



**FROM A MODERNIZING FIGHTING FORCE TO NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT STEWARDS:
MEXICO'S ARMED FORCES UNDER AMLO**

Iñigo Guevara Moyano

With a foreword by Cecilia Farfán Méndez

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Edited and designed by Samantha Kane Jiménez

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027
www.wilsoncenter.org

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Glossary of terms and acronyms

AMLO	Andres Manuel López Obrador, President of Mexico 2018-2024
Gendarmes	A military-trained/civilian-led paramilitary force, part of the Federal Police est. 2014
GN	National Guard
PM	Military Police, deployed in support of law enforcement
PN	Naval Police – originally similar to Military Police, but in its recent form a Marine infantry force deployed in support of law enforcement
SCT	Secretariat of Communications and Transports
SECTUR	Secretariat of Tourism
SEDENA	Secretariat of National Defense, comprising Army and Air Force
SEGOB	Secretariat of Governance, similar to a Ministry of Interior
SEMAR	

pursue their own agenda, Guevara's work sheds light as to how this process has been conducted and how to keep track of it.

Second, and building on the notion of agency, Guevara's work challenges the idea of militarization as a continuous process bolstered during President Calderón's administration uninterrupted up to the current López Obrador presidency. Guevara compellingly shows that while the Army and the Navy are increasingly involved in more tasks, from building railways and welfare banks for distributing social benefits, this has come at the expense of an agenda that sought to modernize and acquire more material capabilities. This, Guevara shows, is an important departure from the Calderón and Peña years where the armed forces could pursue their modernization efforts. The trademark, therefore, of the López Obrador administration is the inclusion of the armed forces into an economic agenda that has created revenue generating opportunities. Consequently, while we can discuss what currently seems like an expanding role of the armed forces, the evidence presented here denotes that this process of militarization has been more complex and less linear than assumed.

Third, Guevara's work is an invitation to examine critically why the Army and the Navy enjoy the highest levels of trust among the general population. The most recent data from Mexico's Victimization Survey shows that 90.2% and 87.8% of the population trust "a lot" or "somewhat" the Navy and the Army respectively. Currently, these high levels of trust are explained in relation to perceived low levels of corruption. This is to say that to the extent that the Army and the Navy are seen as incorruptible institutions, the general population will trust them more.

Data from the Survey on Democratic Quality (ENCADE per its Spanish acronym), however, suggests dynamics are more complex than corruption alone. For example, 77% of the general population trusts the armed forces for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, 67% trust

From a Modernizing Fighting Force to National Development Stewards: Mexico's Armed Forces under AMLO

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Toward a Global Middle Power Force: Mexico's Military Developments Prior to 2018

With no direct national or external threats, the Mexican military has traditionally focused on internal security, conducting counterinsurgency and later counterterrorism. Since 2006, the latter role has seen an increasing emphasis specifically on counter-cartel operations, taking on the fight against the "cartel enforcers" and cartel leadership rather than just the smugglers or supply chain. With an extension of activities into urban centers, military operations came more and more in touch with the urban population. With higher visibility came a set of requirements for the Mexican military, forcing it to professionalize in several of its facets, such as significantly developing its civil military outreach and its political military relationships.

Living in a globalized world, the international dimension became as important as the local one. International media coverage of Mexico's military can influence local or regional perceptions, and (some elements of) the Mexican military also learned how to play in this field. As part of a dramatic shift in tradition, during this transformation period the Mexican military engaged in multiple levels with the United States State, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies. Within a decade of working with U.S. counterparts, Mexican military officers' personal experiences transformed their key questions from skeptical "why should we cooperate with the Americans?" to "How should we cooperate with the Americans?" and "What else should we do with the Americans?"

In the past decade, the

All of Mexico's military branches received attention during this period. The Army continued to be mostly preoccupied with supporting internal security, initially setting up a vast network of highway roadblocks and choke points to contain cartel movements and then moving onto blanket-size stabilization operations. The need for a gendarmerie-like light infantry counter-cartel force was evident and after some organizational frustration regarding operational and administrative control of such a force, this eventually led to a significant expansion of the Military Police Corps (PM). Beyond the traditional and relatively universal military police roles of installation security and enforcing military laws and regulations, the PM was retasked with a much broader law enforcement mandate and deployed throughout the country.

Armed and Dangerous: Mexican Army Developments

Since 2012 the Army has sought to continue its relatively modest modernization process akin to a light infantry force model, announcing a large deal to procure over 3,300 High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (Humvee) from the United States, establishing a production line for 1,000 DNXI light armored vehicles, and ramping up production of the F-16 assault rifle.⁸

In parallel, the Army also embraced an outward-looking role and beefed up its regional cooperation mechanisms with the U.S. military and other USG agencies on the border by increasing participation in the Border Commanders Conference. The Army-controlled Department of National Defense (SEDENA)'s external outreach also included stepping up its international representations worldwide, opening defense attaché offices (DAOs) in an additional 13 countries, taking its global presence to 42. It eventually shut down operations at the Vietnam DAO in October 2020 and the Trinidad and Tobago DAO in May 2021, but currently maintains a presence in 40 countries.

Taking Flight: Mexican Air Force's 2030 Modernization Plans

The Mexican Air Force (FAM), which traditionally served an Army support role, received significant resources to begin partially modernizing its air mobility, air surveillance and enforcement, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. The FAM published plans to procure some 275 aircraft between 2015 and 2030, comprising over 100 combat aircraft and close to 150 helicopters, with the remainder being transport and ISR assets, including Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft. While most of these assets would be procured from the U.S.

myriad of roles it was being tasked to perform.¹⁶ For context, global military spending averages around 2.0% of GDP. The U.S. spends 3.4%, Canada 1.3%, and South America 1.7%.

Lack of a Defense Culture in Social and Political Circles

The lack of a modern defense culture in Mexican society is evident, with most Mexican or Mexico-focused researchers,

onboard each POLA would be an embarked multi helicopter capable of conducting anti submarine warfare and surface ship operations. The Navy did not hide its clear preference for Sikorsky's MH-60R Seahawk, the U.S. Navy's main embarked helicopter, and began negotiations to procure a batch of up to eight helicopters over the course of the POLA construction program. The original plan was to order the helicopters in pairs and phase in their delivery (one) to each POLA in two phases: (a) (b) (c) (d) (e) (f) (g) (h) (i) (j) (k) (l) (m) (n) (o) (p) (q) (r) (s) (t) (u) (v) (w) (x) (y) (z) (aa) (ab) (ac) (ad) (ae) (af) (ag) (ah) (ai) (aj) (ak) (al) (am) (an) (ao) (ap) (aq) (ar) (as) (at) (au) (av) (aw) (ax) (ay) (az) (ba) (bb) (bc) (bd) (be) (bf) (bg) (bh) (bi) (bj) (bk) (bl) (bm) (bn) (bo) (bp) (bq) (br) (bs) (bt) (bu) (bv) (bw) (bx) (by) (bz) (ca) (cb) (cc) (cd) (ce) (cf) (cg) (ch) (ci) (cj) (ck) (cl) (cm) (cn) (co) (cp) (cq) (cr) (cs) (ct) (cu) (cv) (cw) (cx) (cy) (cz) (da) (db) (dc) (dd) (de) (df) (dg) (dh) (di) (dj) (dk) (dl) (dm) (dn) (do) (dp) (dq) (dr) (ds) (dt) (du) (dv) (dw) (dx) (dy) (dz) (ea) (eb) (ec) (ed) (ee) (ef) (eg) (eh) (ei) (ej) (ek) (el) (em) (en) (eo) (ep) (eq) (er) (es) (et) (eu) (ev) (ew) (ex) (ey) (ez) (fa) (fb) (fc) (fd) (fe) (ff) (fg) (fh) (fi) (fj) (fk) (fl) (fm) (fn) (fo) (fp) (fq) (fr) (fs) (ft) (fu) (fv) (fw) (fx) (fy) (fz) (ga) (gb) (gc) (gd) (ge) (gf) (gg) (gh) (gi) (gj) (gk) (gl) (gm) (gn) (go) (gp) (gq) (gr) (gs) (gt) (gu) (gv) (gw) (gx) (gy) (gz) (ha) (hb) (hc) (hd) (he) (hf) (hg) (hh) (hi) (hj) (hk) (hl) (hm) (hn) (ho) (hp) (hq) (hr) (hs) (ht) (hu) (hv) (hw) (hx) (hy) (hz) (ia) (ib) (ic) (id) (ie) (if) (ig) (ih) (ii) (ij) (ik) (il) (im) (in) (io) (ip) (iq) (ir) (is) (it) (iu) (iv) (iw) (ix) (iy) (iz) (ja) (jb) (jc) (jd) (je) (jf) (jg) (jh) (ji) (jj) (jk) (jl) (jm) (jn) (jo) (jp) (jq) (jr) (js) (jt) (ju) (jv) (jw) (jx) (jy) (jz) (ka) (kb) (kc) (kd) (ke) (kf) (kg) (kh) (ki) (kj) (kk) (kl) (km) (kn) (ko) (kp) (kq) (kr) (ks) (kt) (ku) (kv) (kw) (kx) (ky) (kz) (la) (lb) (lc) (ld) (le) (lf) (lg) (lh) (li) (lj) (lk) (ll) (lm) (ln) (lo) (lp) (lq) (lr) (ls) (lt) (lu) (lv) (lw) (lx) (ly) (lz) (ma) (mb) (mc) (md) (me) (mf) (mg) (mh) (mi) (mj) (mk) (ml) (mm) (mn) (mo) (mp) (mq) (mr) (ms) (mt) (mu) (mv) (mw) (mx) (my) (mz) (na) (nb) (nc) (nd) (ne) (nf) (ng) (nh) (ni) (nj) (nk) (nl) (nm) (nn) (no) (np) (nq) (nr) (ns) (nt) (nu) (nv) (nw) (nx) (ny) (nz) (oa) (ob) (oc) (od) (oe) (of) (og) (oh) (oi) (oj) (ok) (ol) (om) (on) (oo) (op) (oq) (or) (os) (ot) (ou) (ov) (ow) (ox) (oy) (oz) (pa) (pb) (pc) (pd) (pe) (pf) (pg) (ph) (pi) (pj) (pk) (pl) (pm) (pn) (po) (pp) (pq) (pr) (ps) (pt) (pu) (pv) (pw) (px) (py) (pz) (qa) (qb) (qc) (qd) (qe) (qf) (qg) (qh) (qi) (qj) (qk) (ql) (qm) (qn) (qo) (qp) (qq) (qr) (qs) (qt) (qu) (qv) (qw) (qx) (qy) (qz) (ra) (rb) (rc) (rd) (re) (rf) (rg) (rh) (ri) (rj) (rk) (rl) (rm) (rn) (ro) (rp) (rq) (rr) (rs) (rt) (ru) (rv) (rw) (rx) (ry) (rz) (sa) (sb) (sc) (sd) (se) (sf) (sg) (sh) (si) (sj) (sk) (sl) (sm) (sn) (so) (sp) (sq) (sr) (ss) (st) (su) (sv) (sw) (sx) (sy) (sz) (ta) (tb) (tc) (td) (te) (tf) (tg) (th) (ti) (tj) (tk) (tl) (tm) (tn) (to) (tp) (tq) (tr) (ts) (tt) (tu) (tv) (tw) (tx) (ty) (tz) (ua) (ub) (uc) (ud) (ue) (uf) (ug) (uh) (ui) (uj) (uk) (ul) (um) (un) (uo) (up) (uq) (ur) (us) (ut) (uu) (uv) (uw) (ux) (uy) (uz) (va) (vb) (vc) (vd) (ve) (vf) (vg) (vh) (vi) (vj) (vk) (vl) (vm) (vn) (vo) (vp) (vq) (vr) (vs) (vt) (vu) (vv) (vw) (vx) (vy) (vz) (wa) (wb) (wc) (wd) (we) (wf) (wg) (wh) (wi) (wj) (wk) (wl) (wm) (wn) (wo) (wp) (wq) (wr) (ws) (wt) (wu) (wv) (ww) (wx) (wy) (wz) (xa) (xb) (xc) (xd) (xe) (xf) (xg) (xh) (xi) (xj) (xk) (xl) (xm) (xn) (xo) (xp) (xq) (xr) (xs) (xt) (xu) (xv) (xw) (xx) (xy) (xz) (ya) (yb) (yc) (yd) (ye) (yf) (yg) (yh) (yi) (yj) (yk) (yl) (ym) (yn) (yo) (yp) (yq) (yr) (ys) (yt) (yu) (yv) (yw) (yx) (yz) (za) (zb) (zc) (zd) (ze) (zf) (zg) (zh) (zi) (zj) (zk) (zl) (zm) (zn) (zo) (zp) (zq) (zr) (zs) (zt) (zu) (zv) (zw) (zx) (zy) (zz)

Furthermore, six months after assuming the presidency, AMLO stated: "it was up to me, I would disappear the army and convert it into National Guard. I would declare that Mexico is a pacifist country that does not need an army, and the defense of the nation necessary would fall on all Mexicans... the Army and Navy would be converted into a National Guard to guarantee security for all Mexicans... I can't do it because there are resistances."²²

While the Navy was not on AMLO's radar or discourse during most of the presidential campaign, the publication of the U.S. Defense and Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notification to the U.S. Congress on the potential sale of eight MH-60R Seahawk helicopters to Mexico changed that. The April 2018 publication announced the potential sale at an optimistic value of USD 1.2 billion, a figure that drew immediate criticism from various analysts in Mexico's mainstream media, which had informed, misrepresented the fact of the notification as a done deal. The notification became cannon fodder amid the heat of presidential campaign. Lopez Obrador's campaign came out hard against the deal. After being elected President of Mexico on 1 July 2018, he announced on July 10 that the negotiations for the deal would be cancelled.²³

Testing the Waters for Potential Direction Change

While there was no firm order to cancel, the announcement led to a halt in negotiations and raised concern that the Navy's 2030 development plans would be likely suffer significant disruptions. In a swift reaction to the president-elect's comments, the Navy published a cost benefit analysis (ACE) for the procurement of two NH Industries NH90NFH Sea Lion embarked helicopters— the pan-European competitor to the Seahawk.

In parallel, the Navy published another ACE document seeking procurement of three Mi 17 transport helicopters from Russia.²⁴ These are not competitors to the Seahawk or Sea Lion but rather cargo versions that would serve as attrition replacements for the existing Mi 17, which the Mexican Navy has operated since 1993.

While procurement of three helicopters from Russia or two from Europe would not constitute a shift in Mexico's strategic defense partnership with the U.S., it would have provided some clarity for the armed forces as to whether the AMLO administration was interested in revisiting Mexico's military supplier relationships.

The response was tantamount or worse than no response: austerity.

Whereas this account regarding helicopters may seem extremely tactical, it helps to encapsulate AMLO's vision of Mexico's defense requirements and commitments. This would likely mean that the long-awaited list of requirements would need to wait another six years and that force development plans would now be interrupted.

²² [Si por mi fuera, desaparecería al Ejército y declararía que México es un país pacifista: AMLO](#), Jornada, 30 June 2019

²³ [Mexico's president-elect will cancel planned U.S. helicopter order](#), Reuters, 11 July 2018

²⁴ Adquisición de helicópteros para Operaciones Embarcadas de Largo Alcance, SEMAR, June 2018

²⁵

The incoming AMLO administration's vision of ~~national~~ security was initially a puzzle

enhanced doctrine, education, training, and equipment for the land forces, to divorce and clarify the dual political-administrative function that SEDENA currently exercises. By establishing Army Command there is now a (clearer) relay in the line of command between the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Army. This created a structure for the land forces similar to that of the FAM.

The Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional (Chief Staff for National Defense) will also transform to become the Estado Mayor Conjunto de la Defensa Nacional (Joint Chief of Staff for National Defense, EMCDN). The term "Joint" represents the Army and the Air Force, but excludes the Navy, which continues to be part of the Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR).

Following AMLO's Initiative 002 in 2019, the National Chief of Staff (CS) and SEDENA were merged into the EMCDN in 2023. Tw EMC

operation a command of the president. However, in early 2019 the SSPC secretary announced that the National Guard would be a civilian institution under direct control of the SSPC.

While the National Guard on paper reported to the SSPC, organization and training entrusted to SEDENA. Highly respected two-star army General Luis Rodriguez Bucio, who has a track record working with the Federal Police as well as with the civilian intelligence center (CISEN) was selected to command the National Guard on 30 May 2019. Furthermore, 61,351 troops and 5,700 marines have been commissioned by their services to form part of the National Guard. Recruitment of 29,263 civilians to the Military Police and assigned to the National Guard began in January 2020. The National Guard also became a second career for recently retired military officers.³¹ Therefore, the "civilian" National Guard is effectively under a military commander and formed to a large degree by current or former military personnel. To equip the National Guard, SEDENA was tasked with producing 130,000 uniforms and 45,000 FX-05 assault rifles.³² Further deviating from the status quo, AMLO announced in June 2021 that he would propose a constitutional reform to transfer the National Guard (back) to SEDENA in 2023.³³

Migration and Border control

In June 2019, the Mexican military was ordered to support a new mission detaining

Figure 1 Source: SEDENA



Figure 2 Source: SEDENA

Similarly, in March 2021, SEDENA launched the Strategy to Strengthen Border Customs deploying military personnel to support international Trade Offices in four border customs offices in the Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon border with Texas. This was later followed by deploying troops to ten border customs offices in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Chihuahua, and Sonora in July and finally the five remaining border crossings in Baja California and Sonora as well as the single customs offices in Chiapas and Quintana Roo in mid July 2021³⁹

Securing Mexico's Energy Leaks

The use of Mexico's military to provide security for PEMEX, the government-owned oil company, is not new. SEDENA traditionally deploys some 300 troops along with 12 manned aircraft and 40 MINI-UAVs⁴⁰ while SEMAR deploys over 1,200 sailors and marines along with a ship, six interceptor craft, four minor craft, and 22 land vehicles to provide security for PEMEX's infrastructure.⁴¹

What changed under the AMLO Administration was the use of the military, initially the Army, to 1) specifically combat fuel syphoning and fuel trafficking gangs and 2) provide logistical transport in the form of fuel tankers, drivers, and security teams.

To the 2,500 troops deployed on energy security in PEMEX's strategic installations, the army reinforced this number with 2,300 troops to combat fuel syphoning along six pipelines

³⁹ Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.138, 1 September 2021

⁴⁰ Tercer Informe de Labores SEDENA 2020-2021, P.184, 1 September 2021

⁴¹ Tercer Informe de Labores SEMAR 2020-2021, P.18, 1 September 2021

Beside these standard security roles, SEDENA deployed 820 troops to combat fuel trafficking on the northern border with the U.S. In 2021, these troops interdicted close to 80 million liters (20 million gallons) of fuel smuggled from the U.S. into Mexico, mostly aboard train carts.⁴²

During the first few months of the AMLO Administration, some 300 military personnel were assigned to provide logistics support to the fleet of fuel tankers that transport gasoline and diesel throughout the country. Additionally, SEDENA subcontracted over 1,800 civilian fuel tanker drivers to operate the 637 fuel tankers that were employed to guarantee fuel supply to 19 cities in Mexico in 2020-2021.⁴³

Planes, Trains, and Tourism: Airport and Railway Construction and Administration

The cancelation of the New International Airport () T1

Railway Tranche	Destinations	Railway Length
Tranche5	Playa del Carmen to Cancun IAP	49.8 km
Tranche6	Tulum to Chetumal	249 km
Tranche7	Bacalar to Escarcega	310 km

Securing the Trans-Isthmus Corridor

Another one of the AMLO Administration's landmark projects is the development of transportation infrastructure along the Tehuantepec Isthmus, the narrowest region of Mexico. The project aims to reactivate a railway along a 300-kilometer corridor, linking the ports of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca on the Pacific coast and Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, making Mexico a viable alternative to the Panama Canal as early as 2023.

Figure 3 Source:DOF

In May 2021, AMLO vowed that once completed, the project would not be a concession to private or foreign investors, but rather handed over to the administration of the Navy.⁵⁴ Given the previous guidance around the AIFA SA de CV, it is likely that AMLO expects the Navy not to just provide security but also to establish a government-owned company to administer international trade operations along the Tehuantepec Isthmus.

Building Welfare Banks and Distributing Textbooks

SEDENA was tasked with building 2,700 bank branch offices for the AMLO Administration's Banco del Bienestar (Welfare Bank), a transformation and replacement of the government-owned Bansefi (established in 1950). The project is aimed at creating a national network of government-run bank branches that will offer "ethically and socially respo

Vesselclass

Mexico according to the latest poll by INEGI. The level of trust that Mexicans have in their public authorities includes the following:

Institution	2019	2020	2021
Navy	83.7	90.1	90.2
Army	80.2	87.4	87.8
National Guard 2020	-	82.8	82.7
Federal Police until 2019	58.2	-	-
Attorney General's Office	51.4	65.2	65.8
State Police	45.7	57.6	58.6
Municipal Police	38.6	52.9	55.1
Transit Police	35.2	45.2	47.2

have increased coverage to 72%. That plan was not executed, Mexico continues to have a large part of its airspace (68%) uncovered by military radar. The development of a new generation of air surveillance radars, beginning with the joint SEDENA-SEMAR Tzinacar 74-kilometer range gap filler radar has led to the development of the 220-kilometer TPS Camazot radar.

Air enforcement or the ability to intercept and force down intruders is the hands of a very small number of obsolete fighter jets and an adequate number of relatively capable turboprop armed trainers. Being able to intercept jets flying low and slow has been more important than high and fast. The latter, however, appears to now be a trend in terms of smuggler operations.

In terms of ground-based air defense, only the Mexican Navy deploys a small number of tactical surface-to-air missiles. Cartels have begun to use unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) for drug smuggling as well as tactical reconnaissance and attack using improvised explosives. Mexican army counter-drone capabilities have been deployed around critical infrastructure and some VIP special events.

2. Air Mobility: limited strategic reach, sufficient tactical resources

Logistical capabilities to project power or even deploy forces on humanitarian relief operations are severely limited by a lack of strategic aviation resources. The FAM operates three ageing but upgraded C-30 Hercules and four new Boeing 737 commercial airliners with a relatively long range. Lack of investment in its air mobility fleet has begun to show especially as COVID-19 response requirements have meant FAM and Navy aviation assets have been pressed to provide

4. Subsurface Defense capability: Modern but very limited

Only the new ARM Benito Juárez frigate has anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability. Project SIVISO was an internal R&D project that equipped an OPV with a variable depth podded sonar system that could provide a force multiplier adding submarine detection capabilities to the Navy's relatively large fleet of ocean patrol vessels (OPVs).

5. Surface Warfare capability: Modern but very limited

Again, the full measure of surface warfare capabilities is pressed on the ARM Benito Juárez, which is the only missile-armed ship in Mexico. The rest of the surface fleet is armed for Coast Guard patrol duties.

6. Amphibious Deployment capability: Obsolete and insufficient

Possessing the ability to deploy troops and cargo along Mexico's coasts and potentially on foreign expeditions to supply and resupply peacekeeping operations, the Mexican Navy deploys a pair of relatively old (1960's vintage) LSTs multipurpose logistics ships

7. Armored Forces: Obsolete and insufficient

The Mexican Armed Forces possess a relatively small number

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