

# THE NINTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS AND A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR THE REGION

Michael W. Chamberlin | Non-Resident Senior Fellow



*The Center for International Policy (CIP) has made the intersection of security, corruption, arms sales, and migration the center of our analytical work for the last half-century. We believe there is an opportunity for the United States to improve this critical situation through more just and humane foreign policy commitments. Today, CIP is resuming its regional focus on Central and South America by monitoring and shedding light on these commitments, policies, and contradictions towards and within the region. As CIP Non-Resident Senior Fellow Michael W. Chamberlin points out, these issues have a direct implication on the prospects of peace, justice, and security in the Americas.*

Photo of Joe Biden with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. The image is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/).

The Ninth Summit of the Americas took place in Los Angeles, California, from June 6 to June 10, 2022. According to the US State Department's [website](#), its focus was on "Building a Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Future." It also specified that the United States "will work with the region's stakeholders toward securing leader-level commitments and concrete actions that dramatically improve pandemic response and resilience, promote a green and equitable recovery, **build strong and inclusive democracies, and address the root causes of irregular migration**" (emphasis added). To address these last two objectives, the United States must consider its role in fostering drug policies that fuel widespread corruption, violence, and absence of rule of law. These structural challenges are the root causes of democratic failures in Mexico and migration crises throughout the region.

In December 2008, Mexico and the United States signed the first Letter of Agreement for the Merida Initiative, aiming "to counter drug-fueled violence threatening citizens on both sides of the border." (emphasis added). Although the US has never provided weapons or ammunition to the Mexican military or police, it has sent a wide range of equipment, from helicopters to virtual firearms simulators, to X-ray scanning equipment, to protective equipment for the forces that dismantle clandestine drug labs.

The US-financed equipment, technology, and training through this initiative were intended to improve investigations, increase arrests and prosecutions, and reduce drug shipments. According to the Embassy in Mexico, the US gave over USD 1.3 million to support Mexico's drug interdiction teams. In 2022, the US provided USD 52 million to law enforcement in the capture of 14 cartel members, 16 drug traffickers, and over 58,000 kilograms of cocaine destined for the United States; and committed over USD 406 million to support Mexico's transition to the support modernizing Mexico's criminal justice system.

What are the outcomes of the Merida Initiative? To date, the State Department's assessment is quite positive: "Through 13 years of implementation, the Merida Initiative has led to a new architecture for bilateral security cooperation, provided tangible support to Mexico's security and judicial institutions, and helped to galvanize joint efforts to stop the flow of weapons and money, and the demand for drugs." Despite this glowing evaluation, the overall impact has not resulted in crime reduction or greater security on either side of the border, or throughout the wider region.

On the contrary, the Merida Initiative is fueling the militaristic policies of former Mexican President Calderón against drug cartels that have persisted through the subsequent administrations of Peña Nieto and López Obrador. Before Calderón's crusade, Mexico reported a rate of eight killings per 100,000 inhabitants. With the military aid in place, the number grew to 23.5 in 2011 and 29 in 2018, with levels remaining constant since then. There have been 377,403 homicides (100,000 under the current administration alone) and a quarter of a million people reported missing (of which 100,000 are still missing). Mexico has become one of the most dangerous countries for journalists and human rights defenders globally. Although three political parties (from right-wing to left-wing) have governed in this period, the approach has not changed.

According to the UN, progress has not been made in Central America either. In El Salvador, the murder rate increased from 57 per 100,000 people in 2007 to 105 in 2015. Guatemala and Honduras have murder rates of 26 and 42 per 100,000 people respectively. In comparison, the US reports a rate of under 6 killings per a population of 100,000 in the same period. Let's be clear: populations in Central America are fleeing violence, which is also one of the leading causes of poverty.

But violence against the civilian population does not come solely from organized crime: government security forces also cause it. As stated by Human Rights Watch in its 2022 world report, Mexico has depended on the armed forces to control organized crime, and these same forces routinely commit generalized human rights abuses. Between 2013 and 2020, Mexico's national human rights institution Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) received 3,799 complaints against the military. Torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings regularly happen at the hands of state agents.

Since 2000, organized crime has increasingly determined the distribution of political power in Mexico through violence. In a Cambridge University Press study "Votes, Drugs, and Violence. The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico," Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley shows how, by 2012, "one-third of Mexico's population lived in municipalities where local government officials and party candidates had been victims of lethal criminal attacks, and where organized crime groups sought to establish sub-national criminal governance regimes."

According to the same study, after six years of war against the drug cartels, Mexico's criminal underworld fragmented and proliferated from five to 62 organized criminal groups. The street gangs working for them grew from dozens to hundreds. So much for the Merida Initiative's goal of countering drug-fueled violence.

To gain control over the territories, these groups rapidly expanded their range of illicit activities from drug trafficking to extortion, kidnapping for ransom, human trafficking (women, children, and migrants), and illegal plundering of mines, forests, gas, and oil refineries. The criminal groups expanded their targets from rival cartels and state institutions to unarmed civilians. This trend was repeated throughout Central America. So much for addressing the root causes of violence-fueled migration.

Ultimately, these groups began systematically murdering mayors and municipal party candidates "to influence subnational election results and gain de-facto control over municipal governments, peoples, and territories." During the 2018 presidential elections, 774 attacks against politicians were recorded, and 150 were lethal. In the recent 2021 mid-term elections, 102 politicians were assassinated, and 1,066 attacks were recorded, demonstrating an increasing trend toward violence aimed at policymakers. Due to the level of violence, state and non-state actors began to collude, further eroding public trust in the government. After the election process, who rules in those municipalities and local states? Who do people vote for? The leaders of Mexico's national political parties haven't said a thing. Although many of their party candidates and fellow running mates were victims, no action has been taken in Congress or within the Federal Administration to address election violence and intimidation. Do the people in office also benefit from crime? So much for building strong and inclusive democracies.

The Ninth Summit of the Americas was a chance for governments to discuss these challenges and make commitments towards effective solutions. Unfortunately, as some predicted, attendance of the Summit reflected a divided hemisphere and the participating countries failed to tackle these challenges. Nevertheless, the United States can still play a central role in helping the region build a sustainable, resilient, and equitable future.

First, there must be a shift from a policy of armed confrontation against organized crime to one that centers on a civic and democratic approach and pursues measurable efforts to tackle corruption and impunity. American courts are vital to processing drug lords and corrupt officials from the region while bringing to light political collusion. The US should continue to prioritize reducing corruption, improving law enforcement transparency, and building robust judicial systems to dismantle organized criminal groups, but these efforts have to happen on both sides of the border. The head of the United States Northern Command, General Glen VanHerck, pointed out that drug traffickers control 35% of Mexico's territory. It is a well-known fact that local politicians and law enforcement often work in tandem with drug traffickers. Therefore, the current strategy of sending money, equipment, and technology to government officials contributes to the worsening security situation.

Second, the US must commit to stricter gun control laws. Over 80% of firearms carried by organized criminal groups are bought legally in the United States. It is disingenuous for the US to say they are working to combat "drug-fueled violence threatening citizens on both sides of the border" and simultaneously allow criminal groups to easily buy arms in the United States. This contradiction gives countries in Central America the impression that the United States is not only fueling violence in Mexico and elsewhere but is profiting from providing the means of warfare to both government authorities and gangs.

Finally, there must be an effort to eliminate migration prohibitions and to regulate labor programs for immigrants in Mexico within the United States. Organized criminal groups profit from prohibition by trafficking migrants fleeing violence over the harsh landscape, putting them in grave danger. In 2021, 651 migrants died trying to cross the US-Mexico border, and at least 1,400 went missing between 2010 and 2020; the actual number is most likely even higher. Laws against migrant labor are not only cruel, but wasteful and contradictory. Since the United States had 25 million job openings before the pandemic and 10 million openings now, during the economic recovery. At the same time, 8.5 million Americans do not want those jobs. Why wouldn't immigrants work these jobs? Comprehensive and humane immigration policies would economically benefit all sides.

Ultimately, long-term security in the Americas and around the world is rooted in equal opportunities to access human rights and strong democracies where justice and civil liberties are respected and protected. The militarized approach championed by the US and Central American governments thus far has only led to more violence and corruption in the region, rather than political stability. Moving forward, the US must rethink its strategy to focus on the well-being of the people affected on both sides of the border in order to make progress toward sustainable peace.



**Michael W. Chamberlin**

Senior Non-Resident Fellow

mchamberlin@internationalpolicy.org

@Chamberlin\_MW

Michael W. Chamberlin is a non-resident senior fellow at The Center for International Policy. Mr. Chamberlin has been a human rights defender in Mexico for 30 years. He has specialized in documenting and analyzing grave human rights violations and crimes against humanity where state and non-state actors have had international responsibility. He has been a consultant on enforced disappearances and the victims' rights to truth, justice, and reparation. Chamberlin has submitted reports to the ICC on crimes against humanity committed in Mexico in the ongoing war against drugs and represents cases at the UN Human Rights Committee.

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