

# Change and Adaptation

## Challenges in the Western Hemisphere and Beyond

BY VICENTE FOX

The world we live in today is defined by rapid and constant change. Advances in communication, transportation, and trade have intensified global transnational exchange, and join all nations in the Western Hemisphere and the world with fates more tightly interlocked than ever. While some modern technologies have greatly benefitted the people of most every nation, other changes have been more problematic and present us with unprecedented challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In such an environment security and stability must rely on concerted action and cooperation between nations across the hemisphere, and throughout the world.

Recent progress in technology has greatly intensified global interaction and continues to factor decisively in the development of countless millions of people, from Africa and Asia to the West and Latin America. As a result, many regions of the world are moving ahead at faster rates of growth and with dramatic increases in per capita income.

This is even more significant as we know that strong and steady economic growth can support a virtuous cycle of development, by increasing government revenue necessary for investment in health, education, and infrastructure. Economic prosperity has also been conclusively linked to reductions in societal violence and the likelihood of civil conflict. In the virtuous cycle that economic growth can create, the increased revenue available for health and education, roads and power-grids, steadily creates greater and greater opportunity for people and enables them to help themselves grow and prosper and contribute to the economic growth of their neighborhoods, towns, and countries. We need to bring this opportunity to every citizen and family around the world.

This is why our global institutions need to redouble their efforts to help disenfranchised people gain access to credit, finance, and financial markets. Bringing such access is the most

*President Vicente Fox was the President of Mexico from 2000 – 2006. He now resides in his home state of Guanajuato where he has founded the Vicente Fox Center of Studies, Library and Museum.*

effective strategy for poverty-reduction and the prevention of violence and armed conflict in the world, and specifically in Latin America today.

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The Western Hemisphere has been mercifully free of major warfare between states for several generations. Yet neither stability nor security can be taken for granted. Hostile blocs have emerged within the hemisphere embracing competing and conflicting worldviews and making the specter of interstate conflict more imaginable than in generations. Moreover, crime has become the most commonly identified problem and source of human insecurity in the hemisphere. As we promote economic opportunity, we must recognize that accelerated change, such as we have experienced in recent decades, can also be traumatic and destabilizing.

The geopolitical changes experienced in the post-World War II period, and particularly over the last 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have been enormous and sweeping. Armed conflict between great powers has largely been supplanted worldwide by a proliferation of smaller regional conflicts, driven by ethnic, religious, identity, and interest group concerns. Many of these civil conflicts are fueled by complex webs of illicit activity and transnational criminal finance. This new reality demands a departure from Cold War

thinking and strategies, and requires that we continuously struggle to improve our understanding of emerging and evolving security challenges in today's rapidly changing world.

We must tirelessly explore new solutions to these new security challenges. For example, in an era characterized by fewer interstate conflicts, it is time we consider dramatically restructuring some of our global intergovernmental institutions – such as the United Nations – so that they can be more responsive and effective in conflict negotiation and peace building in smaller, regional conflicts, or even local conflicts. In order to achieve this more dynamic and effective global posture, it is also essential that the UN bureaucracy be significantly overhauled and reduced.

Unfortunately, while modern technological advancements have furthered legitimate societal development and progress, they have also been a boon to criminal enterprises, organizations, and networks. The last few decades have seen an explosive growth of transnational crime, criminal organizations, and networks of illicit organizations that have excelled at rapid adaptation and effective exploitation of new communication, transportation, and banking technologies. We must endeavor to be as nimble and innovative as they are in our efforts to contain and eliminate these dangerous criminals who represent a burgeoning security challenge for us throughout Latin America, as well as the greater Western Hemisphere.

Similarly, we must pursue new and innovative approaches to stem the flow of weapons and ammunition from the United States into Mexico and Central America. This pipeline of guns and ammunition has empowered the narco-trafficking cartels and street gangs throughout the region for far too long, enabling them to overwhelm under-equipped law

enforcement, and produce carnage in the civilian populations. Confrontation between different narco-trafficking organizations, and their battles with Mexican police and military, resulted in an extended period of catastrophic violence and loss of life in Mexico. Further, this issue is not only a Mexican concern as major Mexican criminal organizations have expanded into Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. What will be or should be the security strategy in Mexico going forward? What if any messages can Mexico learn from Colombia? What lessons can others learn from Mexico's experience? And what are the options for a joint security strategy between the U.S., Mexico, the states of the Northern Triangle, and the coca-growing nations of the Andean Region?

The violence has slowed or even reversed in some regions, yet the overwhelming, coercive capability derived from easy access to weapons and ammunition enables criminals to accrue greater power and wealth. In order to turn the tide, the United States must acknowledge the gun problem and stop the widespread proliferation of small arms and assault weapons into Latin America once and for all.

The vast sums of money the cartels use to buy these weapons, employ mercenary armies, corrupt politicians and public officials, and finance vast criminal operations comes mainly from the sale of illegal drugs. Trafficking in illegal narcotics generates hundreds of billions of dollars worldwide, every year. The failure of the longstanding War on Drugs policy and the prohibition regime is openly acknowledged in most quarters in Latin America. As demand for



Gun show, Houston, Texas. Easily accessible small arms and high-tech weapons from the U.S. saturate Mexico and Central America, equipping criminals and gangs with overwhelming firepower.

drugs in some locales subsidies, new consumer markets for cocaine and heroin continue to develop and grow around the world, fueling spikes in murder, vice, and corruption. Despite shifting demographics, massive profits continue to flow to the cartels and throughout the criminal networks. Moreover, the annual devotion of colossal sums of government revenue to fighting the War on Drugs has been a terrible drain on national governments throughout Latin America, and often results in insufficient funding of other important priorities, such as

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health, education, and infrastructure development. The time has come for fresh and innovative approaches to the growing security challenges presented by drug trafficking networks and the widespread violence and corruption that accompany them. We desperately need a change.

There is a way out of this debilitating situation. The way is to move from a regime based on prohibition to one of regulation. This process has already begun in different parts of the world, including the states of Washington and Colorado in the U.S. There have also been some successes and encouraging lessons to be learned from alternative drug policies in Portugal and Holland, as well as Uruguay in South America. There is also a fast-growing trend to move away from penalizing the consumer, to focus predominantly on fighting

production, distribution, and sales of illegal drugs. This transition has proven successful in reducing income to criminal organizations and cartels and has the added benefit of increasing government revenue through taxation and asset seizure. It is not yet clear whether the new law enforcement priorities will translate to a reduction in illegal drug consumption. In any event, a new and progressive paradigm to deal with narcotrafficking and illegal drugs should devote resources toward a better understanding of illegal drug use as a health issue and not primarily a criminal issue to be prohibited and punished.

We need to accept the reality of our past failures to eliminate drug use and drug trafficking, and accept that prohibition itself creates the lucrative black market for banned drugs and is the foundation upon which the cartels' power, money, and violence find a firm foothold. Regulation and alternative drug policy is the way of the future and after many decades of bloody Drug War violence and turmoil, the transitional process is irreversible in Latin America. We all need to accept this fact and bravely devote our energies and resources to devising smart and sophisticated regulatory strategies. We should resist the temptation to cling to the familiar, but failed mindsets and procedures of the past.

In the meantime, consumer demand for illicit drugs will continue to greatly enrich and empower criminal operators and the unprecedented money generated will continue to drive the most pressing security challenges in the West. These security challenges are manifest in various dangerous ways. The profits from criminal enterprises, especially drug trafficking have contributed to pervasive corruption of politicians, police, judges, and other public officials. Meanwhile, many of the cartels

have diversified their investments and activities and now engage in several other odious enterprises including mass kidnapping, human trafficking, sex slavery, and counterfeiting.

We all share security challenges caused by the proliferation of transnational criminal organizations, illicit networks, drug producers, and drug traffickers throughout the hemisphere. There is some evidence that the most powerful cartels and criminal organizations in the hemisphere have also diversified their business contacts and greatly expanded their logistical network contacts in recent years. This is an ominous development that has, at times, evidently resulted in certain dark alliances. In some cases, these criminal entities have partnered with international terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Finally, again, the spread of the Zeta organization and others into the Northern Triangle is continuing to brutalize those fragile societies and destabilize those governments. For these many reasons, there can be no doubt that transnational criminal organizations and illicit networks, and the money and power that they wield, represent a growing security challenge in the Western Hemisphere that urgently deserves substantial resources and deliberate action. As technology and trade have advanced and the interaction between nations has intensified and become more complex, the fates of all nations of the world have become more tightly interwoven.

Today in the Western Hemisphere, our security, like our economic well-being, is quite interdependent – and as we journey into the future our fortunes will only become more entwined. We are all partners in the quest to meet the challenges of this young century and counter the threats to our security here in Latin

America and the Western Hemisphere. With diligence to energetically understand and accept day-to-day changes in our fast-paced world, and courage to seek out and try bold new solutions to new challenges, together we can go forth and continue to prosper in the future. If we muster the intelligence and the will to work together to meet and best the 21<sup>st</sup> century's daunting challenges, the Western Hemisphere can become a beacon to those fighting for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century everywhere. **PRISM**



Photo courtesy of © Louie Palu/ZUMA Press



In this photo, a Mexican soldier watches over a car in which two men were killed by cartel members. Plagued by intense violence, many Latin American states – and Mexico and the Northern Triangle nations, in particular – have turned to their militaries to help maintain internal state security.