

ORION FORUM

A Neighbor in Focus: Mexico's Role in Emerging U.S. Defense & Homeland Security Strategies

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Introduction

This project evaluates how the 2025 National Security Strategy positions Mexico within U.S. homeland defense and regional security, measuring the alignment between strategic objectives, NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM posture statements, and operational resourcing. We evaluate these positions to understand Mexico's place in the current Trump administration's hemispheric strategies. Mexico's role in U.S. strategic and defense policy has undergone a structural shift from partner to operating environment. Since the George W. Bush administration, U.S. security doctrine has oscillated in how it conceptualizes Mexico, as reflected across successive [National Security Strategies \(NSS\)](#), National Defense Strategies (NDS), and related guidance documents. While this drift is visible as early as 2002, the contrast between the Biden administration and the second Trump administration is especially stark.

This shift is not merely rhetorical. Funding patterns—from the FY25 full-year continuing resolution to [FY26 budget requests](#)--reinforce a broader reorientation of U.S. security priorities away from democracy promotion and alliance-building in the Western Hemisphere and toward preparation for conflict closer to home. Caught in this reconfiguration is Mexico, increasingly presumed to cooperate with U.S. interests and treated less as a sovereign actor with its own policies and strategic objectives than as an object of U.S. security operations.

A comparative review of NSS and NDS documents from the Bush administration through the second Trump administration reveals a consistent drift in how Mexico is conceptualized within U.S. security doctrine. Across administrations, Mexico's strategic salience fluctuates sharply

but never stabilizes at the level of core national security concern. Instead, responsibility for Mexico-linked challenges migrates away from defense strategy and toward domestic enforcement institutions. Migration and transnational crime are persistently securitized, yet rarely integrated into broader defense planning or alliance structures.

When examined longitudinally, the pattern is unmistakable. [The Bush and Obama](#) eras framed Mexico primarily through governance, partnership, and institutional cooperation; the Trump administrations' strategies recast Mexico as a vector of illicit flows, mass migration, and hemispheric instability; and the Biden administration briefly returned to a governance-centric, non-securitized framing. Taken together, these shifts mark a structural redefinition of Mexico's strategic identity in U.S. doctrine--from partner to absent actor, operational problem to conditional regional stabilizer, and ultimately to a security threat vector. This evolution reflects not rhetorical variation, but a deeper reorder of Mexico's place in U.S. national security thinking, emphasizing risk management and control over cooperation and capacity-building.

These doctrinal shifts do not remain confined to strategy documents. They are now being operationalized through the FY25 continuing resolution and the FY26 budget requests, which together reallocate institutional power across DHS, DoD, DOJ, and State in ways that materially reshape how the United States engages with Mexico. The budget architecture reveals where the U.S. government expects Mexico-linked challenges to be managed: not through diplomacy, institution-building, or bilateral governance mechanisms, but through enforcement-dominant, homeland-defense, and military-adjacent authorities. In this sense, the FY26 budget is not simply a resource plan, it is the institutional expression of the strategic drift identified in the NSS and NDS comparison.

Policy & Analytical Framework

Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Requests

Across the [FY26 budget requests](#) for DHS, DoD, and DOJ, the federal government is constructing a durable, institutionalized enforcement architecture whose scale exceeds anything seen in the past two decades. DHS alone receives a 64.9% increase over FY25 enacted levels, driven by \$43.8 billion in reconciliation authority layered atop its \$115.6 billion

request. The DoD receives a \$113.3 billion topline increase, including \$5 billion in new mandatory border-security funding. The DOJ, despite a 7.6% cut, concentrates over \$9 billion on immigration enforcement, transnational criminal organization prosecutions, and Southwest border operations. Together, DHS, DoD, and DOJ form an enforcement triad that now dominates the federal government's approach to Mexico-linked challenges.

In contrast, State and international programs fall by 83.7%, with International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) reduced by \$1.1 billion. Collectively, these shifts reflect not a temporary surge but a structural redistribution of authority, in which enforcement institutions are resourced to act as the primary managers of Mexico-linked challenges while diplomacy, governance, and binational coordination are systematically defunded or effectively sidelined.

President's Budget. While largely declaratory, [the President's Budget](#) (PB) provides clear insight into the administration's strategic priorities and institutional intent. The FY26 PB makes the reorientation toward domestic enforcement explicit. It cuts \$1.1 billion from INCLE, \$491 million from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and \$650 million from DHS's Shelter and Services Program, while increasing DHS resources by \$43.8 billion and DoD funding by \$113.3 billion.

These adjustments privilege enforcement and defense-adjacent authorities over diplomatic, governance, and international law-enforcement tools, while consolidating policy execution within a narrow set of domestic institutions. The PB thus signals an effort to bring Mexico-linked security challenges "in-house," favoring unilateral implementation and vertical integration over interagency coordination and bilateral engagement.

Department of Homeland Security. DHS emerges as the institutional center of gravity in Mexico-linked security policy. The [FY26 budget](#) transforms the Department from a regulatory and administrative agency into the federal government's primary enforcement and border-security institution. Its request includes \$63.6 billion in discretionary funding and \$43.8 billion in reconciliation authority, producing a nearly 65% increase over FY25. ICE receives \$501 million for expanded detention capacity and \$205 million for transportation and removals, explicitly tied to a mass removal campaign.

At the same time, USCIS loses \$169.9 million, eliminating integration grants and narrowing its mission to enforcement-adjacent functions. CBP's discretionary funding declines even as it receives targeted investments in surveillance towers and AI-enabled inspection systems. The Coast Guard gains \$1 billion for maritime interdiction. Because reconciliation authority is multiyear and largely insulated from annual appropriations oversight, it effectively grants DHS strategic discretion over Mexico-linked enforcement operations well beyond a single budget cycle. Together, these allocations produce a DHS that operates less as a civilian service agency and more as a domestic combatant command, with authorities and resources that far exceed those of the diplomatic and governance institutions traditionally responsible for managing U.S.-Mexico relations.

Department of Defense. [The FY26 Department of Defense budget](#) embeds border security within the core of U.S. deterrence architecture, elevating Mexico-linked challenges to a level traditionally reserved for strategic threats such as missile defense, nuclear modernization, and cyber operations. The DoD receives a \$113.3 billion topline increase and \$5 billion in mandatory Homeland Border Security funding, including \$2 billion for border operations and \$3 billion for detention-related activities at continental U.S. (CONUS) sites and Guantanamo Bay.

The DoD also allocates \$904.3 million for counter-drug and interdiction activities, while U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) continues to maintain a Mexico-focused Office of Defense Coordination. This marks the first time in modern U.S. defense planning that border security has been elevated to a core deterrence mission, placing Mexico-linked challenges within the same conceptual space as strategic attack and great-power competition. These investments transform the DoD from a contingency support actor into an enduring operational presence in border and migration enforcement, institutionalizing military involvement in what has historically been treated as a civilian and diplomatic policy space.

Department of Justice. [The Department of Justice's FY26 budget](#) positions the Department as a domestic enforcement throughput institution rather than a partner in binational justice or rule-of-law cooperation. The DOJ's request totals \$41.8 billion, including \$8.3 billion in mandatory funding, while its discretionary budget declines by \$2.5 billion. Despite this reduction, the DOJ allocates substantial resources to enforcement priorities: \$11 billion for

violent crime and gangs, \$10 billion for drug trafficking and opioid enforcement, \$3.2 billion for transnational criminal organization prosecutions, \$3.6 billion for immigration enforcement, and \$2.3 billion for Southwest border operations.

Federal prisoner detention increases to \$2.5 billion, reflecting rising average daily populations and reinforcing the DOJ's role as a mass enforcement executor. The absence of commensurate investment in rights-protective or binational justice mechanisms indicates an institutional acceptance of heightened rights-risk as a tradeoff for enforcement throughput. By contrast, international cooperation functions receive no meaningful expansion, further entrenching a justice posture oriented toward unilateral enforcement rather than cross-border coordination.

Department of State. [The FY26 budget](#) structurally sidelines the Department of State, leaving it with limited capacity to manage the diplomatic friction generated by the expanded enforcement posture of DHS and DoD. State and international programs experience the largest reduction across the federal budget, declining by 83.7%, while foreign assistance accounts are consolidated under a framework emphasizing near-term "results" and alignment with presidential priorities.

Notably, no new funding is allocated for bilateral governance mechanisms, migration management initiatives, or institutional cooperation with Mexico. The absence of an updated [Integrated Country Strategy](#) (ICS)--the primary tool for aligning U.S. and partner priorities--leaves no institutional mechanism for reconciling U.S. enforcement imperatives with Mexico's sovereignty concerns. This budgetary posture signals a prioritization of enforcement outcomes and removals over diplomacy, governance, and sustained bilateral engagement.

What This Means for Mexico

The institutional and budgetary reconfiguration outlined above carries significant implications for Mexico as both a security partner and a sovereign actor. As U.S. strategy and resourcing increasingly consolidate Mexico-linked challenges within enforcement and defense institutions, the bilateral relationship is reshaped in ways that privilege unilateral action over negotiated cooperation. The primary U.S. interlocutors on migration, narcotics, and border management are no longer diplomatic or governance-oriented agencies, but domestic enforcement bodies

whose mandates, incentives, and authorities are designed for control rather than coordination.

This shift narrows Mexico's ability to engage the United States through traditional diplomatic channels. Issues that were previously mediated through bilateral mechanisms, joint working groups, or development-oriented frameworks are increasingly addressed through operational enforcement decisions made within DHS, DoD, and DOJ. As a result, Mexico's policy preferences, domestic constraints, and sovereignty considerations become secondary to U.S. enforcement imperatives, particularly in areas such as migration management, counternarcotics operations, and border security.

Over time, this posture alters the strategic calculus for Mexican institutions. Cooperation becomes increasingly transactional and compliance-driven, rather than partnership-based. Mexican security and migration agencies are incentivized to align tactically with U.S. enforcement priorities to mitigate unilateral pressure, even when such alignment conflicts with domestic political, legal, or human rights considerations. The absence of commensurate investment in governance, development, and institutional capacity-building further constrains Mexico's ability to shape outcomes on its own terms.

The enforcement-dominant architecture also increases the risk of friction and instability within the bilateral relationship. As U.S. policy tools shift toward detention, removal, interdiction, and surveillance, the margin for diplomatic de-escalation narrows. Disputes that once might have been resolved through negotiation or institutional dialogue are more likely to manifest as operational conflicts, legal disputes, or retaliatory policy measures. This dynamic places additional strain on an already asymmetrical relationship and heightens the potential for miscalculation.

Taken together, the FY26 budget and accompanying strategic doctrine recast Mexico less as a co-equal security actor and more as an operating environment through which U.S. homeland security objectives are pursued. While this approach may yield short-term enforcement gains, it risks eroding the cooperative foundations necessary for managing long-term challenges such as migration flows, transnational criminal networks, and regional stability. In effect, the FY26 budget architecture does not simply reshape U.S. institutions; it reshapes the bilateral relationship itself, narrowing the space for negotiated cooperation and expanding unilateral

enforcement as the default mode of engagement.

Posture Statements: NORTHCOM, SOUTHCOM, and U.S. Signaling in Latin America

Further analysis of the posture statements, [CRS primers](#), and FY26 statutory and budgetary signals reveal a striking asymmetry in how the United States approaches security in the Western Hemisphere. [SOUTHCOM](#) continues to articulate a partnership-centric logic; one that emphasizes capacity-building, democratic resilience, and shared regional threats. [NORTHCOM](#), by contrast, frames the U.S.–Mexico interface almost exclusively through a homeland defense lens, describing its mission as “sealing the borders” and “repelling all forms of invasion,” with Mexican-based TCOs treated as direct threats to U.S. sovereignty. This divergence is not merely rhetorical. It reflects two incompatible institutional missions: SOUTHCOM’s cooperative regional engagement versus NORTHCOM’s unilateral territorial defense. Without a mediating institution to reconcile these logics, the enforcement-centric posture inevitably dominates.

The FY26 budget and [NDAA provisions](#) reinforce this structural tilt. [Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities](#) funding remains flat, and Project 5114--the USNORTHCOM Mexico Office of Defense Coordination--operates as an administrative liaison mechanism rather than a platform for integrated operations. This is consistent with a DoD posture that treats Mexico as an adjacent operating environment requiring coordination, not as a co-equal security actor. Even where Congress mandates deeper engagement, as in [Section 1265](#)’s requirement for a U.S. security assistance strategy to Mexico, the statute simultaneously draws a bright legal boundary: nothing in the provision authorizes the use of force in Mexico. [Section 1205](#)’s joint training pilot similarly reflects bounded cooperation: tactical, U.S.-based, and contingent on explicit Mexican consent. These provisions collectively signal congressional intent to expand planning, reporting, and capacity-building while categorically rejecting coercive or kinetic military action.

Budgetary patterns in [the Security Cooperation Justification Book](#) further clarify the U.S. government’s revealed preferences. Western Hemisphere programs are not growth priorities; major increases flow to Taiwan and Indo-Pacific initiatives. No DoD-level Mexico strategy is resourced, and counter-TCO efforts remain tactical rather than structural. Mexico is not framed as a strategic competition theater, even as China is invoked extensively elsewhere. The result

is a durable homeland defense and border enforcement posture on the U.S. side, paired with only episodic, administratively managed engagement with Mexico. Strategic convergence is assumed rather than engineered, and the institutional mechanisms capable of producing it, such as [the Bicentennial Framework](#), lack the statutory, budgetary, and bureaucratic anchoring needed to survive political shifts.

The new National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy sharpen this asymmetry even further by codifying a hemispheric logic that prioritizes unilateral enforcement and territorial defense over binational governance. [The 2026 NDS](#) explicitly elevates border security, narco-terrorism, and hemispheric control as core missions of the Department of Defense, promising to “secure America’s borders,” “provide credible military options against narco-terrorists wherever they may be,” and enforce a “Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine” through decisive military action. Mexico is not framed as a co-equal security partner but as a locus of threats that justify expanded U.S. military authorities and readiness to act unilaterally. This stands in sharp contrast to SOUTHCOM’s partnership-centric posture and echoes [NORTHCOM’s](#) depiction of the border as a battlespace to be “sealed” against “all forms of invasion.” The NDS and NSS therefore institutionalize the enforcement logic already visible in posture statements and budgetary patterns: Mexico is treated as an operating environment adjacent to the homeland, not as a strategic actor with agency.

When read alongside flat counter-drug budgets, administrative liaison structures like Project 5114, and NDAA provisions that mandate planning and capacity-building while explicitly prohibiting the use of force in Mexico, the NDS and NSS reveal a coherent but unbalanced strategic architecture. The United States is building a durable homeland defense and border militarization posture, while engagement with Mexico remains tactical, episodic, and structurally subordinated. The result is a widening gap between rhetorical partnership and institutional practice. One that can only be closed by creating governance mechanisms capable of reconciling these competing logics and anchoring binational convergence in statutory, budgetary, and bureaucratic structures that can withstand domestic political volatility.

The implications are clear. The United States maintains two parallel and largely uncoordinated approaches to regional security: a SOUTHCOM model that depends on partnership and shared governance, and a NORTHCOM model that treats Mexico as a vector of threats to be managed unilaterally. In the absence of institutional structures that force these logics to interact, the enforcement model prevails by default. This is not a policy failure; it is the predictable outcome of how authorities, budgets, and organizational missions are currently aligned. Any durable U.S.-Mexico security framework will therefore require not only new policy language but new governance mechanisms capable of reconciling these competing logics and anchoring convergence in institutions that can withstand domestic political volatility.

Analysis & Implications

Strategic Framing in U.S. National Security and Defense Security

U.S. national security and defense documents, particularly the NSS and NDS, provide the formal articulation on how policymakers conceptualize threats, partners, and priorities within the international sphere. In the Western Hemisphere, and specifically Mexico, these documents reveal how the United States has framed the relationship between internal security, governance, and strategic cooperation. Examining these documents over administrations, from Bush to the second Trump administration, illustrates the contrasts in framing over time. Beginning with the current strategic framing of Mexico within recently released policy documents before tracing the evolution of U.S. strategic thinking to the immediate aftermath of 9/11, we can identify patterns of continuity and change in how Mexico is positioned as both a security partner and source of transnational risk. The analysis provides the doctrinal context for the empirical findings above.

Trump 2.0: The Donroe Doctrine

Under the second Trump administration, U.S. foreign policy has reoriented itself towards [the Monroe Doctrine](#)--a doctrine of Western independence from foreign influence and any such interference in the Western Hemisphere would be considered a threat to the U.S. [The Trump Corollary](#) of this doctrine, what the President has referred to as [the "Donroe Doctrine,"](#) expands Monroe to include international organizations and a stated "destiny" the American

people have in the Western Hemisphere. This guiding principle for the White House is evident within recently released documents and put to use with the capture of Maduro in Venezuela,

November 2025 National Security Strategy. [The current NSS](#) outlines major threats the U.S. is facing and how it plans to address them. The document itself states the primary national security threat is mass migration. Accompanying this, the U.S. faces additional risks from TCOs and FTO-designated cartels. Border security is also elevated to a national security priority to highlight the seriousness the White House is taking with these issues. Beyond these threats, the White House states the Western Hemisphere must be “reasonably stable and well-governed” to prevent mass migration, ensure cooperation to target narco-terrorists, and guarantee the U.S. has access to strategic locations across the Americas.

For Mexico, it is not named explicitly in the NSS. However, its relationship to the U.S. remains evident. Mexico will remain a critical piece in what the Trump Administration is calling the end of the “era of mass migration.” Moreover, Mexico is crucial in addressing cross-border immigration, cartel activity, and narco-terrorism. Though, there is no framework stated in the document on cooperation. The sense is that these countries will be expected to comply. If not, Trump has not been shy about the use of tariffs and other coercive measures.

Specific to border security, the NSS elevates the southern border to a near-battlefield status. It is labeled as “the primary element of national security” and states U.S. military deployments are necessary to “stop the invasion of our country.” This “invasion” has led to destabilization in the U.S., increased criminal activity, and poses a threat to our sovereignty and national security as it is tied to terror, drug smuggling, espionage, and human trafficking, according to the White House. Furthering this narrative, the White House has released information for plans on “[defunding the open border](#)” which follows the same logic: immigration is overrun, dangerous, and wasting taxpayer money.

Most notably, the White House is preparing to make the Department of Homeland Security a combat-command-esque institution as opposed to its more civilian-led structure. The NSS complements the budgetary findings in that DHS and related agencies like DOJ are expected to be defenders of sovereignty with heavier enforcement tactics. Moreover, the Department of State is framed as an enforcer of the Trump Corollary and dealmaker to ensure hemispheric

alignment to U.S. priorities.

January 2026 National Defense Strategy. [The NDS](#) is complementary to the NSS. Border defense is raised to the primary line of effort. The NDS also extends the “[Warrior Ethos](#)” that [Secretary Hegseth has reinstated](#). The document explicitly states the U.S. must “actively and fearlessly defend America’s interests throughout the Western Hemisphere,” “guarantee military and commercial access to key terrain,” and “focuses, decisive action” against hemispheric actors who do not align with U.S. interests. This means for defense strategies, border issues, migration, and cartels are now elevated to the same level as terror and missile defense.

Similar to the NSS, the NDS does not explicitly name Mexico. However, it remains embedded in the idea of “overrun borders” and expected to align with U.S. priorities in combatting narco-terrorists, hemispheric instability, and illegal migration. Specific to cartels, the NDS states the military will have “credible military options to use against narco-terrorists wherever they may be.” This implicitly states the U.S. will leave cross-border military operations on the table. These have already been carried out in January with Venezuela.

For interagency cooperation, the NDS is explicit in DoD’s role as a border enforcement agency. Highlighting DHS as a partner to carry out migration control and border security but remaining subordinate to the DoD paints a clear picture. The military will control the border. Specifically, the military will have total control over the southwest border. The lack of any coordination with the State Department should also be telling. As an agency built and designed for diplomacy, the U.S. is effectively sidelining the strongest tool at its disposal to mitigate any friction the DoD may create--similar to the budget requests.

Security Policies, Priorities, and Initiatives

There have been several security initiatives between the US and Mexico that have evolved throughout the years. These security initiatives have reinforced the bilateral cooperation of both countries in recent years and helped strengthen shared goals. Recently there have been several examples of miscommunication between both governments, but efforts are being made to strengthen binational cooperation in security. Mexico seeks unrestricted respect for

sovereignty and territorial integrity, shared responsibility, mutual trust, and coordinated collaboration without subordination. The U.S. administration demands tangible security results from Mexico and is considering military action in Mexico. Mexico's government seeks to avoid military operation in its own territory and has been willing to extradite criminals and take drastic actions to provide the tangible results the U.S. demands. Both countries understand the illicit gun trade as a national security issue. Mexico has seen a rise in homicides by the use of firearms in recent years and has battled to contain organized criminals that are becoming better equipped and armed. Firearms were used in 71.8 percent of homicides in Mexico, according to the latest [data](#) from INEGI, [compared](#) to 51 percent in 2005. The U.S. helps trace illicit weapons recovered in Mexico, but many gaps remain to better understand these illicit networks.

Security Policies

Felipe Calderón and George W. Bush signed the [Mérida initiative](#) in 2008 to disempower criminal organizations and capture their leaders. The US Congress approved 2.3 billion dollars for this plan and spent 1.4 billion on equipment and training. The plan's aim was also to reform the justice system by applying new judicial, police, and prison reforms, and providing forensic equipment and training. It provided four planes for ocean surveillance, one surveillance aircraft, nine Blackhawk helicopters, divided between the navy and the federal police, and dogs and technology to monitor border crossings. The plan also established a system of secure telecommunications between ten Mexican and American cities to share intelligence and dedicated funding to training and equipment for the Mexican penitentiary and judicial systems. The Mérida Initiative was renewed and expanded under the Barack Obama administration, which formed the [Central American Regional Security Initiative](#) (CARSI) in 2011.

During the October 2021 launch of the High-Level Security Dialogue (HLSD), the United States and Mexico replaced the Mérida Initiative with the [U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities](#). That focuses on binational cooperation in three primary areas. The first is on protecting people and includes public health programs intended to target addiction, support for safer communities through community policing, and reducing homicide rates, as well as impunity rates. The second is to diminish transnational criminal

operations across the border and include securing modes of travel and commerce, reducing the illicit firearm trade, targeting TCOs' supply chains, and targeting human trafficking operations. The third main goal is to pursue criminal networks by targeting illicit financing, strengthening the capacity of security and judicial institutions to reduce impunity for crimes and protect human rights, addressing cyber threats, and increasing extradition cooperation.

In August of 2025, the DEA announced a new [bilateral security project](#). They described how At the core of this effort is Project Portero, DEA's flagship operation aimed at dismantling cartel "gatekeepers", operatives who control the smuggling corridors along the Southwest Border. Gatekeepers are essential to cartel operations, directing the flow of fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine into the United States while ensuring the movement of firearms and bulk cash back into Mexico. By specifically targeting them, DEA and its partners are striking at the heart of cartel command-and-control.

To advance this effort, DEA has launched a multi-week training and collaboration program at one of its intelligence centers on the Southwest Border. The program brings together Mexican investigators with U.S. law enforcement, prosecutors, defense officials, and members of the intelligence community. Over the course of several weeks, participants will identify joint targets, develop coordinated enforcement strategies, and strengthen the exchange of intelligence.

Project Portero is also coordinated with the Homeland Security Task Force (HSTF), ensuring a whole-of-government approach. HSTF integration brings together law enforcement, intelligence, defense, and prosecutorial elements, aligning priorities and operations so the United States can apply its full capabilities against cartel networks.

Days later, on [August 19, 2025](#), Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum said her government did not have an agreement with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration regarding an operation known as "Project Portero," after the DEA announced it. These inconsistencies in announcements reflect the tension between the two countries that are trying to present a united front to the public sphere yet still have two different visions of how to achieve security in the border region.

In September of 2025, Foreign Minister Juan Ramón de la Fuente announced that Mexico and the United States reached an understanding on security cooperation, based on four fundamental principles: unrestricted respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, shared responsibility, mutual trust, and coordinated collaboration without subordination.

At a joint press conference with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio following their meeting with President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, De la Fuente reiterated the strong relationship and extensive collaboration with the United States. At the Mexican Foreign Ministry headquarters, De la Fuente reported that to ensure the effective implementation of the agreements reached in this new Border Security and Law Enforcement Cooperation Program, a high-level coordination mechanism has been established. This mechanism will meet periodically to evaluate progress and ensure the achievement of the established objectives. These statements indicate that Mexico is trying to position itself as a partner in security under the SOUTHCOM model of security that emphasizes cooperation, while trying to reject the NORTHCOM model that would limit its sovereignty and treat the border as a battleground.

The Foreign Minister stated that this understanding will lead to more and better results in security matters, which is in the interest of both governments and peoples. This agreement includes measures to counter illicit financial flows, the flow of illegal fuels, the apprehension of those who generate violence, and the trafficking of drugs and illegal weapons, each within their respective territories.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Mexican Foreign Minister Juan Ramón de la Fuente held a call on January 11, 2026, to discuss strengthening binational cooperation against arms trafficking, fentanyl, and narcoterrorist networks. The Mexican Foreign Ministry emphasized that Mexico has made clear that there must be unrestricted respect for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, shared responsibility, mutual trust, and collaboration without subordination. The U.S. State Department reported that the conversation revolved around the U.S. need to “obtain tangible results” to curb illicit trafficking affecting both sides of the border and dismantle transnational criminal networks. The idea of tangible results is something the Mexican administration have taken very seriously as a possible way to avoid the NORTHCOM model.

President Donald Trump, in an interview with Fox News, declared that the U.S. could begin ground attacks against drug cartels and asserted that these organizations “control Mexico.” Trump has also linked drug trafficking to the deaths of 300,000 Americans every year and has justified the toughening of anti-drug policy as a [national security priority](#). According to a New York Times [report](#) on January 15, 2026, “U.S. officials want American forces, either Special Operations troops or CIA officers, to accompany Mexican soldiers on raids on suspected fentanyl labs, according to American officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive diplomatic issues and military planning.” These statements have propelled the Mexican administration to present tangible results to promote a bilateral security model that does not threaten Mexico’s sovereignty.

On January 20th, 2026, Mexico extradited 37 cartel members to the US signaling that they are willing to cooperate with the US government in order to avoid troops entering Mexico. Since Trump took office [92 cartel members have been extradited](#) to the United States. “Tuesday’s transfer included a handful of important figures from the Sinaloa Cartel, the Beltrán-Leyva cartel, Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion, the Northeast Cartel, a remnant of the infamous Zetas based in the Mexican border state of Tamaulipas, across from Texas. Mexican authorities said that all had pending U.S. cases. Among those transferred was María Del Rosario Navarro Sánchez, the first Mexican citizen to face charges in the U.S. for providing support to a terrorist organization, after being accused of conspiring with a cartel.” Lately the arrest and extradition of the leader of the CJNG, known as El Mencho, as well as several leaders of the cartel have served as tangible results for the US that a security partnership is possible.

Gun Trade

In 2024, the [trade exchange](#) (including international purchases and sales) of Weapons to Mexico was 214 million dollars. 108 million were international sales of weapons, and 106 million were in purchases of firearms. The main commercial origins of Weapons in 2024 were the United States (US\$38.7M), Israel (US\$20.3M), the Czech Republic (US\$7.31M), Italy (US\$6.15M), and Spain (US\$6.11M). The reason Mexico cares so much about the illicit flow of firearms is that firearms were used in 71.8 percent of homicides in Mexico, according to the latest [data](#) from INEGI, [compared](#) to 51 percent in 2005. This percentage represents an

increase of twenty percent in the use of firearms in homicides, which Mexico has struggled to lower in the last two decades. “[The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives \(ATF\)](#) National Tracing Center (NTC) is the nation’s only crime gun tracing facility. As such, the NTC provides critical information that helps domestic and international law enforcement agencies solve firearms crimes.”

The number of weapons traced at the request of the Mexican government provides a glimpse into the increase in the flow of illicit weapons into the country. In 2018, 19,617 weapons were traced at the request of Mexican security forces, and of those, 13,460 were sourced from the United States. By 2023, 25,697 weapons had been traced, of which 17,535 were sourced from the United States. Since 2009, Texas and Arizona have made up to 60 percent of the guns recovered in Mexico and traced to a purchase in the United States. However, these traces are only a part of the picture. As the [GAO](#) explains, the ATF does not compile complete data on all illicit weapon captures and misses thousands of firearms, such as those recovered by Mexican state forces, because only Mexico’s federal Attorney General’s office sends trace requests to the ATF. Mexico as a response to this perceived source of violence sued several major U.S. gun manufacturers including Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Colt and Glock in 2021 but [the Supreme Court blocked](#) the lawsuit in June of 2025.

Policy Recommendation & Conclusion

Create a Southwest Border Joint Task Force lead by DHS incorporating DoD, DOJ, and intel and state liaisons into a single CONOPS for border and cartel-specific threats that has operational control over all border and immigration assets to legalize and centralize command. This would help resolve current interagency frictions and establish a central command over all affairs related to the border and security. Mexico can have standing liaisons in order to help bolster cooperation and agency.

There should be annual binational threat assessments completed to align priorities and reduce the risk of the US unilaterally defining problems. Keeps Mexican agency but also creates a framework for each nation to bring up issues they deem important to their national security. This assessment should be accompanied by a deconfliction mechanism for issues such as accidental escalation or friendly-fire in which members of foreign affairs from both countries

can have direct communication and a pre-established framework to manage these conflicts in a timely and peaceful manner.

President Claudia Sheinbaum has shown herself to be a savvy politician who understands that, to protect her political parties and her own image, they must defend Mexico's sovereignty at all costs. The Mexican constitution, in Article 76, allows the presence of foreign troops only if approved by the Mexican Senate. Sheinbaum understands that, to continue her political party's project of presenting itself as a new transformation with strong nationalist undertones, she must play a careful balancing act with the United States. She has shown willingness to send troops to the border, provide water to Texas, stop petroleum shipments to Cuba and extradite record numbers of organized crime members in the hopes of avoiding a violation of Mexican sovereignty. The use-of-force should be a last-resort more than a bargaining chip as the threat of force to leverage concessions takes credibility and agency away from an already cooperative partner. It also prioritizes Mexican sovereignty and international law which are fundamental for the long term success and strengthening of bilateral relations.

The U.S. should require formal risk assessments for any kinetic option that include security forces from both countries. The US and Mexico should also seek to increase cooperation and joint military exercises that can make a sort of "playbook" for joint responses to scenarios like a mass-casualty attack by organized crime. These exercises can respect Mexico's sovereignty by helping increase its security forces ability to respond to organized crime.

It will become critical for Mexico to address the diversification of organized crime into natural resources, extortion, and targeted money-laundering operations run by a handful of gangs, which could severely disrupt organized crime networks. We recommend the creation of an observatory that is funded by the government and run by academics and grass roots organizations that can help track the exploitation of natural resources by organized crime. This would help track the areas that require more security forces to be deployed and can help police forces open lines of investigation into the criminal organizations responsible for the exploitation of natural resources. The Mexican government has increasingly targeted financial operations of organized criminals successfully but are limited by the transnational nature of money laundering. Greater investment in financial intelligence and asset-tracing by both

countries and financial institutions would help better trace illicit funds. We also suggest harsher penalties for financial institutions that are found guilty of enrichment from organized crime funds to encourage financial institutions to reform their vetting mechanisms for illicit funds and cooperate with the authorities.

There are currently several judicial reforms in Mexico that will hand over the power to pick judges to voters. It will be important for Mexico to build their ministerial capability and strengthen its judicial system in order to address the high levels of impunity and be able to construct investigative lines that can translate into justice. Sector-specific anti-capture strategies for judicial candidates would be helpful to maintain the autonomy of the judicial branch as well as the creation of a vetting system by joint federal-state oversight boards in regions that can help eliminate judicial and political candidates that are found to have ties to organized crime and increase transparency in appointments.

Keeping tighter controls and tracking mechanisms to target the illicit flow of weapons to Mexico is an important step in hindering the combat capabilities of organized criminals. This would benefit Sheinbaum as it would give her political credit, which she is in dire need of and it could help lessen the burden on the Mexican military, which still holds high levels of legitimacy in Mexico but is being overstretched. Investment to regulate straw purchasing and gun trafficking in the U.S. is essential. The JTF could help reduce trafficking, but that's already post-purchase. A tracing cell and expanding Mexico's capacity to trace guns through the ATF at every level of their security forces would help track the flow of illicit firearms into Mexico. Regulating ghost guns and kits is also important for both countries' national security. Border states like Arizona and Texas could also bolster gun purchase laws as most illicit guns tracked by Mexico originate from those states.

A regular (maybe biennial) U.S.-Mexico Security Review issued at the cabinet level would help design and evaluate programs and laws with a focus on binational security. This would create evaluation mechanisms that can track what policies and programs are working and which are not and help reassess security priorities and policies.

Comparison of Strategic Documents: National Security Strategies from Bush-Trump

Category	Bush NSS	Obama NSS	Trump NSS
<p>Threat #1</p>	<p>Terror/WMD (2002) “Shadowy networks”/ weak states (2006)</p>	<p>WMD (nuclear prolif.), terrorism no longer singular--expanded to pandemic disease, cyber threats, and TCOs (2010) Greater threat diversification in 2015--cyber, climate, global health, TCOs, fragile states</p>	<p>China, Russia TCOs</p>
<p>W. Hemisphere</p>	<p>Democracy consolidation & stability (2002) Values-based region more than operational security theater (2006)</p>	<p>Space of shared prosperity, democratic consolidation, economic integration--no securitized hemispheric doctrine comparable to post-9/11 framing</p>	<p>Zone of instability Migration & regional threats</p>

<p>Mexico Framing</p>	<p>Democratic partner and co-planner, becomes more strategic in 2006</p>	<p>Not explicitly present</p>	<p>Not named strategic partner Framed in terms of flows- drug No bilateral partnership</p>
<p>Border Security</p>	<p>Prevention of terrorism and catastrophic threats more than enduring border enforcement posture (2002) Illegal immigration becomes more explicit (2006)</p>	<p>Nested with resilience, trade, legal travel, and rule of law--no language of militarization, deterrence, mass removal. Treated as systems management, not confrontation</p>	<p>Elevated to national mission Framed as sovereignty Linked to mission DHS position executor</p>
<p>TCOs</p>	<p>Destabilizers and “new threat” enabled by globalization and weak governance More explicit on orgs w/o border in 2006</p>	<p>Recognized as serious threat, framed under governance--corroding, financially networked, transnational--response model includes intel sharing, law enforcement cooperation, financial disruption, and institution-building</p>	<p>National security criminal activity Linked to border corruption, No mention or institutional</p>

<p>Role of DoD</p>	<p>State power marshaled against terror (DoD-focused)</p>	<p>Remains foundational, but explicitly not sole instrument Emphasis on supporting roles, capacity-building, partner training, and avoidance of overextension</p>	<p>Rebuild military national power Support de power com Modernizat lethality em Hemispher No border c assigned Framed as not operati</p>
<p>Role of DHS</p>	<p>Remains DoD focused, but emergence of homeland security architecture</p>	<p>Integrated into national resilience, focus on disaster response, infrastructure protection, information sharing--not an enforcement executor</p>	<p>Elevated to border secu control Central to s Positioned in operatio</p>
<p>Role of DOJ</p>	<p>—</p>	<p>Rule of law guarantor, international legal cooperation, counterterror prosecutor--heavy emphasis on legal legitimacy, due process, international law</p>	<p>Enforcement Immigratio detention s Rights arch emphasize</p>
<p>Role of State</p>	<p>—</p>	<p>Diplomacy is core security instrument, institution-building and alliances emphasized Obama explicitly states: "the false choice between our interests and our values"</p>	<p>Diplomacy sovereignty Multilateral Western He nearly abse</p>

<p>Primary Governance Modality</p>	<p>Democracy promotion as a national security strategy; institution-building</p>	<p>Governance-dense: International institutions, multilateral frameworks, capacity building, legal norms, development, human rights</p>	<p>America Fir largely bas sovereignty economic n great-powe Threat fram on revision Russia), rog and uncont Rule of Law enforcemen</p>
<p>Migration Framing</p>	<p>Not central in 2002 Illegal immigration is explicit in 2006</p>	<p>Not securitized No deterrence logic, no mass removal logic, framed under human dignity, economic opportunity, global mobility. Treated more as structural condition, not an invasion threat</p>	<p>Security thr humanitaria issue Language o “uncontrol “border inv No mention protection,</p>

Note: This figure was created by and is the property of Orion Policy Institute.

Comparison of Strategic Documents: National Defense Strategies from Bush-Trump

Category	Bush NDS	Obama DSG, QDR*	Trump ND
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<p>Threat #1</p>	<p>Terror networks, IW, catastrophic threats; states as enablers and incubators of non-state threats (2005)</p> <p>IW, TCO, and hybrid threats; explicit in illicit trafficking, corruption, and instability w/o formal conflict (2008)</p>	<p>DSG (2012) explicitly links defense posture to 2010 NSS</p> <p>Frames US security as alliance-centered, rules-based, while rejecting large-scale prolonged ground conflict--emphasizing restraint and burden-sharing</p>	<p>Primary: Ch</p> <p>Secondary:</p> <p>Tertiary: Te</p>
<p>W. Hemisphere</p>	<p>Not unique or privileged theater, its folded into global security architecture</p>	<p>Homeland defense is framed as defensive and supportive, not enforcement-dominant</p> <p>DOD will support civil authorities, build partner capacity, and avoid becoming default solution to governance problems</p> <p>Emphasis on small footprint, advisory roles, and interagency cooperation</p> <p>U.S. force is last resort, partners have sovereignty, distinct strategic preferences and political constraints</p>	<p>One of four regions, fra</p> <p>power comp</p> <p>governance</p>
		<p>QDR further emphasizes restraint in DoD</p>	

<p>Mexico Framing</p>	<p>Largely absent</p>	<p>Absent; hemisphere treated as competitive space, not partner space</p>	<p>No mention Not defense threat vecto deterrence, defense pla</p>
<p>Border Security</p>	<p>Border not mentioned, homeland defense is; prevention of threats reaching U.S. territory and forward defense, surveillance, preemption (2005) Defense and persistent presence, interagency integration forefront; highlights domestic consequence management and civil support (2008)</p>	<p>Not a DoD mission, homeland defense through cyber, WMD, and strategic attack</p>	<p>Not assigne</p>

<p>TCOs</p>	<p>Security threats for destabilizing regions, enable terror, undermine governance</p> <p>2005 specifically focuses on IW and non-state networks</p> <p>2008 expands to criminal enterprises and illicit trafficking</p>	<p>Non-state “mass disruption” actors, not central to force design</p>	<p>Appear thro activities, il cybercrime Not elevate deterrence/ national se</p>
<p>Role of DoD</p>	<p>Globally present, persistently engaged</p> <p>Capable of operating below threshold of war</p> <p>Integration with civilian agencies</p> <p>2008 explicit in international and domestic support inside/near U.S. territory</p>	<p>Central executor of national power; lethality, competition</p>	<p>No mention</p>
<p>Role of DHS</p>	<p>DHS not central, DoD retains primary homeland defense role</p>	<p>Supporting actor, not central to defense strategy</p>	<p>Integrated campaignin great-power alliances/pa defense fro modernizat</p>
<p>Role of DOJ</p>	<p>—</p>	<p>Supporting actor, not central to defense strategy</p>	<p>—</p>
<p>Role of State</p>	<p>—</p>	<p>Subordinated to deterrence and competition</p>	<p>—</p>

<p>Primary Governance Modality</p>	<p>—</p>	<p>Minimal, focus on lethality, readiness, modernization</p>	<p>—</p>
<p>Migration Framing</p>	<p>Not a humanitarian or governance issue; population flows, instability driver, and facilitator of illicit networks Migration should be conceptually securitized before operationally militarized</p>	<p>Absent, not conceptualized as a defense issue</p>	<p>Democratic rule of law, resiliency, strengthening transbound</p>

Note: This figure was created by and is the property of Orion Policy Institute.

* For administrations that did not issue a formally titled National Defense Strategy, this analysis relies on the highest level of defense guidance available. For the Obama administration, this includes the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance and the Quadrennial Defense Review, which informed DoD programming and budgeting decisions. They are therefore treated as full NDSS.

**The full 2018 National Defense Strategy remains classified and was never released in an unredacted public version. Accordingly, this analysis draws on the unclassified NDS Summary, the 2018 National Military Strategy, and congressional testimony on the goals and priorities of the Trump administration's defense posture.

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