiently vague to lend itself to a broad range of activities.¹³ The war on drugs/counter-terrorism model embodied in Plan Mexico invariably extends into repression of political opposition in countries where it has been applied, blurring the lines between the war on drugs, the war against terrorism, and the war against the political opposition. A 2004 report documents the impact of U.S. increased military aid in Latin America and concludes that “too often in Latin America, when armies have focused on an internal enemy, the definition of enemies has included political opponents of the regime in power, even those working within the political system such as activists, independent journalists, labor organizers, or opposition political-party leaders.”¹⁴ Moreover, curtailing civil liberties weakens, rather than strengthens, both institutions and the public’s faith in legal channels to resolve differences.

On June 23, a group of Mexican intellectuals published a letter containing a laundry list of the country’s social woes.¹⁵ The list did not make for comfortable reading: “Drug-related violence with an exceedingly high cost in lives (not only those directly involved); the crisis of the national security apparatus; the destruction of the social fabric; the expansion of fear and panic in broad sectors of society; the unsustainable high cost of living, the disaster—universally recognized—in public and private education; the eagerness to reduce the electoral process to vote buying; an accentuated crisis in the judicial branch; officials’ support of ecological death (over-exploitation of water, destruction of forests, pollution) that ratifies the monstrosity of neoliberalism; impunity of the powers that be, who hold themselves up as the new ‘moral authority’; an intense campaign to privatize energy resources; officials whose continued presence in office constitutes a major challenge to legality (Juan Camilo Mouriño, Ulises Ruiz, Mario Marín); moral lynching campaigns against the opposition ...”¹⁶

The country’s weak democratic institutions have been shaken and discredited by their evasive or downright duplicitous responses to the electoral conflicts of 2006, to powerful politicians who openly defy the rule of law, and to the inequality of daily life generated under the neoliberal economic model. The justice system remains bound to the interests of a weak federal government that fears popular protest, and to state and local governments in many cases controlled by despots. Every day the newspapers report incidents and declarations that reflect a loss of faith in the system and the loss of credibility of the institutions charged with upholding and extending it.

Mexico is thus at a critical juncture. It can either take up the challenge to strengthen democratic institutions, or it can fall back into rule by force and authoritarianism. So far, the federal government's response has been to defend the neoliberal model that has played a major role in leading to the crisis and extend it into security issues in a closer alliance with the U.S. government and the Bush administration's counter-terrorism strategy. Particularly in a nation that is deeply divided both politically and economically, the defense of neoliberalism not only further divides society, but threatens the legitimacy of the state.

In Chiapas, a state rich in coveted natural resources, the link between the breakdown of the social compact and the pressures of the neoliberal model are particularly stark. The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center reports: "As the neoliberal economic project advances, which puts the interest of business above those of the majority of the population and promotes economic projects that seek to appropriate natural resources, social goods, and communal spaces for the private sector, the political costs to the State will increasingly undermine its legitimacy."¹⁷

The report also mentions the traditional mechanisms for building social consensus that have broken down and the way in which they are being supplanted by force: "The tendency to criminalize and repress protest and civil acts derives from the slight-to-zero effectiveness of the mechanisms of control conventionally employed by the State, specifically those operated through ideological structures such as the media, schools, the church, culture, and the exercise of politics. When these mechanisms ceased to be effective to control the widespread discontent that has been expressed in mass demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, the State has frequently and disproportionately employed the intervention of security forces (army and police) to exercise social control."

The imposition of the Bush national security-free trade paradigm has led to a further breakdown of institutional channels for pulling the divided nation together or deepening a transition to democracy. There is no clearer example of this disastrous policy than the recent Merida Initiative.

The extension of NAFTA into SPP and Plan Mexico enforces a strategy of the current Mexican government to deal with organized crime as a violent crusade, and to handle opposition through force. The human rights violations related to this strategy stem from the mentality of confrontation, the lack of training of security forces in proper human rights, and the impunity of knowing they can get away with just about anything as long as the victim is outside the inner circles of power. In addition to bolstering a weak presidency and suppressing dissent, the regional security strategy outlined in these alliances pursues the goal of assuring access to natural resources and "armoring NAFTA"—locking in the neoliberal economic model that has contributed to a dangerous disintegration of the social compact in Mexico. It is a strategy meant to confront head-on the widespread demands for a new social order based on equity and inclusion.

End Notes

1. See the official Web site, www.spp.gov/myths_vs_facts.asp.
2. Thomas Shannon, speech to the Council on the Americas, April 3, 2008.
3. Alejandro Estivill, conference on SPP, Universidad de las Américas (Cholula), June 12, 2008.

4. "Aprueban diputados que se penalice el delito de terrorismo ...," *La Jornada*, February 21, 2007.
5. See "A Primer on Plan Mexico," available at <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5204>.
6. International Crisis Group, "Latin American Drugs: Losing the Fight," March 14, 2008, available at www.crisisgroup.org.
7. See the recent report by the International Civil Commission on Human Rights, available at www.cciodh.pangea.org.
8. See Lourdes Godínez Leal, "Combating Impunity and Femicide in Ciudad Juárez," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 41, no. 3 (May/June 2008): 31-33.
9. See Erich Moncada, "Mexico's Military and the Murder at Zongolica (II)," *Narco News*, April 10, 2007, available at www.narconews.com.
10. Associated Press, "Report: Mexican Army Used Rape, Torture in Drug War," September 21, 2007, available at www.usatoday.com.
11. Víctor Quintana, "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Repression," CIP Americas Program, May 8, 2008, available at <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5218>.
12. Ibid.
13. José Galán and Laura Poy Solano, "Abierta violación al espíritu constitucional: expertos," *La Jornada*, April 28, 2007. See also testimonies on the CCIODH video at www.cciodh.pangea.org.
14. Latin American Working Group, the Center for International Policy, and the Washington Office on Latin America, "Blurring the Lines: Trends in U.S. Military Programs in Latin America," September 2004, available at www.ciponline.org.
15. "La Consulta, un logro del movimiento ciudadano," *La Jornada*, June 23, 2008.
16. Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mouriño has been questioned for signing contracts with his family's oil company while serving in public office; Ulises Ruiz, governor of Oaxaca state, stands accused of authoritarianism and violent repression of the social movement; Mario Marín, governor of Puebla, was recorded discussing the apprehension and harassment of human rights defender Lydia Cacho with a Puebla industrialist allegedly connected to the pedophile rings Cacho wrote about.
17. Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, "Sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en Chiapas, Balance Anual 2007," available at www.frayba.org (translation by the author).

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