



## The southern border of Mexico: problems and challenges of national security and its different dimensions[1]

### La frontera sur de México: Problemas y desafíos de seguridad nacional y sus diferentes dimensiones

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**Abstract:** The southern border of Mexico presents great challenges and opportunities. It is an area of traditional coexistence and daily border dynamics. Despite not presenting a can be done traditional enemy; however, the interests of the United States have made organized crime activities, especially related to drug trafficking; as well as the transit of undocumented migrants is part of the Mexican National Security agenda. This paper proposes that only from a multidimensional and comprehensive approach is it possible to manage a border that takes people into account as human beings, beyond their citizenship.

**Keywords:** Multidimensional Approach, National Security, Southern Border, US-Mexico Relationship.

**Resumen:** La frontera sur de México presenta grandes desafíos y oportunidades. Es un área de convivencia tradicional y dinámica de frontera diaria. A pesar de no presentar un enemigo tradicional se puede decir; sin embargo, que, a causa de los intereses de los Estados Unidos en la región respecto al control de las actividades del crimen organizado, especialmente las relacionadas con el narcotráfico; así como el tránsito de inmigrantes indocumentados, es que la frontera sur siempre ha formado parte de la agenda de Seguridad Nacional de México. Este documento propone que solo desde un enfoque multidimensional e integral es posible gestionar una frontera que tenga en cuenta a las personas como seres humanos, más allá de su ciudadanía.

**Palabras clave:** Enfoque multidimensional, Frontera Sur, Relación EE UU-México, Seguridad nacional.

## INTRODUCTION

The general aim of this article is to highlight the role of the national security approach and policies by the Mexican State on the Mexico-Guatemala and Belize border, analyzing some of the problems and challenges that have arisen in recent years. For the Mexican State, the southern border with Central America is a priority in its national security agenda, considering the main shared border problems: drug trafficking, migration, violence, arms trafficking, smuggling of goods, and trafficking in persons.

The border between Guatemala, Belize and Mexico has long been porous and pendular migration, related to commercial activity, or justified by different job opportunities has been an important part of the regional culture (García, 2017: 44 y 45; Chan-Pech, 2019: 48-55). In the Central American North Triangle, made up of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (Barrachina, 2016: 47-52), violence is part of the population's daily life by criminal groups deeply rooted in the territory (Armijo, 2011: 45-48).

The problems caused by organized crime in the region have not been managed effectively (Olson y Zaino, 2014: 29-34), this has resulted in the current situation being more complex and generating significant social impacts. Therefore, it is still essential to promote a comprehensive agenda to promote an effective security and welfare policy on this border (Correa-Cabrera, 2017: 7-11). From the perspective of national security, the inadequate management and implementation of the policy to reduce risks, threats and problems; especially in terms of drug trafficking, weapons and money laundering.

By way of background, in the 1980s, Guatemala - and, in general, Central America - was a favorable territory for Colombian cartels to diversify the routes and means of drug transport. Weak institutions in political and economic dimensions of the region were an excellent breeding ground for cartels to take control of important regions of the territory. The internal armed conflict reduced attention to drug trafficking, corruption of the military and other officials; as well as armed bands that provided protection to illicit crops and transport routes. Additionally, note that there is a large Guatemalan border of about 1,687 kilometers with four countries and a high degree of border porosity, as well as a network of areas and routes of consolidated traffic; and poor cooperation and drug policy coordinated with Mexico since the 1980s (Comisión Nacional para la Reforma de la Política de Drogas, 2014).

Over the years, according to the 2016 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, issued by the United States Department of State, most of the cocaine [90 percent] that enters that country passes through Central America. This trend has increased since the 1990s with the strengthening of Mexican criminal groups and their networks with Colombian groups. The impact of drug trafficking and its profits also show the ineffectiveness of international drug cooperation; of binational cooperation and management on this issue of Central America in the last 30 years, based on an agenda for national security. Despite this there have been advances; For example, in 2017, Guatemala had its largest confiscation, consisting of 13.7 tons of cocaine, with the support of the US Coast Guard (Williams, 2018).

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## THEORICAL FRAMEWORK

### **The multidimensional approach of the national security policy of the Mexican state: an effective transversal management model.**

The National Security Program 2014-2018 of Mexico "(...) recognizes the impact of those trends and factors that could have a negative impact on the national interests and aims of Mexico and on the conditions for the social and economic development of its population" (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2014). The challenge posed by this program is that "(...) gives integral attention to vulnerabilities, risks and threats that directly impact the development of the Mexican State and the quality of life of its population, establishing a link between security, defense and development in three aspects: human, political-military and economic-environmental." (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2014).

This change in the national security approach implied having an effective transversal management model, which in practice has had limitations on the southern border with Central America and in the relationship with the United States (Angulo, 2006: 17-26). The analysis of Mexican drug policy and its relationship with Guatemala, within the framework of national security policy, reflects different limitations, which have not affected on a reduction in the factors that figure vulnerability and the risks of the interrelationship between security, migration, and drug trafficking (Arévalo. B. 2002: 162-164).

The challenge of this paradigm is to make its implementation viable by the government actors of the three levels of government in Mexico, to promoting security and development in the southern Mexican border. The challenge is even greater if "multidimensional national security" integrates human security not only for citizens, but for all human beings who are in the national territory (Head. I, 1991: 115-119; Nef. J, 1999: 11-13; Rojas, F and Alvarez, A., 2002: 14-19).

On the southern border of Mexico, the documented or undocumented migratory flow of Central Americans, mainly from the countries that make up the northern triangle (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador), is common (International Crisis Group, 2016: 11-16). The dimensions to which migration responds (Casillas, 2015: 56-61), range from chronic insecurity of the countries and populations of origin (homicides[\*\*], kidnapping, smuggling, drug trafficking, collection of land, trafficking in persons, domestic violence, arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion and former revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements [Mata Cervantes, 2017: 6-8]), epidemic violence (aggravated by gangs and organized crime groups), hurricane and earthquake disasters, endemic poverty in the region and economic uncertainties caused by changes in patterns of production due to climate change (Nawrotzi, Riosmena and Hunter, 2015: 67-69), as well as basic structural factors of regional economic development.

This diverse context represents a challenge to carry out an effective multilevel management oriented towards regional security and development. Hence the question, Will the incoming Mexican administration be able to set up a policy capable of addressing all these dimensions? These problems have gradually been exacerbated over the years by inefficient cross-cutting management for development and security, also limited governance based on the rule of law (Benitez Manaut, R, 2003; Barrachina Lisón, C and Rial, J, 2006: 150-157).

The challenge of managing these problems lies in reconciling the national security risks agenda versus a human rights agenda (Ghys, 2019: 20-22) and the right to migrate. The difficulty of conceiving this balance is, has been and will be a source of border, local, regional and intergovernmental tension, because emigration is a human right, the truth is also that in the migratory flows it is possible to enter people with criminal records, linked to gangs or criminal groups. Hence the challenge of the institutional capacity of the Mexican State to discuss the risks in these migratory flows from Central America (Ingram y Curtis, 2015: 25-27).

The attack of September 11, 2001 is the watershed of major geostrategic changes in cooperation relations for border control between the United States, Mexico and Guatemala (Ribando Seelke and Finklea, 2017: 13-22). The attacks triggered that Mexico modified the way it organized its territorial security. As a result, he had to reconsider the terms in which he would develop his border and immigration security policy with his neighbors in the South (in Mexico one of the effects was to include security cooperation in the NAFTA agreements [Lozano-Vázquez and Rebolledo Flores, 2015: 246-249]). From that moment on, countries acquired the commitment to improve their security by protecting shared borders (Cottam y Otwin, 2005: 20-28). However, in practice, Mexico has gradually strengthened border security and control, as part of the Mérida Initiative, since the end of the first decade of the 21st century, porosities are still maintained.

This situation has facilitated both the flows of irregular Central American migrants to Mexico, as well as drug trafficking to and from Central America. Therefore, the emphasis is on promoting effective co-responsibility in the area of migration governance within the framework of the institutionalization processes of security, migration and development policy towards the southern border and promoting cooperation from Mexico, with Central America and the United States that gradually be strengthened (Pastor Gómez, 2016: 6-10).

In the case of Mexico, the first formal policy action was to impose on Guatemala the contents of the "Smart Borders" agreement, which resulted in the creation in 2002 of the High-Level Group for Border Security (GANSEF, later, GANSEG) (Ribando Seelke, 2009: 21-25). Since then, border control and security are a priority issue for both countries (initially as a response to terrorist threats, and subsequently the fight against drug trafficking from the second half of the 21st century). However, the problems of corruption, lack of professionalization, limited technology, intelligence and research, among others, show the increasing difficulty of substantially reducing drug trafficking on the Mexico-Guatemala border in the last twenty years. The current budgetary restrictions of both the federal administration of the United States and Mexico to promote international initiatives for both security and local development show the distrust of the results of actions and strategies in previous agreements. On the other hand, the Mérida Initiative has not been successful in its effort to cut drug trafficking, in its transit from Central America to Mexico and then to the United States.

After September 11, 2001, the "Merida Initiative" was devised with the aim of improving cooperation and security control between the United States, Mexico and Central America to stop drug trafficking of transnational criminal organizations; as well as to detect possible terrorist attacks in the region (Ribando Seelke, 2009: 17-20). It started with a financing of 1.6 billion dollars and four pillars of action: 1) disrupting the working capacity of organized crime; 2) institutionalize the ability to support the rule of law; 3) create the border structure of the 21st century, and 4) build strong and resilient communities (Benitez Manaut y Rodríguez, 2009: 43-45). Funding for programs for improving and professionalized local police was one of the initiative's core strategies. The guidance for action were: control of undocumented immigration, strengthening and professionalization of public safety; shared strategies to protect the southern border of the United States. Over the years, the impact of the Mérida Initiative on the relationship with Mexico and the border has basically been limited in terms of financing for infrastructure and biometric equipment to promote immigration regulation and control (Barrachina, 2009: 260-265).

The security thresholds established as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 2001 - which caused a stricter border control, as well as the "criminalization" speech of irregular migration to the United States - caused Mexico to devote more resources and attention to compliance with the safety community criteria (Benitez Manaut, 2008: 2-6). Given the new security scenario, Mexico increased cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking and migration by implementing policies on the southern border through Plan Sur (2001-2003) and the Southern Border Program (2014-2018) (Borja Armas, 2016: 19-29). However, there have been structural limitations in these cross-border cooperation programs, which have not substantially reduced drug trafficking or the passage of undocumented migrants across borders.

## Southern border program: policies and limitations

On July 7, 2014, presidents Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico and Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala, announced the Southern Border Program (PFS), whose purpose was to protect migrants traveling through Mexico. Other goals of the program were: to foster a culture of legality, human rights, respect and appreciation of migrants; join the issue of migration into regional and local development strategies; and consolidate effective migration management, based on criteria of facilitation, international co-responsibility, border security and human security. Promote the processes of integration and reintegration of migrants and their families; and strengthen access to justice and security for migrants, their families and those who defend their main rights (López, 2015: 70-72).

The two main goals of the Program are: a) to protect migrants entering Mexico and b) to administer ports of entry in a way that promotes the security and prosperity of the region (Wilson and Valenzuela, 2014:1-3). The program promoted border custody from a dozen naval bases in rivers; safety cords that are found along a line between Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz and Salina Cruz, Oaxaca (on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec). Also, it stipulated that migration officials should work with the military, federal and state police, to carry out the controls from the issuance of "Regional Visitor" and "Border Worker Visitor" cards. The repercussions of these border containment cords meant that migrants took more remote and dangerous traffic routes (D Vera, Passel and Gonzalez Barrera, 2017: 5-7).

Regarding the aim of "protecting migrants entering Mexico", the action plan considered five dimensions: a) orderly migration, b) infrastructure improvements, c) protection of migrants, d) shared regional responsibility and e) Inter-institutional coordination (Isacson, Meyer y Smith, 2017: 6-8). The problem of management and policies in these dimensions has been its effective capacity for implementation and transversal coordination that, although it has improved migration controls, has not affected a decrease in drug flows across the borders with Guatemala, whose destination is mainly to the United States.

Regional and orderly migration: The "Regional Visitor Card of Mexico" was established with a validity for five years with an unlimited number of tickets, and a limit of 72 hours to stay in the country; the "Border Worker Visitor Card" would allow working in the border area and staying for extended periods. The aim was to ease regular, orderly and documented trips of people crossing the border in the region. This has allowed Guatemalans and Belizeans to receive a pass for tourism, shopping and family purposes in the immediate Mexican border region for a limited period. The main aim was to protect regional operations by promoting purchases and cross-border tourism by residents of neighboring countries.

TABLE 1  
Number of Local Visitor Migration Forms and as of 2013  
Regional Visitor Cards delivered per year and Mexican state.

Local Visitor Immigration Form / Regional Visa Card (from 2014)												
AÑO	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Chiapas	1376	7067	123322	79267	60896	58019	36537	94936	105069	83533	71176	67120
Tabasco	S/D	S/D	8064	5042	3068	3151	4487	8725	6478	3736	2849	4793
Q. Roo	2139	3577	40673	8152	10141	6465	4134	8377	2670	2547	1417	2167
Total	4515	10444	172059	92461	74105	67635	45158	112038	114217	89816	75442	74080

Prepared by the authors based on statistics from the National Institute of Migration, Mexico in the period 2007-2018.

TABLE 2  
Number of Migrant Forms Border Worker and as of 2013 Border  
Worker Visitor Cards delivered per year and Mexican state[††]

Border Worker Immigration Form / Visitor Card Border Worker (as of 2014)												
AÑO	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Chiapas			30655	28570	29953	23177	15749	15358	16613	15056	12348	10544
Tabasco			23	58	40	32	32	33	35	66	48	166
Q. Roo			0	1	1	1	6	0	10	8	3	4
Total	27840	22458	30678	28629	29994	23210	15782	15391	16658	15130	12399	10714

Prepared by the authors based on statistics from the National Institute of Migration, Mexico in the period 2007-2018.

Improve infrastructure for border security and migration control: Focused on conditioning infrastructure and other types of improvements at customs ports of entry and other border stations to modernize customs and border stations. The proposal of the plan was to create new Centers for Integral Attention to Border Traffic, which would serve both to offer services to migrants in transit, and to ease their deportation processes. This is an aim aligned with Mexico's regional programs to streamline ports of entry with the goal of improving trade and visitor flows. It was known as the "Border Zone Support Program" and sought to promote regional integration. Initially, these new centers did not offer services to migrants who decided to stay in the country, such as services to asylum application, file criminal complaints or receive legal advice without fear of deportation. This part was consistent with Mexico's regional programs to streamline ports of entry to improve trade and visitor flows (Border Zone Support Program) and to promote regional integration of trade schemes. In 2017, there were five Centers for Integral Attention to Border Traffic and mobile checkpoints along the border. The services offered for migrants were medical care, support and advice for minors in the process of repatriation (Ortiz de Zárate Bejar y Shubich Green, 2015: 171-174).

Protection of migrants: intended to develop medical and social services for families by developing new social and health services for migrants and their families, building five new medical units in Chiapas and a set of improvements in infrastructure, personnel training and working protocols for Detention centers and migrant shelters.

Shared regional responsibility: the aim was to coordinate regional efforts based on a "shared responsibility" between municipalities, Mexican states, Guatemalan departments and countries. The aim of this proposal was to improve regional collaboration on issues related to migration, based on a "shared responsibility" between the countries of Central America and Mexico. One aim to highlight was the interest of the countries of the northern triangle to develop public policies in Central America that triggered changes in their economic and political processes, to combat the factors that will drive population migration (poverty, insecurity, vulnerability and violence); However, this policy did not commit Mexico to any financial assistance or help [††]. An important point in this part was to promote coordinated work, especially with the Government of Guatemala, for the dismantling of criminal groups, and to establish centers for the registration and formation of shared border databases (biometric data, criminal organizations, routes of traffic, traffic routes, vulnerable populations, etc.). However, profound limitations persist in effective drug cooperation, based on research, intelligence, prevention and vocational training, hindered the progress of drug cooperation initiatives.

Inter-institutional coordination: The Ministry of the Interior should coordinate with the governments of the States of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Tabasco through a public policy known as "Coordination for the Comprehensive Care of Migration in the Southern Border" to carry out the strategies, mechanisms and activities stipulated in the program to develop and implement models of inter-institutional coordination between federal, state and municipal units involved in border security, and meet the goal of an orderly migration. One of the aims of the strategy was to coordinate the agencies that had the task of

enforcing the program guidelines, integrating from the military institutions, to the municipal police that carried out their own control points and working protocols.

The plan postulated the exchange of information between agencies and coordinated actions to protect the border and control the flow of migrants and illegal goods[§§]. Emphasized the ways in which there were limitations in the evaluation and monitoring of these initiatives with a comprehensive approach (migration, security and development), and there were no positive effects on the progress of the capabilities of interception of illicit drugs, as well as cut the working capacity of transnational criminal groups. The results of these cooperation initiatives were to strengthen the infrastructure, border inspection mechanisms and include certain technological innovation processes. The pending challenges were to strengthen security, reducing the infiltration in Mexico of people with criminal records or practices and promoting better welfare conditions in border populations, which implied a greater impact on the processes of management and implementation of migration policies and community development. However, the assistance policy of the United States towards Central America (Olson, 2014) and in particular towards Guatemala has not been integral in the last twenty years, in the sense that the confiscated drug shipments increased, especially cocaine, the truth is also that the incentives for a real decrease in drug trafficking have not been eliminated (Cara Labrador and Renwick, 2019). This entails the need to redefine collaboration strategies for binational and national combating organized crime. In the case of Mexico, its priority is to make sure greater effectiveness of security policies and carry out effective mechanisms to combat corruption, transparency and accountability of its various institutes and corporations responsible for implementing policies related to the southern border.

To implement the Program, a variety of federal agencies participated. These federal agencies together with state and municipal corporations were responsible for the distribution of competences and functions, which have resulted in programs, policies and strategies with low levels of efficiency in drug seizures and eradication of the various international and cross-border criminal groups. This institutionalization of the national security policy on the southern border was not effective in regulating drug flows from Central America and with preferential destination to the United States. To make this possible improvement in communication and information technologies; police reform and in the prison system; as well as improvements in the intelligence systems they had to be implemented, as well as, to create an effective model of inter-institutional coordination in the national security agenda with Central America.

Mexico has signed many cooperation agreements with Guatemala and Belize with contents similar to those signed with the United States, to have greater border control. Some of the results of these agreements are the Binational Border Security Groups. However, the difficult geographical conditions of the region — which is jungle, mountainous and has many wetlands — poor institutional coverage and corruption have limited greater effectiveness in drug policy over the past 30 years (Benitez, 2011: 188-190; Barrachina, 2013).

The national security policy in the administration of president Andrés Manuel López Obrador

At the time of knowing the election result of the 2018 elections in Mexico, there was great uncertainty about what the president's relationship with the Mexican armed forces authorities would be. One of the most recurrent comments was that Andrés Manuel López Obrador had a great resentment towards them, that the Presidential General Staff was going to disappear, and that military institutions were going to lose a lot of political force (Espino, 2018).

Despite fulfilling the promise of the Presidential General Staff disappearing, the reality is that the armed forces have become a disciplined instrument at the service of the President of Mexico, and that this follows a policy of continuity with the Mexican tradition of military autonomy (Arteta, 2018; Notimex, 2019). The approval of a National Guard, under military command, and composed of elements of the army, navy and federal police; and its missions focused on combating organized crime (as a national police), as well as neutralizing the passage of migrants through Mexican territory confirms this hypothesis. Officially presented, with all the legal instruments approved, at Campo Marte on June 30, 2019, the National Guard will depend

on the Secretary of Security and Citizen Prevention, and will have General Luis Rodríguez Bucio as the first commander. There is no doubt in pointing out that this institution will become the central pivot of López Obrador's security strategy, and that it will directly manage a good part of the missions related to the national security agenda in the Mexican territory (Damian, 2019).

Obama from the hand of the IDB followed a mixed policy (The White House, 2015). While on the one hand the repressive policy increased and repatriated many of Central Americans, inviting Mexico to strengthen its policy of immigration neutralization through the Southern Border Plan, on the other it promoted the "Alliance Plan for the prosperity of the Northern Triangle" (PATN), whereby these countries received 8,618 million dollars in different projects from 2016 to 2018. The policy sought to develop local capacities so that Central Americans would not leave their countries (Banco Interamericano para el Desarrollo, 2018).

Donald Trump's threat to impose increasing tariffs on Mexican exports has become the clearest threat to national security facing the Mexican administration (Mars, Ximénez de Sandoval and Fariza, 2019). The US president put on the table two major issues that are a priority without delay so as not to fulfill his threats: control of both organized crime and its activities related to the transit of narcotics to the United States; as of the migratory flows (Briscoe, 2018), especially of Central Americans on their way (Rooney y Collins, 2018) to the American nation (Bergman, 2017: 135-138). Although we did not trust the idea of a multidimensional national security agenda, this time, in a "traditional" way, the Donald Trump administration has integrated and imposed that the fight against drugs and immigration control be matters of national security of Mexico. The Government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico began by proposing an alternative policy to the securitizing vision of Donald Trump: for a few months it seemed that Mexico was betting on the development agenda and the United States of America for that of the hard hand.

As of May 10, 2017, the Trump administration tried to cancel the PATN. On June 15 and 16, 2017 at the "Conference for Prosperity and Security in Central America" (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2018), Vice President Mike Pence met with the leaders of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Colombia in Miami to change the strategy by making that the new approach falls on security issues. On August 27, 2018, the Consultative Body of the Regional Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity (2018) met, and on September 9 a first meeting of the foreign ministers of Honduras, Guatemala and Honduras was suspended with the elected president of Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Ola, 2018). As of this moment there is a regional agenda with two alternative projects: that of the new Mexican administration and that of Donald Trump.

On October 11, 2018, Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray and Secretary of the Interior Alfonso Navarrete Prida attend the "Second Conference for Prosperity and Security in Central America" in Washington DC. The assistants on the part of the North American government were Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Presidents of the "Northern Triangle" countries, Homeland Security secretary Kirstjen Nielsen affirms that "we must end transnational criminal organizations and eliminate threats wherever they originate" (Seguridad en América, 2018).

As of October 29, 2018, Alicia Bárcena Executive Secretary of ECLAC begins with Marcelo Ebrard to develop a development plan for the Mexican southeast and Central America, with the idea of trying to detonate the economy with projects such as the Mayan train, and the connection Railway Coatzacoalcos-Salina Cruz (CEPAL, 2018). In their protest as president of Mexico, on December 1, the presidents of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador signed with López Obrador a pact of understanding to advance the plan sponsored by ECLAC (Animal Politico, 2018); while on December 10 at the Conference for the "Global Compact on Migration" in Marrakech (Rivera, 2018), the Comprehensive Development Plan was presented, with the support of the presidents of North Central America, Mexico and ECLAC. At first, the United States followed a "diplomatic" position by pressing along the line of securitization; until Trump finally gave up Nielsen and launched the threat of the gradual rise in tariffs.



On February 20, 2019, the “IV Meeting of Security Ministers of the Northern Triangle and the United States” is organized in El Salvador. Without the Mexican delegation present, the members sign a memorandum to bring criminals to justice, share information and secure borders and prevent migrant caravans. On March 6, Secretary Nielsen appears before the Committee on Homeland Security of the United States Congress, pointing out the state of emergency in the region and requesting the support of congressmen to strengthen the president’s measures (La Jornada, 2019). On March 29 Trump threatens to close the border with Mexico (Brooks, 2019), and on April 6 Nielsen Kirstjen renounce and its replacement is Kevin McAleenan who until then served as commissioner for customs and border protection (CNN, 2019).

Despite the tightening of the US position, Mexico continues with its road map and on May 20 at the National Palace, President López Obrador, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard and ECLAC Secretary Alicia Bárcena present the “Development Plan for Southeast Mexico and Central America” (CNN en español, 2019) (Sanchez, 2019). Two days later Marcelo Ebrard presented the plan in Washington DC (Velazquez, 2019), and seven days later he did it in Berlin, where he secured the support of Germany, Spain and the European Union (Sanchez, 2019).

On the other hand, the day after the presentation in Berlin, on May 28, McAleenan traveled to Guatemala to sign an agreement against human trafficking (United States embassy in Guatemala, 2019), and on May 30, Donald Trump announced that he would gradually increase export taxes Mexican as of June 10. Before this date, on the 7th, Mexico agreed with the United States to deploy members of the National Guard on the southern border of Mexico, and that the transit measures of migrants through the country would be hardened (Ahmed y Villegas, 2019). On the other hand, Mexico agreed to temporarily accommodate migrants who were requesting their asylum request in the United States, to support US immigration agencies.

At this time, it is still early to know how this policy will evolve, and what the interaction dynamics will be. It seems that Mexico is going to tighten its immigration policy, while moving forward with its regional development project, as Obama already did when. Shortly after all these movements, Tonatiuh Guillén (El Financiero, 2019), Commissioner of the National Migration Institute resigned, and questioned the little influence that the Secretary of the Interior Olga Sánchez Cordero was having in the crisis (Riva Palacio, 2019). On the other hand, official reports on the first amounts of resources sent for different projects to Central America have already been made (López Ponce, 2019).

#### Mexico in its border role

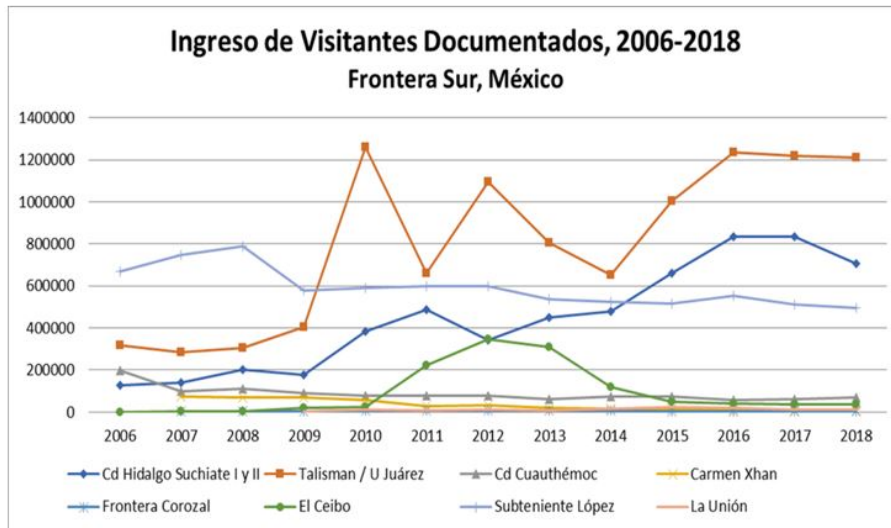
With the aim of preventing the arrival of Central American migration, the United States has extended its regulatory networks beyond the physical border, towards Mexican politics and territory. Mexico claims to recognize the human rights of Central American migrants and has classified irregular migration as an administrative offense, and not as a crime. However, in practice many of the government actions treat migrants as criminals, and in the population the social representation that associates migration with “illegality” persists (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Criminalize migration in Mexico, which means that migrants use organized crime networks in the country to make their goal. Similarly, criminals have come to control the migration route. The channeling of migrants, their clandestine status and the increased risks have thus served to strengthen criminal control over migration routes in the country. In this way, border policies have been instrumental in maintaining insecurity. Estimates suggest that the measures to prevent Central American migrants from passing through Mexico have not really had any effect; on the contrary, the numbers increase continuously. The Mexican authorities estimate that between 400,000 and 500,000 irregular migrants have crossed from Central America to southern Mexico each year - as mentioned in Chancellor Marcelo Ebrard on different occasions- although these numbers fall short to the latest data on arrests in the United States<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, with those arrested and repatriated by Mexican authorities, and those who manage to reach their destination.

A network of shelters, mostly funded by religious entities and other civil society organizations that work along the migration routes, offer some monthly data, but only a percentage of migrants traveling north

stay in shelters. The southern border remains the main route for cocaine trafficked from the Pacific coast of Colombia, and is also part of the logic of economy and violence of irregular migratory transit. In their territories the context of violence is the product of the gradual fragmentation and rise of drug cartels (Mazzitelli, 2011); and the spread of Central American street gangs, which are often the armed arm in the populations of border states and those responsible for controlling migrant transit routes (Dudley, 2011 and 2012).

Since the eighties of the last century we have seen a constant silent migration flow, which has created security problems for Mexicans. The criminal activities of organized crime, kidnappings, murders of migrants, and difficult living conditions in their countries, is what has led to them finally being organized in caravans, and that their visibility has generated alarm. In the border spaces for the inhabitants, the Central American crossing documented on a regular basis is common. In Chiapas, from 2006 to 2018, the registry indicates 17 million 867 thousand 356 crossings (from border workers, regional visitors, tourists and foreigners living with their papers in Mexico and crossing the border). In Tenosique 1 million 208 thousand and in Chetumal 7 million 834 thousand 926. Life on the border is very dynamic. Guatemalans (Vega-Macias, 2017) and Belizeans cross to Mexico every day to the cinema, to buy, to study, to carry out daily activities, and few have been the problems derived from this daily coexistence[†††].



GRAPH 1  
Entry of documented visitors in Mexico 2006-2018  
Prepared by the authors based on the "Monthly Bulletin on Migration Statistics" 2007-2018

Also, as noted, people are very accustomed to the passage of undocumented immigrants (in some places more visibly than in others) and this has also not represented major problems. Since 2000 the different Mexican administrations have treated the migratory phenomenon with different approaches, with national security prevailing. From 2001 to 2018, 2 million 146 thousand 852 Central Americans and Cubans returned to their countries of origin from Mexico[†††].

The "South Plan" that Vicente Fox implemented was a repressive and police strategy. After the attacks of September 11, the established plans aimed to support the United States in immigration control. The Government of President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa in Mexico (2006-2012) faced a new situation, because it was in these years that the increase in homicidal violence in the country; as well as organized crime activities, it was also reflected in the number of kidnappings and killings of migrants in transit. The reports of the National Commission of Human Rights and the massacre of San Fernando de Tamaulipas in 2010, led the administration to see the need to integrate the concept of Human Rights into legislation and change the

approach of approach to migrants. The common denominator of those years was the drastic reduction of repatriated migrants (Barrachina, 2013).

Mexico has been a traditional ally of the US administration both in the fight against organized crime, which has generated violence and an unprecedented situation of instability in the safety of citizens throughout the country; as well as the strategies to contain the irregular migration flows have failed. The complaint of the US president, for lack of collaboration and lack of understanding makes no sense.

There are not many, relatively, documented migrants, especially from the Central American area that has remained to live in Mexico; The number of Venezuelan migrants is now significant. The southern border of Mexico is nevertheless very busy, both documented and undocumented. This bases the proposal of this work about the fact that it is very important to strengthen border development policies based on multidimensional strategies that foster a long coexistence that does not marginalize the benefits to large regions and populations on either side of the border.

## METHODOLOGY, SAMPLE PERIOD AND DATA USED

### Design

This work has rebuilt and given order, through declarations, official documents, and information obtained in the media, to the difficulties that the Mexican State has had to transform a traditional policy of securitization of the southern border, into a multidimensional vision that privileges human security over national security. Despite the intentions, and the statements of the Mexican government, the reality and pressure from the United States has led to the continuation of a traditional policy in which the armed forces, through the National Guard, play an important role.

### Instruments

This manuscript has used the news provided by the media to describe in detail a political situation that has evolved very rapidly during 2019 and early 2020. Data from the National Institute of Migration have been used to try to measure both the important coexistence that exists on the southern border of Mexico, and the limited number of Central American citizens who choose to stay and live permanently in Mexico. The “must be” that the literature indicates as ideal for harmonizing security policies with democracy has been contrasted with the imperative that is imposed in the political reality.

### Process

The analysis of documents, identification of moments and times of the dynamics, and the political pressures of the governments of Mexico and the United States, from a descriptive approach, allow us to measure the pulse that was experienced in the initial moments of the administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Despite the intention of the Mexican administration to visualize the southern border in a multidimensional human security logic, such as the one proposed in this article, the reality finally prevails, and allows pressure from the United States to define Mexican border policy.

Specialized literature that reflects on the concepts of national security and human security has been identified in this article; as well as the one that discusses the consequences of expanding the horizon of these concepts from a multidimensional perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

The general aim of the article was to highlight the role of the national security approach and policies of the Mexican State on the southern border of Mexico with Guatemala and Belize; analyzing some of the problems and challenges of implementing strategies and dynamics that foster cross-border development and security. According to estimates by the US government, 90 percent of the illicit drugs that enter through its southern border pass through the Isthmus of Central America and Mexico. Of that percentage, about half cross through Central America. This influence of drug trafficking has conditioned the effectiveness of national security policies and international and regional cooperation, and with it the multidimensional approach to the national security perspective of the Mexican State.

Answer the question posed in the text about whether the Mexican government (2018-2024) will be able to set up a policy capable of addressing an effective multilevel management oriented towards regional security and development? The empirical analysis of the history of the number of repatriations of Central Americans and Cubans carried out by Mexico clearly shows the thesis that the strategies implemented on the southern border always respond to dynamic political interests. In such a way that the data shows four very defined stages: 2001 to 2007 repatriation of 1 million 127 thousand 812 Central Americans and Cubans in a period marked by the inertia of the South Plan, which after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, tightened the policy; 2008 to 2013, change of the General Law of Population, modifying the concept of "illegal" by "undocumented", begins the impulse of the concept of Human Rights in the law, in such a way that there was relaxation of the repatriation policy; 2014 to 2018, derived from the Plan Frontera Sur and the close relationship with the United States' securitization policies towards the region, there was an increase in the number of "returnees". Finally the current stage that begins in 2019 and, although at the beginning it posed a scenario of great tension due to Mexico's preference for betting on regional development instead of continuing with the previous policy, based on the threat of tariffs from President Trump of At the end of May 2019, it decided to follow the policy that the US government dictated.

Recently, the United States Government also introduced the issue of migration in the National Security agenda, and Mexico must take part in this dynamic. Therefore, it is important to manage a multilevel and transversal agenda on complex issues such as human rights, border security, immigration regularization, insecurity, social assistance and social polarization. The failure to set up an agenda that takes these items into account has limited the actions of governments to cut these problems with a perspective focused on security for development.

One of the challenges of the new Mexican migration policy will be to reconcile human mobility, the right to emigrate with the State's priorities to regulate, control and order international migrations and its implications for national security, especially with the role of military control of the National Guard. One situation to highlight is the leadership that the Secretary of Foreign Relations (SRE) has acquired in defining the migration agenda with the United States, overcoming the limitations of Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB). However, that the SRE lacks an effective operational capacity and professional expertise in migration management and policy has led to the Migration's national institute (INM) and the National Guard having a greater relationship with migrant communities, both in the southern and northern border.

The prospecting of the scenarios of the southern border of Mexico must start from recognizing institutional limitations to promote effective governance that facilitates safe, orderly and regular migration from a comprehensive regional perspective and thus reconcile the priorities of migration flows, the right to emigrate and the national security priorities of the Mexican State.

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## NOTES

[1]The results presented in this document are part of the investigation of aim K "National Security and Border with Guatemala" of the research project "Mexico-Guatemala Cross-Border Region" (2018-2020). Large-scale scientific initiative in which more than 90 researchers with a consolidated track record from Centro GEO, COLEF, CIDE, CIESAS, Instituto Mora, ECOSUR, FLACSO Guatemala and the University of San Carlos de Guatemala cooperate. Available in [http://www.rtmg.org/ms/objetivo\\_k/narrative/51](http://www.rtmg.org/ms/objetivo_k/narrative/51)

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[\*\*]At the time of the 2014 DHS report, Honduras had the highest murder rate in the world: 74.6 homicides per 100,000 residents that year. El Salvador ranked second, with 64.2. Guatemala was ninth, with 31.2. In 2016, El Salvador had an even higher homicide rate than Honduras, 91.2 per 100,000 people. The rate for Honduras was 59.1 and the rate for Guatemala was 23.7 (D'Vera, Passel y Gonzalez-Barrera 2017).

[††]Source: Prepared by the authors based on statistics from the National Institute of Migration, Mexico in the period 2007-2018.

[†††]The projects for the development of the area are the "Integration and Development Project of Mesoamerica" and the "Alliance for Prosperity". Also, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) made a commitment to support ongoing initiatives to integrate energy markets (connect Colombia's electricity networks to Mexico and integrate gas markets in the region).

[§§]On the border strip between Mexico and Central America there are 370 informal steps and 56 of them are vehicular, that is, where trailers and trucks of all kinds pass, without any verification. These are located in the 23 border municipalities: 18 in Chiapas, two in Tabasco, two in Campeche and one in Quintana Roo. (Barrachina, 2013; Isacson, Meyer and Smith, 2015).

[\*\*\*]According to the Customs and Borders correction Southwest Border Total Apprehensions / Inadmissibles table of the United States government in the fiscal year of 2014, the people arrested were 569,237 people; in 2015 444,859; in 2016 553,378; in 2017 415,517; in 2018 521,090 and in 2019 from January to May 676,282. If we add to this the number of detainees and deportees from Mexico, and those who manage to pass and settle in the United States, the number of migrants who cross annually is greater than that calculated by the Mexican authorities, Southwest Border Migration (CBP, 2019).

[††††]All the data that appears are own elaboration based on the different reports published between 2007 and 2018 "Boletín mensual de Estadísticas migratorias" INM. Documented visitors are: Guatemalans and Belizean with a local visitor card, regional visitor, border worker or their equivalents. Migrants who live in Mexico in a documented way. Tourists from different countries that meet the requirements to visit Mexico; and Mexicans who seal their entry into the country after visiting Guatemala or Belize.