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## FEATURED Q&A

# Should the U.S. Be More Involved in Mexico's Drug War?



U.S. President Donald Trump said he plans to designate Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. Mexican authorities are pictured arresting drug lord Servando Gómez Martínez in 2015. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

**Q** In the wake of the massacre of members of a Mormon family in northern Mexico on Nov. 4, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted, "This is the time to wage WAR on the drug cartels and wipe them off the face of the earth." Three weeks later, Trump said he plans to designate Mexican drug cartels foreign terrorist organizations. What would such a designation lead to? In which ways and to what extent should the United States be involved in fighting Mexican drug cartels? How much progress has Mexico's government made against the cartels, and does it need more help from abroad?

**A** Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow for foreign policy at the Brookings Institution: "While appealing to President Trump's penchant for drama and a year-long Republican drumbeat, designating Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) as terrorist groups will not bring any benefits or tools to U.S. policy. The designation of DTOs under the U.S. Kingpin Act already provides the United States with the same and complete tool box—including wiretapping, steep penalties, financial intelligence, asset seizures and money laundering charges—against any individuals associated with the groups. The United States can already deny visas to individuals collaborating with DTOs and can cut off their access to the U.S. financial system. Designating them terrorist organizations will counterproductively constrict and limit U.S. policy options. It would mandate that U.S. officials and other entities operating in Mexico guarantee that none of their money and resources reach terrorist groups. So, if the designation goes through, the United States may, for example, be self-deterred from delivering alternative

Continued on page 3

## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Meddling in Bolivia Election 'Deliberate': OAS

The results of Bolivia's Oct. 27 election were deliberately manipulated, the Organization of American States said in its final report on the vote.

Page 2

### ECONOMIC

## A Few Sticking Points Remain for USMCA: Mexican Trade Negotiator

Mexico's top trade negotiator said a few issues remain to be worked out with final ratification of the USMCA trade accord.

Page 2

### POLITICAL

## Thousands March in Bogotá Amid Third Strike

Thousands of people protested in Colombia's capital amid the third nationwide strike in two weeks. Demonstrators have given a wide range of demands to President Iván Duque, whose approval rating has fallen to 26 percent since he took office last year.

Page 2



Duque // File Photo: Colombian Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Thousands March in Bogotá as Plans for Talks Stall

Thousands of protesters marched Wednesday in Bogotá as the committee that is behind the protests and the government of Colombian President Iván Duque have been at odds over how they should proceed, BBC News reported. Duque has called for a “great national dialogue” to discuss demonstrators’ demands, but the committee that organized the ongoing protests has said that only it and the government should be at the negotiating table, for fear that including other groups could water down their demands. The two sides plan to meet again today. Wednesday’s protests accompanied the third national strike in two weeks. The demonstrators have given Duque a wide range of demands, including that it fully comply with the terms of its 2016 peace accord with the FARC rebels and do more to prevent the killings of former rebels and social activists. Additionally, the protesters want more accessible education and assurances from the government that it will not raise the pension age or cut the minimum wage. Duque has denied planning to make any such changes to the pension system or the minimum wage. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Bogotá on Nov. 21 during the first national strike, and demonstrators have gathered almost daily in smaller actions since then. The protests initially were sparked by proposed cuts to pensions, The Guardian reported. That reform was never formally announced, but it led to widespread protests of Duque’s government. The president’s approval rating has fallen to 26 percent. At least five people have been killed in the protests, The Guardian reported. Among them was 18-year-old Dilan Cruz, whom riot police shot in the head with a bean bag round on Nov. 23. His death led protesters to demand the dismantling of Colombia’s riot police squad, Esmad, which opponents accuse of using excessive force. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Nov. 20 issue of the Advisor.]

## Bolivia Election Meddling ‘Deliberate’, ‘Malicious’: OAS

Bolivia’s Oct. 27 election was rigged in a “deliberate” and “malicious” way, according to a final report on the vote, released Wednesday by the Organization of American States, Reuters reported. There were “deliberate actions to manipulate the result of the election,” the OAS report said. Then-President Evo Morales claimed a narrow victory over challenger Carlos Mesa. However, Morales’ victory has been seen as fraudulent. He resigned and fled to Mexico last month amid massive protests following the disputed vote.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## A Few Sticking Points Remain in USMCA: Mexican Official

Mexico’s top trade negotiator, Jesús Seade, on Wednesday said there are two or three sticking points that must be resolved before finalizing the United States-Mexico-Canada, or USMCA, trade deal, the Associated Press reported. Seade told reporters that he has been working hard over the past few days to reach an agreement on a final version that is in line with U.S. Democrats’ demands as part of Congress’ ratification process. “Let’s hope [it will all be over] in the coming days,” he said. “But I don’t want to speculate.” Seade met earlier that day with his U.S. counterpart, Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, for about three hours, the AP reported. Although Mexico’s Senate has already approved the pact, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump is still negotiating with House Democrats to incorporate changes that would prompt Speaker Nancy Pelosi to bring the implementation bill to the House floor for a vote. Both chambers of the U.S. Congress must approve the bill before the USMCA can take effect. Among Democrats’ demands are

## NEWS BRIEFS

## U.S. Attorney General to Meet With López Obrador in Mexico City

U.S. Attorney General William Barr is scheduled to meet today with President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and other top Mexican officials today in Mexico City, the Associated Press reported. The meetings come after U.S. President Donald Trump said last week that he planned to designate Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. The statement followed last month’s massacre in Sonora state of nine members of a Mormon family.

## Brazil May Lose U.N. Vote Over Unpaid Debt

Brazil is at risk of losing its vote at the United Nations if it does not pay some of the more than \$400 million it owes the organization by the end of the year, U.N. and Brazilian officials said, Reuters reported Wednesday. Of the \$415.8 million Brazil owes, \$143 million is due this year, they said. Under U.N. rules, if a country owes an amount that equals or exceeds payments due for the previous two years, it can lose its General Assembly vote, unless it can demonstrate the inability to pay is beyond its control.

## Chile’s Central Bank Keeps Key Rate Unchanged

Chile’s central bank said on Wednesday that it would maintain its benchmark interest rate at 1.75 percent, adding that it would likely keep it at that level for the next several months, as the country begins to feel the economic consequences of weeks of protests, Reuters reported. The bank said the government’s recently announced stimulus package and a depreciating peso, which is at a historic low this week, could help bring long-lagging inflation to the bank’s target. The decision to hold rates was unanimous but was not in line with market expectations.

ensuring improved labor and environmental standards are enforced. Pelosi is also pushing to remove sweeping legal protections for online content in the deal, a move seen as a blow for big technology companies, The Wall Street Journal reported.

## BUSINESS NEWS

# ExxonMobil Planning 31-Well Exploration Project Off Guyana

ExxonMobil is planning an exploration program in Guyana of 31 wells over three blocks, pending regulatory approval, the Texas-based company told Argus Media on Wednesday. "As part of the permitting process, we have submitted applications to the Environmental Protection Agency [of Guyana] for a multi-well exploration drilling program in the Stabroek, Kaieteur and Canje blocks offshore Guyana," Exxon said. The company plans to begin production soon from the Liza field in the deepwater Stabroek block, initially with 120,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil and eventually raising production to 750,000 bpd in 2025. The Environmental Protection Agency said the drilling of wells would not significantly affect the environment, adding that the project will not undergo an environmental impact assessment, though Exxon must still present an environmental plan, Argus Media reported. Exxon recently announced its 14th discovery in the Stabroek block, bringing total estimated recoverable reserves to more than six billion barrels of oil equivalent. The International Monetary Fund last month said it expects Guyana to see economic growth soar to 86 percent next year, up from 4.4 percent, driven by the country's imminent oil production. "How these revenues are spent, particularly regarding public sector emoluments, education, health, security and infrastructure, will determine how citizens benefit," Riyadh Insanally, Guyana's ambassador to the United States, told the Advisor last month. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Nov. 15 issue of the Advisor.]

## FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

livelihood programs in Guerrero if a terrorist-designated DTO could usurp some of the money. In Colombia, even after the peace deal, the United States cannot provide any assistance to any program in which ex-FARC members participate. In Nigeria, the United States needs to go through extraordinary legal contrivances to deliver assistance to a program for low-level Boko Haram defectors, even children who have been dragged into Boko Haram slavery. Worse yet, the United States can impose severe sanctions against countries and NGOs that deliver aid that could trickle to a terrorist group. This threat gravely increased the deaths of Somalis during the 2011 famine as international NGOs were scared off. In fact, U.S. and international sanctions against material support to terrorist groups have criminalized humanitarian aid. The Obama administration contemplated designating the Zetas as a terrorist group and wisely backed away from doing so. President Trump's policy guideline does the opposite of what President Obama intended. Hopefully, U.S. professional foreign service officers and civil servants will manage to persuade Trump to refrain from applying the designation despite his inclinations."

**A** **Arturo Sarukhan, board member of the Inter-American Dialogue and former Mexican ambassador to the United States:**

"Designating transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) could have far-reaching consequences for Mexico's struggle against violent crime and for relations with a U.S. president who will continue to use it as an electoral piñata on the road to 2020. That this coincides with the lack of coherent and forward-looking Mexican and U.S. government strategies to tackle violence in Mexico and confront criminals operating on both sides of our border makes it all the more problematic. And it's not just about nomenclature; it's about using a wrong tool-

box. When your only instrument is a hammer, every problem you face looks like a nail, and one cannot address TCOs and their drivers in Mexico as just another nail, regardless of how violent and brazen they have become there. An FTO toolbox will be ineffective if it does not include the wider range of instruments that are needed to strengthen the rule of law, confront endemic impunity, strengthen governmental and judicial institutions, and mend a shredded social contract. More importantly, the designation would also seriously harm bilateral relations between the two nations, affecting our trade and economic ties (remember, Mexico is now the number-one trading partner of the United States) and bilateral security, intelligence and military-to-military cooperation that we have so painstakingly built since 9/11. This latest chapter also underscores that, for a Mexican government that has done everything in its power during its first year in office to avoid confrontation with Trump, it's Mexico's domestic weaknesses on a whole range of issues that are creating vulnerabilities in the relationship with Washington and leaving it open to pressure from the Oval Office, Congress or Fox News. The paradox is that, for a president who has said 'the best foreign policy is domestic policy,' it's actually domestic issues that are creating a foreign policy crisis and the most relevant pressure points so far for President López Obrador's administration."

**A** **Raúl Benítez Manaut, researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Science and Humanities at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM):**

"The United States has been cooperating in the fight against Mexican drug cartels for more than 30 years. The partnership is based on the exchange of intelligence, training, provisions of military equipment and much cooperation along the border. The murders of three women and six children of the LeBaron family on Nov. 4 in Sonora, very

Continued on page 4

## FEATURED Q&amp;A / Continued from page 3

close to the border, is a good justification for President Donald Trump to define Mexican criminal cartels as terrorists. In Colombia, the FARC and other guerrilla groups and drug traffickers had been defined as 'narcoterrorists,' but they are 5,000 kilometers away from the United States. This is not the same as being on the edge of the Mexico-U.S. border. In Mexico, this has awakened nationalist views that a U.S. military intervention may be possible. However, the president of Mexico does not accept any increase in military actions by the cartels against the civil population and against Mexico's security and military forces. This year has had the highest number of homicides in Mexico's history since the decree of the war against drug trafficking. To accelerate the investigations into the murders of the LeBaron family members, an FBI team, with authorization from the Mexican government, entered the country to investigate the crime. In Mexico, the government has no security strategy to stop the increasing militarization of narcotrafficking groups in the northern part of the country. This was clear in the Oct. 17 action in Culiacán, which was a great failure of the army. The government is not at war—it is only on the defensive. Mexicans are waiting for a more effective government offensive."

**A** **Melvyn Levitsky, professor of international policy and practice at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy and former member of the International Narcotics Control Board:** "Terrorism is a tactic, not an ideology, so most Mexican drug trafficking organizations could qualify as terrorist groups. They use violence and terror as a means to protect and support their drug trafficking activities. In fact, in the past, the United States designated the Medellín Cartel under Pablo Escobar as a terrorist group. However, Medellín was more directly involved in terrorism, for example in

blowing up an aircraft in 1989, hoping to kill then presidential candidate César Gaviria. The United States has also designated the FARC as a terrorist group; the FARC is involved in drug trafficking, but that is a funding activity, rather than a primary goal.

**“ The ‘terrorist’ designation would do little to bolster the fight against Mexican cartels.”**

— Melvyn Levitsky

The 'terrorist' designation would do little to bolster the fight against Mexican cartels. The designation as a terrorist group would make it illegal to provide 'material support' to such a group and would allow the U.S. government to freeze and seize assets of the group. This can be done already without the designation, under our extensive anti-drug trafficking legislation. The Mexicans would certainly be livid about the designation because it would imply that the United States had the right to take extraterritorial military action against the cartels as it now does with Al Qaeda and ISIS. A further consideration: despite campaign promises, the Trump administration has done little to reduce demand for illegal drugs in the United States, nor has it done much to reduce the illegal flow of weapons from the United States to the drug cartels. I suspect that the president's statements are yet another impulsive threat meant to show strength without commitment to do anything substantive. Mexico and the United States already cooperate quietly against drug trafficking. The latest presidential screed will add little to the effort against the Mexican cartels."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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