

Nafta's Renegotiation Risks National Security

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A union worker during a protest against Nafta negotiations in Mexico City last week. Carlos Jasso/Reuters

It came straight from the mouth of [Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray of Mexico](#), arguably the most influential member of President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration: a Trump administration rejection of the North American Free Trade Agreement would undermine United States-Mexico security cooperation and our collaboration on migration.

Until recently, the Mexican government had only insinuated that security cooperation was on the table. It's time for Americans to take the warning seriously as Mexico heads into an election year in which anti-Trump sentiment continues to grow, increasing the political cost of partnering with the United States and buoying the nationalist presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The Americas Barometer reports that the Mexican populace's distrust of the United States rose to 84 percent from 31 percent in just three months after Donald Trump was elected.

Many analysts worry that the Trump administration's disparaging language and its positions on trade, immigration and the wall threaten our economic and political connections. However, a third core pillar of the relationship — our bilateral defense and security relationship — is also being tested. A deterioration of our defense cooperation threatens the stability and security of our hemisphere in areas from illicit trafficking to migration-related humanitarian crises to destabilizing crime and violence.

These developments are unfortunate, given that President Trump inherited a partnership of exceptional collaboration in the defense sphere. This cooperation was facilitated by Mexico's willingness and capacity to take on

a greater share of the security burdens not just in the Western Hemisphere but globally. The Mexican military has increased activity in international forums, developing the groundwork for potential future external military missions, including contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations. After eight years of confidence-building initiatives, the Obama administration established a defense relationship of trust, and cooperation expanded beyond counternarcotics and counterterrorism to broader strategic engagement including coordinated efforts in Central America, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and global peacekeeping.

By jeopardizing United States-Mexico counternarcotics cooperation, President Trump risks cutting off his nose to spite his face. He has declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency, and his ill-advised supply-side approach requires Mexican collaboration.

Over 90 percent of the heroin in the United States is either produced in or shipped through Mexico, and Mexico is an [important transit point](#) for the deadly synthetic opioid fentanyl and the principal transit point for cocaine entering the United States. In Mexico, it is the military that has the drug enforcement mission, which includes fighting cartels and poppy eradication. The president would do well to listen to the head of the United States Northern Command, Lori Robinson, who highlighted in her 2017 congressional testimony that collaboration with the Mexican armed forces is strong — and critical to the struggle against illicit trafficking.

Another Trump priority has been stemming the flow of undocumented immigrants. During the Obama administration, the United States and Mexico began to discuss how together we can address the root causes of Central American migration, driven by violence, lack of economic opportunity and fragile government institutions.

Most migrants crossing our southern border aren't from Mexico but from the troubled countries of the Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. United States-Mexico dialogue focused on how we could strengthen Central American defense institutions, which would increase not just military effectiveness but also transparency and accountability.

This is especially critical given that the armed forces have assumed a law enforcement role in much of the region. It's going to take a coordinated effort of the community of Western Hemisphere nations to address the triple threat of crime, poverty and weak institutions. The 2017 Americas Barometer reports that over half of those living in the Northern Triangle [fear being victim of a homicide](#). This staggering statistic helps explain why the intention to migrate continues to rise in all three countries. If we want to avoid a breakdown of democracy in our hemisphere, continued cooperation with Mexico is critical.

Mexico has also been helping us with the dirty work of apprehensions. The 2014 unaccompanied children crisis would have been much worse without Mexican assistance along the major smuggling routes. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Mexico is responsible for over 40 percent of apprehensions of those bound for the United States. Although not the lead, the Mexican military has been part of the Interior Ministry's effort along the border with Guatemala and Belize. Even with Mexico's help, however, the flow of migrant children continues, underscoring the need to focus on the roots of the problem rather than the symptom.

The death and destruction of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria highlight the importance of our nascent cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, which is more urgent than ever as a result of climate change. These environmental calamities represent another challenge to stability in the region, and the Mexican military has been a leading exporter of disaster relief know-how and technical assistance. As host of the 2018 Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, Mexico is working closely with nations such as Chile and Canada to develop a hemisphere-wide disaster relief policy. We should be part of that effort.

As Mr. Trump's negotiating team sits down with its Mexican and Canadian counterparts on the [fifth round of Nafta negotiations](#), let's hope the president understands that we have a lot at stake beyond trade. Even if it were desirable and possible to reduce our \$63 billion trade deficit with Mexico by scrapping Nafta, it's not worth jeopardizing the multifaceted cooperation that advances United States' security and hemispheric stability.

