

Mexico appears to abandon its ‘hugs, not bullets’ strategy as bloodshed plagues the country

Mark Stevenson : 7-8 minutes : 11/7/2024

For free real time breaking news alerts sent straight to your inbox sign up to our breaking news emails

Sign up to our free breaking news emails

Sign up to our free breaking news emails

I would like to be emailed about offers, events and updates from The Independent. Read our [privacy policy](#)

For the last six years, [Mexico](#) bragged about its oft-questioned “hugs, not bullets” strategy, in which its leaders avoided confrontations with drug cartels that were gradually taking control of large parts of the country. The thinking was that social programs, not shootouts, would gradually drain the pool of cartel gunmen.

Now, a month into the term of new President Claudia Sheinbaum, a string of bloody confrontations suggests the government is quietly abandoning the “no bullets” part of that strategy and is much more willing to use the full force of the military and the militarized [National Guard](#).

But the challenge Mexico now faces is different from that during the country’s 2006-2012 drug war. [Cartels](#) today are more diversified, more deeply entrenched in migrant smuggling and more willing to use foreign recruits and adolescents to fill their ranks.

All of that has led to a string of violent clashes in which security forces who shoot at suspected drug cartel convoys wind up killing bystanders and migrants, and reporting lopsided death tolls in which soldiers aren’t harmed but most of the suspects are wiped out.

Sheinbaum has studiously avoided using the “hugs, not bullets” slogan popularized by her predecessor and mentor, former President [Andrés Manuel López Obrador](#), who left office on Sept. 30. She has, after all, pledged to continue each and every one of López Obrador’s policies. Her office did not respond to a request for comment.

But Sheinbaum has had to perform some verbal gymnastics to avoid disowning the policy entirely.

“Clearly, it isn’t a question of hugs for criminals, nobody has ever said that,” Sheinbaum said soon after taking office. The hugs, she said, were meant for impoverished youths, to avoid having them recruited as cartel gunmen.

“There are traces of a change in tone toward organized crime, but it’s too early to call,” said Falko Ernst, a security analyst. “It seems unlikely that the Sheinbaum administration would risk a politically inconvenient, steady stream of violent imagery by betting on wholesale balazos (bullets)-only strategy,” but there may be more willingness to confront “the most overt and brazen displays of power” by the cartels.

But it is hard to imagine Sheinbaum issuing public praise for drug lords for behaving themselves, or saying — as López Obrador did — that she will “tell on them to their fathers and grandfathers” if they cause too much violence.

She has also been unwilling to tolerate criminals taking police and soldiers hostage, or to crow about reductions in Mexico’s “lethality index” — the measure of suspects killed, wounded or taken into custody, versus casualties on the law enforcement side — the way her predecessor did.

López Obrador famously called off the 2019 arrest of drug lord Ovidio Guzmán, and ordered his release, after his Sinaloa cartel threatened to plunge the northern city of Culiacan into chaos to win his freedom. López

Obrador said he made the decision to avoid bloodshed.

Sheinbaum's administration has been a tad different. On her first day in office, soldiers in the southern state of Chiapas opened fire on a truck that "looked like one used by criminal groups." But after shooting up the truck, they found only migrants, six of whom were killed and 10 wounded.

Ten days later, army and National Guard troops killed three innocent bystanders as they were pursuing suspected gunmen. And this weekend, the National Guard opened fire on a truck carrying migrants, killing two Colombians and wounding at least four.

Then there are the lopsided death tolls: López Obrador always criticized previous administrations for shootouts in which all the suspects were killed, and very few were taken alive. But in Sheinbaum's third week in office, soldiers in Sinaloa killed 19 drug cartel suspects and arrested one in a confrontation, but suffered not a scratch themselves.

And toward the end of her first month in office, soldiers pursuing cartel gunmen who had killed two local policemen killed 17 of them but lost no soldiers. Most of the dead, and 10 of the 15 gunmen arrested in the confrontation, were Guatemalan.

"The hugs not bullets strategy ended some time ago," said security analyst David Saucedo, pointing to an increased number of high-level drug arrests and extraditions of suspects. "The U.S. government pressured Andrés Manuel López Obrador to resume the capture of high-level drug lords."

One of the key differences Sheinbaum faces is that Mexican cartels have gotten involved in the lucrative trade of smuggling migrants from far-away countries.

In the old days, the cartels took a cut from smugglers moving Central Americans, who used to make up the vast majority of those crossing Mexico to reach the United States. Those migrants paid hundreds or a few thousand dollars apiece.

Since smugglers opened up a new route through the Darien Gap, people from farther away have been crossing Mexico, and they can pay far higher smuggling fees.

Simultaneously, an immigration crackdown in the U.S. and Mexico has meant a significant number of Central and South Americans now have no avenue to get into the United States, said military analyst Juan Ibarrola, noting, "It is big business, and it is a far more profitable business than drugs."

Ibarrola claims the cartels are now using migrants both as human shields, and sometimes as cannon fodder for their squads of hitmen.

"The recruitment of larger batches of foreign fighters is yet another sign of the gradual deepening of Mexico's armed conflicts," said Ernst. "Left unchecked — much like the employment of homemade explosive devices — it's a trend that's been allowed to expand."

Expand is exactly what the cartels did during López Obrador's six-year term from late 2018 to 2024.

"For six years we were ruled by the policies of a president who did not understand, or who did not realize, that the worst thing he could have done, the worst error he could have made, was not to use legal force against criminal violence," said Ibarrola, who is convinced the policy has now changed.

The other problem Sheinbaum faces is the result of her determination to continue with López Obrador's strategy of militarizing Mexican law enforcement — essentially giving soldiers a task they weren't trained to do.

Together with the mix of migrants and drug traffickers, it seems almost a certain recipe for more deaths of innocent bystanders.

"It is a fact that the National Guard does not correctly apply the rules of engagement on the use of force," said Saucedo. "They tend to open fire before investigating or trying to detain criminal suspects."