Original Article

Who is Wile E. Coyote? Power, influence and the war on drugs

Mark Aspinwall^{a,*} and Simon Reich^b

^aDivisión de Estudios Internacionales, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Carretera México-Toluca 3655, Col Lomas de Santa Fe, Mexico City 01210, Mexico.

^bDivision of Global Affairs, Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, 212 Conklin Hall, 175 University Avenue, Newark, NJ 07102, USA.

*Corresponding author.

Abstract Thucydides said that ‘Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’. Such is the characterization by many scholars of the US dominance of Mexico. We challenge this claim in explaining a puzzle: why American unilateralism in the ‘war on drugs’ results in symbolic and material gains for Mexico as it shifts the United States from a unilateral to a cooperative policy. We examine five major cases over the last five decades and identify a dynamic cycle that begins with unilateral US action and ends with bilateral agreements, where mechanisms for clear communication are created, and resource transfers take place. Although we recognize that our claims are both contingent and context-dependent, a clear pattern emerges: Like the Roadrunner, Mexico has triumphed again.

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Weak State, Strong Power: A Paradox

The oft-cited adage of Porfirio Díaz, former autocratic ruler of Mexico, ‘poor Mexico, so far from God and so near to the United States’ attests to a belief burned into the Mexican psyche from birth: that Mexico has been subjected to the whims of its most powerful northern neighbor dating from the battle of Alamo in 1836 and the subsequent American–Mexican war. It is easy to conceive of this bilateral relationship as emblematic of what Thucydides would regard as one between the strong and the weak. So why doesn’t the strong state get its way in the war on drugs?

The flow of illicit drugs originating from Mexico has been one of America's most significant security problems for the last five decades. Consistent with realist logic, a plethora of evidence suggests that the United States has clearly and consistently spelled out its economic and national security interests to Mexico. Moreover, the ability to employ superior material power should ensure a favorable outcome for the stronger party.¹ Indeed, several Mexican scholars, utilizing a 'pressure-response' model, have argued that the outcome is usually that the United States gets what it wants.²

Yet the paradox is that Mexico has repeatedly manipulated unilateral American initiatives in drug policy, a key policy area that has been specifically identified by the United States as a security priority, and turned them to its advantage. Mexico steers American unilateral policies that infringe on Mexico's sovereignty toward institutionalized collaborative approaches that respect it, with clear lines of communication, and new resources for Mexico.

Rationalism's Inability to Explain this Paradox

Some IR scholars suggest that weak states prevail against stronger states if they have access to counterbalancing alliances or something highly valued by the larger state that they can use as leverage (see Wohlforth, 1999; Fox, 1959; Rothstein, 1982). Mexico, however, is not a member of an international organization that can dilute US interference nor can it effectively align with regional or global partners in a way that counterbalances America's material advantages (Cf. Sanchez, 2003; Vital, 1967). Others claim that weak states may prevail when favored by geography or greater resolve (Bjøl, 1968). In fact, some believe that given that the United States cannot effectively police the entire 2000 mile border, the United States is more vulnerable and therefore more inclined to tread lightly.³ This may be partially true but it does not explain deep American bilateral involvement in Colombia, with which the United States does not share a border. The United States is not 'more unilateral' with states farther away.

Theories of inter-dependence might, in principle, explain the lack of effective US intervention because of the numerous economic linkages between the two sides (Schiavon, 2006). But the cases we describe span a historical period that predates a growing inter-dependence between the two economies.⁴ More recently, scholars have shown how norms contribute to the resources available to weak states in multilateral forums – but have not done so in bilateral relationships between contiguous states where the distribution of material resources is asymmetric.⁵

Power and Influence

We argue that the concept of 'influence', rather than power, is the key to explaining this paradox. Influence is composed of two elements: material power, defined as

economic and military resources, and social power, derived from the legitimacy of the actor and the linkage between the actor's claim and universalistic values and principles (See Reich and Lebow, 2014). It is therefore distinct from the narrower concept of either. States and non-state actors use combinations of material and social power in attempting to influence others. Countries can have relatively high degrees of both forms and are thus relatively influential. Although by no means a definitive measure of social power, opinion polls can be instructive. In a 2013 global public opinion poll, for example, Germany ranked as the most popular country among 16 candidates and the European Union (EU), and its economy is among the largest and most productive (Cf. BBC World Service Poll, 2013). Although its military capacities are limited, Germany has become increasingly influential within the EU, beyond its Eastern borders, in international forums, and in the halls of power in Beijing, Moscow and Washington.

The effective use of varied combinations of material and social power is inevitably contextual and contingent. An overt reliance on material power risks being thwarted, notably when the stronger state required consent and cooperation in pursuit of its goals. Under such circumstances, the weak may be surprisingly adept at counter strategies if they effectively link limited material resources with social power.

How do we apply this formulation of influence to explain the puzzle? The United States relies predominantly on material power. It augments its resource advantage with limited exercise of social power, repeatedly justifying its actions by claiming that the Mexican authorities are corrupt and unreliable. Conversely, Mexico relies predominantly on social power, augmented by limited material power. It invokes the well-established principle of sovereignty, one of its 'anchors of identity', to challenge US actions.⁶ Mexico channels its complaints against Washington through 'a legalistic approach' that emphasizes playing by the rules and respecting the principle of non-intervention (Santa-Cruz, 2012, p. 22). The complementary material component involves expelling officials of US agencies, rejecting offers of border cooperation, refusing requests for extradition and funding, and not policing the behavior of its own police and military forces (*ibid.*, p. 118).

This process of resistance represents a first stage in a longer process. To achieve more Mexico must cooperate. It, therefore, consistently seeks to negotiate an agreement which, as one of its most experienced analysts points out, 'is a strategy designed to compensate for Mexico's weakness in comparison with its more powerful neighbor ... thus, it is likely that each American act that Mexico interprets as a violation of its sovereignty will be met with the same response: negotiation of new agreements to confront it'.⁷ We stress that agreements are not inevitable (though they occur in an observable pattern). Initially, the United States must retreat from its legitimizing claims regarding Mexican corruption. Then, subsequent agreement implies three conditions – the outcomes we describe that defy traditional suggestions of American dominance.

First, *institutionalization* takes place (that is, the formalization of agreements). Institutionalization is important because it commits bureaucratic personnel to regular interaction involving clear rules and principles with counterparts across the border, establishes guidelines for appropriate future behavior, and provides continuity and overcomes shifts in political priorities.⁸ Second, clear mechanisms for *communication and coordination* are established for the specific purpose of policy coordination. These must be coordinated not only across national sovereign jurisdictions but also within national administrative jurisdictions to avoid contradictory initiatives and to sustain trust. Committing senior personnel to consultation and routinizing contacts increases stakeholder commitment from both countries. With so many US federal agencies involved in drug interdiction in Mexico, it is easy, if not inevitable, that individual agencies will adopt their own strategies in order to protect secrecy and pursue policies that contradict the efforts of other agencies. Likewise, failure to communicate and coordinate actions across the border is likely to undermine efforts at cooperation. Third, *resource transfer* takes place. This facilitates cooperation because it increases capacity and ‘tunes’ skill levels between agents and bureaucrats on both sides. This occurs through the provision of finances, new technologies, equipment or training exercises, secondments and personnel swaps.

Mexicanists rightly point to a historical pattern of American dominance. Yet the evidence we present in the critical case of drug policy offers an exception to this generalization. If Mexico receives recognition as an equal partner, a stable institutional network of bilateral relations, and material resources then it is hard to argue that it has not – like the Roadrunner – outsmarted its more powerful opponent.

Illustrating this Cycle

We examine this argument by detailing five case studies over five decades. We make no claim that these cases constitute a definitive ‘test’ of our general argument. Yet their significance, as arguably the major cases of the last 50 years, offers compelling support for our claim. Collectively, they suggest two findings: the strategic use of influence can outwit even the most dominant of states under specific conditions, and that American policymakers periodically ‘reinvent the wheel’, learning lessons that their successors soon forget.

From intercept to cooperation (1969–1970): The archetypal case

Operation Intercept was launched in September 1969 in the context of President Nixon’s law-and-order crusade and a growing drug problem in the United States. Intended to stem the flow of drugs through enhanced border security, the language used by Nixon was aggressive and militaristic, describing the strategy as a ‘frontal attack’.

America's unilateral posture was clear: Deputy Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst – the head of a new US joint task force established to shut down the flow of all illegal drugs across the US–Mexican border – stated that the Operation would take place 'independent of any increased activity that might be undertaken by the Government of Mexico'.⁹

First, US military personnel were barred from Tijuana; then all civilian planes flying between the two countries were required to file flight plans and radio positions; and finally temporary blockades were established, the United States deploying 2000 agents along the border to inspect vehicles in what became the United States largest peacetime search and seizure operation. Few drugs were actually seized (Andreas, 2013). Nonetheless, the effects were dramatic and consequential. Over 4.5 million people were inspected during a three-week period. Intercept caused significant disruption to economic activity on both sides of the border, with some communities losing up to 70 per cent of business, an estimated US \$500 000 per day on the US side and \$400 000 on the Mexican (Craig, 1980b). In fact, Intercept's architects were so sure that they would cause a strong negative reaction in Mexico that they prepared a briefing note for American diplomats in Mexico. It explicitly addressed a series of anticipated complaints, including that it was discriminatory against Mexicans, infringed on Mexico's sovereignty, amounted to blackmail, and was intended to punish Mexico (*ibid.*, pp. 571–572).

Mexican officials reacted angrily, describing the operation as discriminatory, racist, and a violation of Mexican sovereignty. President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz claimed that a 'wall of suspicion' had been erected between the two sides (*ibid.*, p. 573). Mexican officials employed the language of humiliation and indignity, claiming that American actions had violated their trust. Foreign Minister Carrillo wrote directly to Nixon outlining Mexico's position. He commented on the material and symbolic damage incurred with little tangible benefit: 'results have been negligible in stopping the traffic of marihuana and drugs, but great in harming the economy on both sides [of] the border and in creating frictions and bad publicity for the United States'. He emphasized that Mexicans 'simply cannot understand that two weeks after you met with our President, the most drastic, and for many, unfriendly measure against Mexico was taken' (cited in Doyle, 2003).

With only limited material resources with which to respond, Mexico's Chambers of Commerce nonetheless launched 'Operation Dignity', a buy-Mexican initiative intended to punish US exporters. This represented an 'act of legitimate defense of our people against humiliation', according to Francisco Gano Escalante, the Chamber of Commerce's President (cited in (Craig, 1980b, p. 567). In fact the greater adverse material impact on Washington came from its own side of the border in the form of a severe backlash from congressmen and governors located in several US border states, who were suffering from the drastic economic slowdown.

Mexico's mounting public pressure rapidly proved to be successful. In early October, US officials stated that they would refuse to adhere to Mexican requests for

termination of the program until they saw evidence of more forceful actions against drug criminals. Yet, within days, the Nixon Administration released a statement saying that Intercept had been terminated and would be replaced by Operation Cooperation (ibid., p. 577). President Nixon subsequently apologized to Mexican President Diaz Ordaz. The headline in the *New York Times* characterized it bluntly: 'US bows to Mexican demands' (Belair, 1969).

Operation Cooperation immediately succeeded Operation Intercept. US diplomats took charge of the US team negotiating this jointly implemented initiative with Mexico. In a confidential telegram sent before the negotiations, Robert McBride, US Ambassador to Mexico, mentioned that there were now three important objectives – curbing drug smuggling, ensuring normal border operations and respecting Mexican sovereignty.¹⁰ The negotiations established a Joint Working Group that would report its recommendations collectively. The subsequent joint declaration reiterated the two countries' 'determination to maintain relations between them at the highest level of friendship, understanding, and respect for the dignity and sovereignty of their respective countries'.¹¹

The Joint Working Group recommended that 'enhanced cooperation in narcotics enforcement and technical assistance and equipment' be made available to Mexico. The following April (1970), Undersecretary of State Elliott Richardson announced that the United States would provide \$1 million in aid for Mexico to obtain helicopters, spotting planes, remote sensing equipment and chemicals for crop eradication.¹² The Mexican Government reported that confiscations of drugs surged. Marijuana seizures increased from about 5 tons before Operation Cooperation, to 65 tons by 1971; opium confiscation increased from less than 5 kilograms to approximately 100; heroin from 5 kilograms to 175; and cocaine from less than 5 kilograms to 155 (Manzanera, 1974; see also Brown, 1976, p. 485). The Presidents and Attorneys General of both countries expressed satisfaction with the level of cooperation and the results. The US Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs concurred.¹³

Beyond the drugs netted, Operation Cooperation was important because it involved sharply increased levels of resource transfer and joint operations. The United States provided helicopters, weapons, finance (by 1975, US support for Mexican operations had grown to \$11.6 million) and DEA training for Mexican agents (Walker, 1989). In a confidential memo sent in 1973, Ambassador McBride stated that, 'the habit of working closely together on this matter of such high priority interest to us has deeply improved and strengthened over the years'.¹⁴ According to Mathea Falco, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics Matters between 1977 and 1981, Operation Cooperation worked for several reasons, including Mexico's political, logistical and financial commitment, and America's technical aid, funding support and commitment to a bilateral working relationship (cited in Pastor, 1989). As Richard Craig noted, by 1978 'Mexican officials appear to be sharing information and working with Americans as never before' (Craig, 1978).

Operation condor (1975–1976)

Operation Cooperation did much to overcome Mexican distrust of their American counterparts, particularly at the operational level. ‘Cooperation between Mexican and American narcotics officials has improved with each passing year. Thus, while Intercept proved a short-term diplomatic blunder, it indirectly and somewhat ironically became a springboard to more effective international cooperation’ (Craig, 1980a; Astorga and Shirk, 2010). Yet old suspicions prevailed. So when an American Task Force on Interdiction published a paper recommending to the President that he instituted new border restrictions, even with joint policing, the Mexican response was negative (GPO, 1975). The government feared that the operation would compromise Mexico’s sovereignty, and the Americans were forced to relent on the idea (Toro, 1995, p. 16). Striving for a compromise, both sides found a complementary interest in what became known as Operation Condor.

By 1975, Mexico’s manual eradication efforts had proved inadequate to the growing surge in poppy cultivation prompted by plummeting ‘French Connection’ and Turkish heroin exports (Bertram *et al.*, 1996; Craig, 1980a, pp. 579–580; also Craig, 1978, p. 110; Chabat, 2002). Mexican officials favored an aerial herbicide eradication program, recognizing that the ‘critical triangle’ of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua was simply too large an area to attack with traditional stick-beating techniques. They concluded that they needed US technical assistance in implementing the program. Washington officials agreed because they too wanted to attack drug flows ‘at the source’.¹⁵

Mexico initiated Operation Condor in January 1976 with great aspirations, believing that an eradication program that used American resources, combined with stricter law enforcement and interdiction, could eliminate the drug problem (Craig, 1980a). Mexico requested aerial technologies from Washington, including remote sensors, multispectral and infrared photography, satellite reconnaissance to identify opium plots, herbicides and defoliants, and 40 aircraft to spray fields and transport soldiers. Washington complied with these requests (Craig, 1980a, pp. 347–348). The United States also agreed to provide technical training and drug intelligence, as well as 30 DEA agents who would work closely with their Mexican counterparts in implementing the program.¹⁶

The Mexican government responded positively. Government spending increased dramatically as it sought to demonstrate the seriousness of its commitment, knowing that illicit drugs were contributing to domestic corruption and crime, regional instability and tarnishing its international reputation. Mexico assigned 2500 soldiers, and units from the air force and navy for enforcement and interdiction. Using a new strategy, it also tried to limit the possibility of corruption within its military forces by regularly rotating officers in the field and employing a new elite force of approximately 250 specially trained and relatively well-paid federal police for operations. Mexico’s Attorney General’s Office even negotiated access to American counter-insurgency training for Mexican forces as well as a wealth of American

weaponry, including an air wing that was larger and more efficient than most forces in Latin America.¹⁷

Operation Condor proved to be very effective according to several statistical measures. Mexico's share of the US heroin market declined from 85 per cent in 1974 to 37 per cent within a decade. Its share of the marijuana market plummeted from 90 to 5 per cent between 1974 and 1981 (Craig, 1989b). Large quantities of cocaine were seized, traffickers arrested, drug networks disrupted, and numerous corrupt judges and police removed from office. The Mexican government was able to re-establish control, albeit temporarily, over much of the territory of its rebellious northern states.¹⁸

American officials recognized the benefits of professionalism and cooperation. According to DEA head Peter Bensinger, 'no single international effort now underway is doing more to combat heroin trafficking than the Mexican Government's eradication program' (cited in Craig, 1980a, p. 349). In November 1978, a National Security Council Presidential Review Memorandum (NSC-41) praised the Mexican government's anti-drug efforts as 'vigorous' and 'successful' (cited in Doyle, 1993). As Richard Craig pointed out:

Particularly crucial [to Intercept] was the excellent working relationship that evolved between Mexican and US drug officials. 'This is my third year here,' remarked an American narcotics official in January 1976, 'but never have we had the working relationship with Mexican officials that we've had since the launching of this year's campaign.' More information was exchanged, extensive use was made by Mexican officers of the expertise of 30 U.S Drug Enforcement Administration agents, and greater cooperation was evidenced in the building of conspiracy cases involving drug offenders in the two countries. (Craig, 1980a, p. 348)

Operation Condor's success was short-lived. American domestic demand continued to grow, small producers and traffickers were eliminated, and the Mexican economy went into recession (increasing local incentives for new drug cultivation). Drug lords expanded crop production well beyond the northwestern states that had been the focus of the eradication program. Drug processing also became more widely dispersed. Furthermore, Colombian drug cartels began to use Mexico as a gateway to the US market. The net long-term effect was that domestic cartels grew in power as demand grew, production spread, prices increased, and they discovered that they could make money out of both the production *and* the transshipment of drugs (Bagley, 2001). The benefits of Condor were therefore temporary. Nonetheless, it served as a model for bilateral cooperation.

The leyenda case (1985–1991): A rollercoaster cycle of agreement and defection

In February 1985, US DEA agent Enrique Camarena was kidnapped, tortured and murdered in Guadalajara. Camarena had been operating illegally and with few

restrictions in Mexico, a common practice (Nadelmann, 1987–1998; del Villar, 1988, p. 201). Mexico occasionally ‘chose to ignore ... serious challenges to its sovereignty’ because DEA assistance was strategically valuable to the Mexican government’s anti-drug efforts (Walker, 1992). It was also covert and therefore did not embarrass the Mexican government because it could deny its presence.

There had been longstanding American concerns about the safety of DEA agents operating in Mexico (United States, House of Representatives, 1989), but by March 1986, the Mexican government had made only limited progress in solving the case despite several arrests, and impatient American officials made furious accusations of high-level corruption against their counterparts.¹⁹ Frustrated Reagan administration officials then unilaterally closed the border for eight days. Acrimony and accusations escalated.

A familiar process then ensued. In the aftermath of Mexico’s initial complaints against the border closure, the respective Attorneys General began a process of coordination, setting up clear avenues for exchanging ideas and information (Samuel I. Del Villar, 1988, p. 198). In August 1986, the two sides created Operation Alliance, a joint border enforcement initiative linking US agencies to various military and civilian law enforcement operations. The new resources were impressive, involving 250 American and Mexican officials (representing a 14 per cent increase in staff), 1000 new law enforcement officers stationed along the border, a 20 per cent increase in the number of dedicated detection, tracking and apprehension aircraft, and a 63 per cent increase in the number of boats used for interdiction.²⁰ The results were just as notable. Seizures in the first 18 months of the operation increased dramatically, including 199 196 kilos of marijuana, 15 526 kilos of cocaine and 100 kilos of heroin (Dixon, 1988).

By 1987, new bilateral working groups were created that brought Mexican and American officials together and opened further channels of communication (Andreas, 2009, p. 54). The anti-drug portion of the budget for the Mexican Attorney General’s office leapt from 32.5 per cent in 1985 to over 60 per cent 3 years later. By 1987, 25 000 soldiers were involved in anti-drug operations, a fivefold increase in less than 10 years (Andreas, 2009, p. 49). Responding to these efforts, the United States increased expenditures on its joint International Narcotics Control Program in Mexico to \$15.1 million per year by the end of the 1980s.

This process was by no means uncomplicated, as a second stage unfolded. Having once again established cooperation, and having signed the Agreement on Cooperation in Fighting Drug Trafficking and Drug Dependency in February 1989, the relationship was soured when DEA operatives (probably with the assistance of the Mexican police) abducted two suspects in the Camarena case: Humberto Alvarez Machain and Rene Martin Verdugo Urquidez.²¹ Outraged, Mexico banned all DEA activities and vowed to prosecute anyone found participating in such activities without appropriate authorization.²² The Mexican Attorney General declared that, ‘If it is proved that Dr Alvarez Machain was kidnapped and illegally transferred with the participation of US authorities,

this will put at risk our bilateral cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking' (cited in Hinojosa, 2007). As the Mexican government ramped up its rhetoric, it suspended all cooperation with the United States. As a result, the flow of drugs to the United States increased (Kosmetatos, 1998, p. 1086; Lemus, 1994).

Mexico challenged the legality of the DEA's tactics, issuing a formal complaint, noting that such actions clearly violated Mexican sovereignty under the 1978 US–Mexican Extradition Treaty as well as international law (Kosmetatos, 1998, p. 1083; Nadelmann, 1993; Zaid, 1997). The Mexican Embassy sent a series of formal diplomatic notes to the State Department concerning Alvarez Machain's abduction (Nadelmann, 1993, pp. 447–451). The government refused to accept American financial or logistical assistance (Zaid, 1997, p. 437). In further retaliation, *Proceso* – a Mexican magazine – published a list of DEA agents then working in Mexico – a list reputedly provided by the Mexican government (Palacio, 1990; Shenon, 1990). Somewhat embarrassingly, Alvarez Machain was later tried and found not guilty, the American judge harshly criticizing the prosecution for presenting its case based on such weak evidence.²³

The United States agreed to negotiate two accords imposing limits on its behavior as a result of this combination of public embarrassment and continued obstacles from the Mexican side. The first included new and significant modifications to the United States–Mexico Extradition Treaty.²⁴ The second, which eventually became the 1991 'Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty', set out specific guidelines for DEA agents operating in Mexico. Both agreements legally restricted the activities of DEA agents and reinforced the principles of sovereign self-determination and non-intervention.

As the storm surrounding the kidnaping and trial of Alvarez Machain reached a crescendo in late 1990, the United States responded by providing Huey helicopters to Mexico worth \$17 million as part of its collaborative counter-drugs strategy (Hinojosa, 2007, p. 27). This new spirit of cooperation yielded tangible and symbolically important results. In November 1991, when a Mexican Army unit murdered several officials of the Mexican Attorney General's office, it was US Customs agents who recorded the attack from the air, and provided evidence to the Mexican Congress.

Casablanca (1998–2000): Bankers' corruption, government conciliation

Bilateral relations were testy following a contentious annual recertification process in 1992 (Toro, 2000, p. 155, fn. 30), and Mexico responded by declining US assistance for 3 years. The government reversed position in 1995 with the instigation of Operation Hardline, accepting some helicopter support, training and technical assistance for new law enforcement officers, and the reconstitution of some border task forces. The formation of a High Level Contact Group in 1996, the introduction of a new Binational Drug Threat Assessment in 1997, and the creation of Binational Drug Strategy in 1998, with a renewed focus on illegal arms trafficking, all offered

grounds for optimism (Storrs, 1998). At this point 'there was more operational cooperation and information sharing at the law enforcement level than ever before' (Hinojosa, 2007, p. 47).

This optimism was punctured in May 1998 when 12 Mexican bankers who had been laundering drug money were lured to Las Vegas at the invitation of undercover agents posing as 'criminal associates'. The US government estimated that Mexican banks were laundering more than \$15 billion annually in drug money, approximately 5 per cent of Mexico's gross domestic product (Padgett, 1998, p. 15). Operation Casablanca was the culmination of a 3-year undercover effort that led to the subsequent arrest of 160 people, including 22 Mexican bank officials, the criminal indictment of three of Mexico's largest banks and the confiscation of \$150 million in assets from Colombia's Cali cartel and Mexico's Juarez cartel (Carreno and Ferreyra, 1998; Padgett, 1998).

Undertaken without the knowledge of the Mexican government, Casablanca caused considerable embarrassment to the Zedillo Administration because it revealed the depth of corruption in the already scandal-ridden banking system. The criminal conviction of several high-ranking Mexican government and law-enforcement agents for working with drug cartels, convinced US officials that the details of Casablanca should not be shared (Golden, 1999). Like the Intercept case, the US State Department was kept out of the loop, both Secretary of State Albright and the Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey learning about the operation as it unfolded. Albright wrote a scathing letter to her Treasury counterpart, Robert Rubin, complaining about the lack of information sharing both within the United States and across the border.

The Clinton Administration requested that five Mexican bankers be extradited to the United States. Mexico refused, threatening to issue formal charges against the participating US agents for violating Mexican sovereignty. Moreover, Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations, Rosario Green, and Attorney General, Jorge Madrazo, formally protested the action (Garcia and Miselem, 1998). Green proposed that the United States adopt a 'code of behavior' that would respect the territorial sovereignty of other countries (Ruiz, 1998). Finally, President Zedillo sent a letter of protest to the State Department and in a telephone call with Clinton he threatened to institute legal action against the United States (Padgett, 1998, p. 15).

As in prior cases, Mexican protests proved successful, drawing new commitments and resources from the United States. The two Attorneys General signed the 'Brownsville Letter' only 2 months after Casablanca. It placed restrictions on the activities of US agents, and requiring them to provide advance notice of cross-border activity.²⁵ In fact, so seriously were these notification requirements taken that US agents subsequently expressed deep frustration at the limits imposed on their activities.²⁶ It also stipulated a series of collaborative awareness raising and confidence-building exercises between the two countries. The letter pledged better communications, and a secure, direct link between the offices of the two Attorneys General. Communications indeed improved after September 1998 when the Mexican

Attorney General's office and US Customs created an 'operational liaison' to facilitate information flow and contact between specialized officers (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2000, p. 152). Several joint training exercises for law enforcement officials were carried out over the next 2 years as required under the terms of the Brownsville Letter. These exercises not only upgraded levels of professionalism among Mexican law enforcement officials, but also raised awareness of similarities and differences between the two sides (*ibid.*, p. 14).

Mexican officials, nonetheless, continued to express skepticism that the new accord would increase cooperation or curtail future sovereignty violations (Castillo, 1998). In response to this pressure, presidents Clinton and Zedillo signed a memorandum of understanding – the 'Mérida Agreement' – on 15 February, 1999. Mérida detailed procedures for narcotics cooperation between law enforcement agencies, imposing further restrictions on US behavior.²⁷ Major bilateral consultative, operational and information-sharing groups, such as the High Level Contact Group and the Senior Law Enforcement Plenary Group, would work more closely together. The importance of the latter subsequently increased because it brought together top officials several times a year to discuss operational and legal issues, and to share information and best practices.²⁸ The Zedillo Administration also allowed US officials to collaborate with Mexican counterparts in the selection of candidates for a new anti-drug unit established by Mexico (Chabat, 2002).

The new taste for collaboration developed momentum. In the next 18 months, the two sides approved an extradition protocol, two agreements on money laundering, a money laundering working group and the 'Interdiction Working Group'. According to the annual narcotics report for 2000, communications and cooperation improved. The two sides:

[H]eld a training exercise in post-seizure analysis for agents and prosecuting attorneys of the Mexican counterdrug agency (FEADS), PFP, Secretariat of Communications and Transportation (SCT), and officials from the US Coast Guard, DEA, FBI, and US Attorney's office. The highlights of the exercise were the use of the ion scanner, crew interview techniques, and detection of false compartments on maritime vessels. A joint session given by Mexican and US prosecutors on protecting the chain of evidence for case prosecution served to educate participants on the needs of judicial officials in both the US and Mexico. (US Department of State, 2001)

Seizing the opportunity, Mexico insisted that specialized intelligence, appropriate equipment, coordination between the relevant agencies and organizations, and 'frank, open and respectful cooperation' were all essential in combating transnational drug crime effectively as part of the Binational Drug Control Strategy. The American response was positive and a flurry of initiatives ensued (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2000, p. 14). The two sides cooperated in Operation Impunity, resulting in the capture of 93 members of Mexican drug trafficking organizations

(DTOs) and the seizure of \$26 million in cash and other assets, 12 434 kilos of cocaine and 4800 pounds of marijuana.²⁹ Other operations, including Millennium (1999), Southwest Express (1999) and Impunity II (2000), all resulted in important arrests and seizures (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2000, p. 8). The number of extraditions in both directions substantially increased (*ibid.*, p. 8). By 2000, a Bilateral Cooperation Group for Matters of Drug Interception was created with the purpose of sharing information and establishing procedures on interdiction. US authorities claimed that the cumulative effect of these initiatives was the virtual elimination of cocaine shipments into Mexico by air (*ibid.*, p. 12).

Reflecting on the changes in this period, then drug Czar General Barry McCaffrey commented in an October 2000 interview that the level of cooperation had substantially improved: 'In fact, we are sharing intelligence. We do work in partnership. We do have a significant US FBI/DEA/Customs/Coast Guard intermittent presence in Mexico with their authority and support. We do work across that border with bi-national law enforcement agencies'.³⁰

The Mérida initiative (2008–...): Redefining 'security'

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration's focus was firmly on the issue of border control in combating terrorism. Security concerns had widened beyond drugs and illegal immigration. In the spirit of collaboration, Mexico signed the Smart Borders agreement with the United States in 2002, and began discussions on a Security and Prosperity Partnership (See Manaut, 2009). Yet the Bush administration's use of the PATRIOT Act and the Real ID Acts against illegal immigrants rather than terrorists sat uneasily with Mexican officials (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2012). Mexican discontent grew in 2005 when the US administration unveiled a plan under the Secure Fence Act to militarize the border, construct a new security fence 700 miles long, dramatically increase the number of border agents and introduce new visa requirements.

As with the border closings of previous years, this US action was met with hostility. President Vicente Fox called the fence 'a unilateral measure that goes against the spirit of understanding that should characterize how shared problems between neighboring countries are handled (Wepman, 2008)'. His successor, Felipe Calderón, called the fence 'a grave mistake which would lead to more Mexican deaths on the border'.³¹ Earlier in his *sexenio*, Calderón sent 40 000 troops and 5000 federal police to the northern border as part of his war on drugs. This inflamed the situation, and a subsequent US National Drug Assessment Threat report proclaimed that Mexican DTOs 'represent the greatest organized crime threat to the United States'.³² Mexican analysts, in contrast, argued that the two countries both needed to embrace a regional vision of security, about terrorism *and* organized crime, and Calderón launched a campaign to convince the Bush administration accordingly.

Patricia Espinosa, Calderón's Foreign Secretary, in discussing this campaign, subsequently noted that the goal also included access to American resources to help strengthen Mexico's security forces.³³ Sigrid Arzt, one of Calderón's national security advisors and a key player on the drug issue, agreed that securing US resources was crucial. She added that the Calderón strategy was equally aimed at committing the United States to a bilateral resolution of the drug problem.³⁴

The Bush administration responded positively. The Mérida Initiative, as it became known, represented the first formal cooperation agreement between the two countries since the Binational Drug Control Strategy in 1998. A joint statement reiterated familiar Mexican themes: 'Our strategies for expanded cooperation are based on full respect for the sovereignty, territorial jurisdiction, and legal frameworks of each country, and are guided by principles of mutual trust, shared responsibility and reciprocity' (U.S. Department of State and Government of Mexico, 2007).

Mérida massively increased US funding to Mexico from \$40 million per year in the mid-2000s to \$1.5 billion in Mérida's first 3-year phase, mostly targeted at providing the Mexican security forces with equipment and training to counter drug trafficking organizations.³⁵ This first stage, which concluded in 2010, was criticized for not addressing issues of capacity building and institutional reform (Clare and Finklea, 2011). In response, 'Beyond Mérida' – the second stage – included resources to enhance capacity in the areas of rule of law and strengthened communities.

The areas of cooperation were extensive. In 2010, DHS signed an agreement with SSP (the Mexican Secretariat of Public Security) to conduct joint border patrols. Both sides agreed to increase joint intelligence gathering the following April.³⁶ The United States provided funding for judicial training, support for state and municipal police officers, and logistical help in creating a major crimes task force (Clare and Finklea, 2011, p. 16, fn. 75). Meanwhile, USAID and the Department of Justice assisted in judicial and legal reform at state and federal level and Customs established a training academy in Mexico. The federal Attorney General's office (PGR) also works closely with the Department of Justice and the Narcotics Affairs Section in State, to improve its performance. Training and secondment of Mexicans to the United States increased (Ai Camp, 2010). The United States expertise in law enforcement is critical, according to AID officials based in Mexico.³⁷

Operationally, the two sides intensified cooperation on gun smuggling and money laundering. ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives) maintains an office in Mexico City to provide Mexican officials with information from its eTrace gun-tracking program. In addition, Immigration runs Operation Armas Cruzadas – a multi-agency effort to counter gun smuggling. These efforts proved fruitful with tens of thousands of US-origin weapons seized in Mexico since 2007.³⁸ The two countries also created a Bilateral Money Laundering Working Group to investigate and

prosecute money laundering and smuggling (Clare and Finklea, 2011). As a result, the number of extraditions increased dramatically. DEA agents now operate alongside the PGR. They participate in arrests, are able to collect and safeguard information, and even allegedly conduct interrogations in the agency SIEDO (the assistant attorney general's office for special investigations of organized crime) and in the PGR.

From Power to Influence

In this article we utilize the concept of influence, recognizing that it is contingent and context dependent, to challenge the conventional wisdom that the United States always gets what it wants from Mexico. In these cases, the weaker neighbor, beyond simply thwarting the stronger, repeatedly manipulates the situation so that it emerges with both an enhanced reputation as a peer, and also material benefits.

Scholars and policymakers have avoided addressing this conundrum by simply denying the existence of this pattern. But in a set of five major drug policy cases drawn from each decade, arguably the most important cases involving Mexico and the United States since 1969, the pattern has been consistent. Mexico has rebuffed American unilateralism and extracted explicit recognition of its sovereignty, along with binding agreements in which the United States cedes autonomy, creates new networks of communication and provides Mexico with material support.

Mexican material leverage is nominal, so this outcome cannot be explained by realist theories. Furthermore, given that the pattern we identify long predates the economic integration of the two economies, theories drawn from the liberal concept of interdependence also have little utility. Our first case predates NAFTA by a quarter of a century, and yet Mexico's capacity to divert unilateral initiatives to its own ends is equally robust for the early cases.

We recognize that certain conditions apply here: the United States essentially requires Mexican cooperation to fulfill its policy objectives and is dealing with a prioritized security issue from which simple withdrawal is not an option, if only for political reasons. Nonetheless, our formulation – the use of social power coupled with a limited use of material power yields robust results across all five cases (Eckstein, 1975). We find a consistent pattern: the process begins unilaterally and ends cooperatively; the United States shows an explicit disregard for Mexican sovereignty only to – in effect – limit its own as it signs a formal agreement; and the United States subsequently provides Mexico with significant material benefits. The findings of each individual case, the time span between the cases, and the regularity of the pattern allow us to include that there may be a learning process that takes place among American policymakers within each cycle but that the lessons learned are soon forgotten by successor administrations.

About the Authors

Mark Aspinwall is Professor of International Relations at the *Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas* in Mexico City and (from January 2016) Head of the Department of International Studies. He teaches international relations and international political economy. His research interests are in rule of law, comparative governance in environmental and labor sectors, US–Mexico cooperation, and the impact of regional organizations on domestic politics in North America and the EU. His latest book, *Side Effects: Mexican governance under NAFTA's labor and environmental agreements* was published by Stanford University Press in 2013. The translation *Acuerdos Paralelos* was published by Editorial CIDE in 2014.

Simon Reich is Professor in the Division of Global Affairs and Department of Political Science at Rutgers University, Newark. He is author, co-author or editor of 10 books, his most recent being *Good-bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (with Richard Ned Lebow, Princeton University Press, 2014). He is now working on a project on US grand strategy and regularly authors a column on global issues online in *The Conversation*.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Schelling cited in Jackson and Sorensen (2007); Snyder and Diesing (1977).
- 2 For example Toro (1995). For an evaluation of the 'domination' and 'interdependence' perspectives on this relationship, see Toro (2000); Santa-Cruz (2012).
- 3 This argument is discussed in Carpenter (2013).
- 4 Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in Keohane and Nye (1977).
- 5 Jeanne A. K. Hey, 'Refining our Understanding of Small State Foreign Policy', In: Jeanne A. K. Hey (ed.) *Small States in World Politics*: p. 187; For a development of this theme see Christine Ingebritsen, 'Norm Entrepreneurs: Scandinavia's Role in World Politics' In: Ingebritsen *et al* (eds.) *Small States in International Relations*, pp. 273–285.
- 6 See, for example, Chabat (1993); Reuter and Ronfeldt (1992); Santa-Cruz, 2012, p. 21. In fact, if incursions are not made public there is often no reaction from Mexico.
- 7 Toro, 2000, p. 161. In contrast, however, Toro interprets this as evidence of compliance by Mexico, not a shift in the US position.
- 8 On these processes in the context of NAFTA, see Aspinwall (2013).
- 9 Both quotations are from Craig (1980b).
- 10 National Archive source, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB86/intercept15.pdf (accessed 1 May 2013).
- 11 National Archive source, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB86/intercept16.pdf (accessed 2 May 2013).
- 12 Cited in Brown (1976). Also, Gooberman (1974).
- 13 See *Eugene Register-Guard*, 29 June 1970, p. 4A.
- 14 National Archive source, aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?dt=2472&rid=66053&dl=1345 (accessed 7 May 2013).

- 15 This initiative eventually proved to be part of a larger cooperative *campana permanente* (anti-drug campaign) Toro (1989).
- 16 Toro, 1995, pp. 17–18; Also Toro, 2000, p. 155. The US provided Mexico with more than \$95 million worth of equipment to fight drugs in the 1970s. Marshall (1991).
- 17 Craig (1989a); Andreas, 2009, pp. 41–42.
- 18 The only question concerned the health effects of the aerial defoliant campaign. Reuter and Ronfeldt, 1992, pp. 94, 125.
- 19 On Camarena's assassination and its links to the Mexican police, see Shannon (1988); Walker (1995); Kosmetatos (1998).
- 20 Together they apprehended 3506 fugitives in 1986, although Mexican officers caught only three of them, generating American skepticism. Robert A. Pastor, 'The Supply and Demand of Drugs and Money: The American Side', in Pastor and Castañeda (1989). See also US General Accounting Office, 'Border Control: Drug Interdiction and Related Activities Along the Southwestern US Border', www.gao.gov/assets/90/88204.pdf, September 1988, (accessed 9 May 2013).
- 21 Twenty-two people were actually indicated and several convicted for orchestrating the Camarena assassination, including Ruben Zuno Arce, brother-in-law of former President Luis Echeverría Alvarez. See, 'Central Figure Is Convicted In "85 Killing of Drug Agent"', *New York Times*, (1 August 1990), p. A10.
- 22 Golden (1992); As cited in Tello Peon (1996).
- 23 The US Supreme Court had ruled that the Alvarez Machain kidnapping did not prohibit him from being tried in a US court. Four others were tried and found guilty, with Mexican officials being implicated. Cannon (1992); Mydans (1992); and Clark (1992). Alvarez Machain later sued the United States government for the actions taken against him. See Seper (1993); 'Bodyguard Is Convicted in Case With Links to Drug Agent's Death', *The New York Times* (7 August 1990), www.nytimes.com/1990/08/07/us/bodyguard-is-convicted-in-case-with-links-to-drug-agent-s-death.html.
- 24 Toro (1999). For a preview of these terms see US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Mutual Legal Assistance Cooperation Treaty with Mexico*, S. Treaty Doc. 100–13, 100th Congress, 2nd session, 16 February 1988.
- 25 'Attorneys General Reno and Madrazo Sign Letter to Enhance Cooperation', (2 July 1998), pp. 1–3, at www.usdog.gov/opa/pr/1998/July/312ag.html (accessed 23 May 2013)
- 26 Public Broadcasting System, Interview with John Hensley, former US Customs Special Agent, 2000. Cited at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/interviews/hensley.html#brownsville (accessed 10 April 2012).
- 27 Not to be confused with the later Mérida Initiative. PGR, *Mexico's Fight Against the Scourge of Drugs* (Mexico City: SRE, January 2000), p. 49; and Informe de Monitoreo – Embajada de México en Estados Unidos de América, 'Transcript of Albright, Berger, Reno 15 Feb. [1999] Briefing', pp. 1–7.
- 28 See The Office on National Drug Control Policy, www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/enforce/communique.html (accessed 20 May 2013).
- 29 US Department of Justice, 'Operation Impunity Dismantles Nationwide Drug Trafficking Operation,' Press Release, Washington DC, 22 September 1999.
- 30 Public Broadcasting System, interview with Barry McCaffrey, former Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. PBS, 2000, pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/interviews/mccaffrey.html, accessed 10 April 2012.
- 31 'Mexico anger over US border Fence', *BBC.com*, 27 October 2006, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6090060.stm (accessed May 23 2013).
- 32 United States Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center (2009); González (2009); Olson *et al* (2010); Raúl Benítez Manaut, 'La Iniciativa Mérida: desafíos del combate al crimen y el narcotráfico en México,' Real Instituto Elcano, ARI N° 129/2007, 10 December 2007.
- 33 Patricia Espinosa, personal interview, 23 May 2013.

- 34 Sigrid Arzt., personal interview, 16 May 2014.
- 35 Sullivan and Beittel (2008); Also, Clare and Finklea (2011).
- 36 dBuneNews, 'US and Mexican negotiators agree to cooperate against drug cartels,' 29 April 2011, www.dbune.com/news/world/5791-us-and-mexican-negotiators-agree-to-cooperate-against-drug-cartels.html, accessed 4 August 2011.
- 37 Interviews with Gabriela Capò and Cecilia Real, 28 July 2011.
- 38 Cf. Olson *et al.*, 2000, p. 16. In some cases the lack of information-sharing and unilateral action has led to problems. See US Congress, Joint Staff Report Prepared for Rep. Darrell E. Issa, Chairman United States House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform & Senator Charles E. Grassley, Ranking Member United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary. 'The Department of Justice's Operation Fast and Furious: Accounts of ATF Agents'. (Washington DC: GPO, 14 June 2011), p. 5.

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