

# New U.S.-Mexico Security Strategy: Issues for Congressional Consideration

February 17, 2022

On January 31, 2022, the U.S. and Mexican governments published an action plan for implementing the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities. Launched at the October 2021 [U.S.-Mexico High-Level Security Dialogue \(HLSD\)](#), the framework is a replacement for the [Mérida Initiative](#), a long-standing security partnership featuring U.S. antidrug and rule-of-law assistance to Mexico. Congress has appropriated more than \$3.3 billion since FY2007 for the Mérida Initiative, but there has been growing criticism within Congress of the inability of bilateral efforts to reduce organized crime-related violence in Mexico and drug overdoses in the United States. The Bicentennial Framework's [action plan](#) has three broad pillars (see **Figure 1**) that Congress could influence through legislation, appropriations, and oversight.

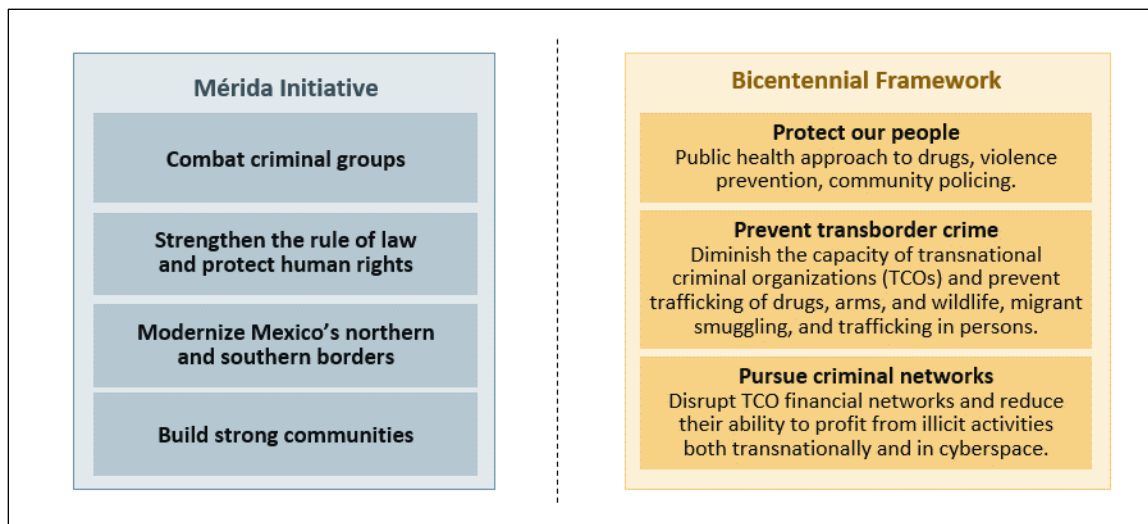
## The Bicentennial Framework

Since taking office in 2018, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has [criticized](#) the Mérida Initiative and has reduced federal security cooperation with the United States, with the exception of [migration enforcement](#). Many observers praised the convening of the HLSD, the first since 2016, for [revitalizing](#) bilateral security cooperation. Although some have [criticized](#) the Bicentennial Framework for deemphasizing institutional reform in Mexico, others have [acknowledged](#) its prioritization of issues such as arms trafficking and violence prevention. U.S. officials [assert](#) that the strategy's pillars align with the Biden Administration's drug control priorities, including treating drug addiction through a public health lens, preventing the diversion of precursor chemicals to illicit drug production, and combating illicit financial networks.

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**Figure I. From the Mérida Initiative to the Bicentennial Framework**

Source: U.S. Department of State.

## Issues for Congressional Consideration

### Synthetic Opioids

A key oversight issue for Congress is the extent to which the Bicentennial Framework will address illicit synthetic opioids concerns. In recent years, Mexican transnational criminal organizations (chiefly, [Sinaloa and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, or CJNG](#)) have established [Mexico](#) as the primary source and transit point for illicit fentanyl into the United States. As U.S. synthetic opioid overdose [deaths](#) (including fentanyl-related deaths) continue to mount, disrupting the illicit production and trafficking of U.S.-bound synthetic opioids has emerged as a key U.S. priority in ensuring the framework's success.

In its February 2022 final [report](#), the Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking established by Section 7221 of P.L. 116-92 encouraged international cooperation on reducing illicit synthetic opioids, warning that the United States “cannot succeed alone.” It also emphasized that such cooperation has yet to manifest in the U.S.-Mexico relationship, assessing that “overall cooperation with foreign law enforcement officials in Mexico to eradicate the fentanyl threat has been insufficient to date.”

Some analysts question whether the U.S. and Mexican governments will prioritize this equally, given the differing effects synthetic opioids are having in the two countries. Synthetic opioids are causing more overdose deaths in the United States than in [Mexico](#).

### Rule of Law and the “Militarization” of Public Security

Congress has [expressed](#) ongoing concern about violence and human rights abuses perpetrated by criminal groups and corrupt officials in Mexico. Since 2018, homicides in Mexico have exceeded [33,000 annually](#). At least [five journalists](#) reportedly have been killed in 2022. Some [95,000 enforced disappearances](#) have been reported, most since 2006. Impunity for homicides stood at some [90% in 2019](#), higher for other crimes. To deter such crimes and abuses, experts have urged Mexico to strengthen its criminal justice system to increase the likelihood of prosecution.

Under the Mérida Initiative, the U.S. government provided more than [\\$406 million](#) to help train and equip federal- and state-level justice operators (police, prosecutors, judges, and forensics personnel) to serve in Mexico's new [accusatorial justice system](#), which took effect in 2016. While the nongovernmental

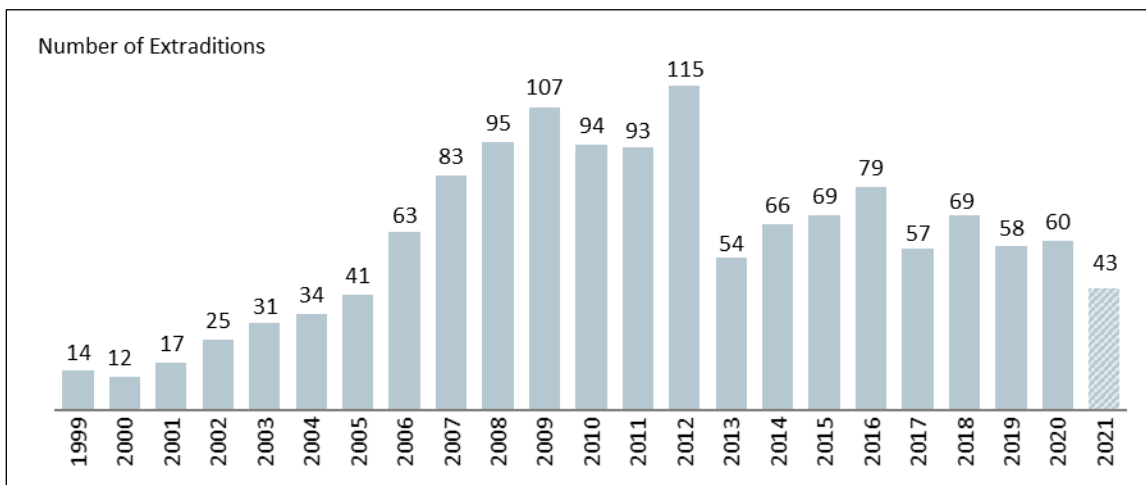
organization World Justice Project [praised](#) the system's potential for increasing transparency, efficiency, and accountability, the López Obrador government has cut funding for its key law enforcement institutions as part of austerity measures. It also dismantled the federal police and created a military-led [National Guard](#), a force with a controversial human rights record and no investigative authority.

The Bicentennial Framework mentions increasing institutional capacity to respond to homicides and reduce impunity, but it is unclear how much U.S. training and technical assistance the government will accept. Should Mexico continue to rely on its military to perform public security tasks and accept less U.S. foreign assistance, Congress may lose some influence on rule-of-law reform in Mexico through conditions on appropriations, vetting, and human rights training.

## Anti-corruption and Law Enforcement Cooperation

Congressional attention may focus on the status of progress in combating corruption (a global strategic [priority](#) for the Biden Administration) and strengthening bilateral law enforcement cooperation through the framework. The action plan envisions a joint objective of building on past cooperation to investigate and prosecute corrupt actors in the context of disrupting criminal financial networks, as well as increasing cooperation in extradition matters (see [Figure 2](#)). However, bilateral law enforcement cooperation on all criminal matters, especially those pertaining to corruption cases, remains a [source of friction](#) between the countries. President López Obrador also has [criticized](#) civil society groups that have received U.S. funding for reporting on corruption in his government.

**Figure 2. Extraditions from Mexico to the United States**  
(1999-2021)



**Source:** U.S. Department of Justice.

In recent years, investigations in both the United States and Mexico have targeted high-level alleged criminal kingpins and corrupt actors, including [Genaro García Luna](#), a former Mexican Secretary of Public Security, and [Emilio Lozoya](#), the former chief executive of *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex). However, the late 2020 U.S. law enforcement arrest of former Mexican Defense Secretary General Salvador Cienfuegos on drug- and corruption-related charges led to an [unraveling](#) of law enforcement cooperation. In the aftermath of Cienfuegos's arrest (and subsequent release), the Mexican Congress [enacted legislation](#) to limit U.S. law enforcement operations and U.S.-Mexican intelligence sharing and the López Obrador government paused the issuance of visas for U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents. Compounded by the pandemic, extraditions from Mexico to the United States hit a 15-year low in

2021. These and other factors raise questions about the extent to which the Bicentennial Framework might achieve the levels of cooperation seen during the Mérida Initiative.

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