

Mexico's president wants to change how the drug war is fought, and he may be heading for a showdown with Trump

Laura Weiss, [World Politics Review](#)

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Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador at a campaign rally in Patzcuaro, Michoacan state, Mexico, May 31, 2018. REUTERS/Alan Ortega

- Mexico's president has announced plans to revise the Merida Initiative, a billion-dollar US aid program that has funded the war on drugs, and to decriminalize drugs and pursue national development over drug prohibition.
- Both efforts could run afoul of the US government, which has taken a hardline on immigration and drugs, and may not totally solve the insecurity plaguing Mexico.
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Mexico's drug policies could be in for some sweeping changes, and with them the country's relations with the United States.

Last week, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador announced that his administration would seek to revise the Merida Initiative, the \$3 billion US aid package that has largely funded Mexico's war on drugs. In a press conference May 9, Lopez Obrador, widely known in Mexico as AMLO, [said](#) his administration does not "want aid for the use of force, we want aid for development."

The announcement came shortly after the Mexican government released a [National Development Plan](#) for the next five years that proposes decriminalizing all drugs in Mexico. That plan, approved by Mexico's Senate, also seeks to eradicate corruption and improve the justice system; guarantee jobs and higher education for children; and invest in infrastructure and health services through regional programs and development goals.



Mexican soldiers guarding a hotel in Reynosa, in the state of Tamaulipas, northern Mexico, January 9, 2008.(AP Photo/Dario Lopez-Mills, File)

If implemented, the plan would mark a major shift in Mexico's drug and security policies, which have operated under the logic of a low-intensity war against drug cartels since 2006, shortly after Felipe Calderon took office, and have received US funding since 2008.

The majority of this funding package has gone toward security, especially in [its first three years](#)-including transferring US military hardware and equipment to the Mexican government, providing police training, and assisting Mexican authorities with intelligence operations to capture cartel leaders and intercept drug trafficking, in addition to training Mexican immigration authorities.

In recent years, a larger share of this aid has gone toward economic and development initiatives, including police and judicial reform, and programs through the US Agency for International Development focusing on human rights and fighting corruption, according to Maureen Meyer, director for Mexico and Migrant Rights at the Washington Office on Latin America.

However, the amount appropriated by the US Congress per year has diminished considerably, the Congressional Research Service [reports](#). The Trump administration [requested only \\$76.3 million](#) for the Merida Initiative in fiscal year 2020, a 35% drop from the 2018 request.

Residents near a Mexican marine guarding an area after a shootout between gang members and the army in Mexico City, July 20, 2017.REUTERS/Carlos Jasso

This close cooperation between the US and Mexico has not resulted in fewer drugs being trafficked into the United States or less crime in Mexico. Although the US and Mexico together took down the heads of several major drug cartels, these cartels have since splintered, causing turf wars and increased violence.

They have also diversified their income streams due to the crackdown on drug smuggling, turning increasingly to fuel theft, extortion and kidnapping-with the participation and collusion of public security forces.

Homicide rates have surged across Mexico, targeting politicians, police, military personnel, activists and civilians. Since the drug war began in 2006, some [235,000 people have been murdered](#) in Mexico, and over 37,000 have been officially identified as disappeared.

"This militarized model has had a negative effect on civilians, many of whom have been direct victims of human rights violations by the military or by police bodies, and an even larger percentage of whom continue to live in fear of criminal violence because the use of force in the streets is not actually effective at sustainably reducing overall violence or changing structural causes of crime," Stephanie Brewer, an attorney at the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, a Mexican human rights organization in Mexico City, writes in an email.

Soldiers guard the area around an oil-pipeline explosion in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo state, Mexico, January 18, 2019. Secretary of National Defense via AP

AMLO's proposal to shift the direction of US funding reflects the "need to assess where the Merida Initiative is in terms of what impact it's had," according to Meyer. But in any renegotiation, "there's likely to be tension," she says, citing the administration's recent [decision to cut off State Department aid](#) to Central America's Northern Triangle, because the US claimed those countries were not doing enough to stem emigration.

Perhaps in response to pressure for Mexico to ramp up its enforcement efforts, AMLO's government has increased its deportation numbers in recent months. Meyer says these efforts "are being carried out in a way that sharply contrast with the government's expressed commitment to respect migrant rights."

Beyond AMLO's goals for the Merida Initiative, the National Development Plan goes further in calling for the decriminalization of all drugs in Mexico.

"The prohibition model is unsustainable, not only due to the violence it has generated but also because of its negative results in public health," the plan pronounces. "The only real possibility to reduce drug consumption is to lift the prohibition on drugs that are currently illicit, and to reorient the resources currently directed toward combating trafficking and apply them to reinsertion and detoxification programs."

A soldier shows the lancing of a poppy bulb to extract the sap, used to make opium, during a military operation to destroy a poppy field in Coyuca de Catalan, in Mexico's Guerrero, state, April 18, 2017. REUTERS/Henry Romero

While the proposal is certainly noteworthy in its acknowledgment of the failed prohibition model and its focus on rehabilitation, Mexico's Supreme Court has already [overturned](#) the country's ban on recreational marijuana, and possession of small amounts of most recreational drugs [is already legal](#).

The proposal may be more controversial when it comes to heroin. Mexico is a major source of the heroin consumed in the United States, and its poppy-growing regions have been the sites of the highest levels of violence since the beginning of the drug war. Successfully decriminalizing poppy would also require an infrastructure to ensure that crops go into legal markets, something that Mexico may not have the capacity to do.

Given the opioid epidemic in the United States, it may be difficult to popularize any plan seen as soft on drug producers. And Mexicans who have suffered from violence related to the drug war may resist any proposals that look at all like amnesty for people who have hurt or killed their loved ones. AMLO's administration has discussed the idea of offering amnesty to low-level drug traffickers, while still holding perpetrators of grave human rights abuses accountable.

The Mexican government's drug proposal notes that the decriminalization process "must be reached in a negotiated manner, both in terms of the bilateral relationship with the United States as well as in the multilateral landscape within the UN" On the US front, such a negotiation does not appear promising.

Last month, Trump said that he would give Mexico a year to stop the flow of both drugs and migrants over the border, or else he would impose auto tariffs or close the border. Trump has yet to respond directly to last week's proposal to decriminalize drugs.

President Donald Trump tours the US-Mexico border. AP/Evan Vucci

Yet while much of AMLO's National Development Plan is progressive or even radical in its pronouncements, it also seeks to establish a "civilian-led" National Guard, which would mark a continuation of militarized policing and security policies, something AMLO had [vowed to reverse](#).

The proposal, Brewer notes, "does not represent a meaningful change over the past several administrations' variations on the use of force, including military force, as the central component of law enforcement."

Whatever form this new National Guard takes, its impact will ultimately depend on whether the government holds the police and military accountable for abuses, Meyer says. In the past, that has been a major challenge for Mexico.

Until authorities "start to reorient and broaden their security proposals based on evidence gathered over more than a decade of failed strategies," Brewer adds, "the population is caught between a rock and a hard place as its faces both its insecurity in day-to-day life, and a reactive, use-of-force security model from the government that frequently adds more victims to the already high toll of criminal violence."

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