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### QI Panel:

#### Demilitarizing the U.S.-Mexico Relationship

January 16, 2023  
1:00-2:00 PM EST

#### **Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 0:36**

Welcome everyone. My name is Kelley Vlahos and I am a senior adviser of the Quincy Institute and editorial director of our magazine, Responsible Statecraft. I am very excited to be moderating our discussion today, De-Militarizing the US Mexico Relationship. During an early Republican presidential primary debate, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said he would put U.S. special forces into Mexico to go after the drug cartels. quoting directly. He said yes. And I will do it on day one. The President of the United States, he added has got to use all available powers as commander in chief to protect our country and to protect the people. So when they're coming across, yes, we are going to use lethal force. Yes, we reserve the right to operate. DeSantis is not the only Republican to advocate for unilateral military force against the drug cartels in Mexico responsible for trafficking narcotics, particularly fentanyl into the United States today, the problem no doubt is considered a crisis for the first time in US history. fatal overdoses peaked above 112,000 deaths, with experts saying that overdoses due to fentanyl being the majority of cases. Many are accidental as less powerful opiates like Percocet and even ADHD drugs like Adderall are laced with fentanyl, and other powerful chemicals unbeknownst to the user. This phenomenon is vexing public health communities and is pressuring elected officials to do something. President Lopez Obrador is under equal pressure to address the violence that has been devastating Mexico for two decades, at least. We are here today to talk about how efforts between the US and Mexico have attempted for decades to address drug trafficking as well as the flow of arms the other way, Plan Mérida, which was was launched in 2008, as a bilateral agreement became more militarized as years went on, and actually made security problems worse. Now, the two countries have pledged to flesh out a new Bicentennial framework, but it's been sitting on the back burner. Meanwhile, Republicans are getting more demanding about unilateral military action, which is put serious stress on the relationship.

Here to talk about her new brief on this subject is Aileen Teague, a non resident fellow of the Quincy Institute and Assistant Professor in international affairs at Texas A&M Bush School of Government and Public Service. She will talk about where previous drug war efforts have gone wrong, and what the Biden administration can do to shift away from militarization and towards more development oriented strategies to reduce cartel violence as well as drug demand and gun flows from across the border. Here to flesh out our understanding of the critical problems inherent in the US Mexico security cooperation, and drug enforcement interdiction over the years, as well as what needs to be done to reverse the horrifying trend lines on both sides of the border, are two other non resident fellows at Quincy and dedicated scholars in their fields. Christy Thornton is an assistant professor of sociology and Latin American Studies at Johns Hopkins University, an expert in US Latin American relations and Latin American Political

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Economy. She holds a PhD in history from New York University as well as an MA in international affairs from Columbia University. She previously served five years as the executive director of the North American Congress on Latin America. Miguel Tinker Salas is a professor emeritus of Latin American history at Pomona College. His research includes work on contemporary Mexico to Cohen, Venezuela, and he has published several books including *In the Shadow of Eagles*, *Sonora*, and *the Transformation of the Border during the Porfiriato* by the University of California Press, and you can you can correct me on that Miguel. Sorry about that. Welcome, everyone. And thank you so much for taking the time to be here and to share your combined years of experience and expertise on this volatile and critical subject. Let's start with Aileen. Can you share some thoughts and maybe r the highlights of your brief, *Responsibly Demilitarizing US Mexico Bilateral Security Relations*, you know, maybe set up what you see as the most critical issues, straining the Biden AMLO relationship right now.

### **Aileen Teague 5:19**

Absolutely. Thank you, Kelley and to the Quincy Institute for organizing this panel and to Christie and Miguel for joining in on the discussion. I don't think that 55 minutes will be able to do the topic justice. But I'm looking forward to all of us being able to to jump in. With both the United States and Mexico in election years, deaths from the opioid crisis at record highs, and security challenges in Mexico and at the border seemingly at a standstill, it seems like a good time to explore in greater details, the failures of militarized policing against people and drugs and Mexico as well as their impacts on the broader region. But it's not only about the failure of these policies we hear so much about, it's also about the fact that politicians on both sides of the border, keep repeating their mistakes. This is something I was particularly interested in highlighting in the brief, which I published for Quincy Institute. And though the brief starts roughly in the 1990s, there's a much longer history of repeating these mistakes, and I'll shamelessly plug my forthcoming book here with Oxford University Press *Policing on drugs, the United States, Mexico and the origins of the modern drug war in 1969 to 2000*.

Militarized punitive policies have not only failed to curb the drug trade, in fact, they make the task of Counter Narcotics worse and the region even more unstable. My brief discusses how the basis for regional security cooperation the 2008 Mérida Initiative, which Kelley spoke about as a failed plan, has been unable to stem the tide of violence and instability in Mexico or to halt the cross border flow of migrants, guns and drugs. Perhaps most significantly, it has continued to rely on militarized policing paradigms. Yet it lacks buy-in from many of our regional partners in the context of US Mexico relations, which is the focus of my brief, the result has been poor regional security in the context of a deteriorating bilateral relationship. These are issues which must be discussed, addressed, especially as other factors shape the United States the security approach in Latin America, including the expansion of the drug war, to new places like Ecuador, the pink tide, and China's increasing influence in what used to be considered the US' so-called backyard. My brief aims to engage more with Mérida's replacement, the United States Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health and Safe Communities, which many hope will strengthen bilateral cooperation and help put security relations on a path toward gradual demilitarization. But the reason I wrote this brief is because I feel like there hasn't been enough

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talk about the Bicentennial framework and the concrete ways it manages to ease regional security woes. It came out in 2021, or it was announced in 2021. We receive periodic information on it, updates in 2022, and the latest has been in April 2023. And this lack of discourse on the Bicentennial framework comes amidst a continued border crisis, or so we call it and presidential elections in both the United States and Mexico this year. I hope we'll all get to chime in on how we might conceptualize security issues in light of these upcoming elections in both countries. In the United States. As Kelley pointed out, leading Republican candidates are calling for an all out invasion of Mexico, a sovereign nation and a US partner nation. Even former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley has called for sending us forces to Mexico to attack the cartels, quote, just like we dealt with ISIS. And unfortunately, these political figures have an audience. But differently, we have a lot of discourse out there, some security related some politically motivated, of course that we must rein in that now continues to take more American lives each year than it did in the previous. The US continues to engage in trade with Mexico as it continues at the same time to fortify its southern border. The kingpin strategy which I engage heavily with in the in the brief, although flawed, and although the war on drugs is a so called failure, the kingpin strategy and similar militarized policies are still alive and well and yet they remain opportunities to do things differently, which is why I wrote this brief and which is why I'm looking forward to the forthcoming discussion with you all.

### **Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 10:11**

Great, thank you, Aileen. And I just want to mention or just remind our viewers, thanks for joining us. By the way, if you do have questions, please put them in the q&a at the bottom of your screen and I will try to intersperse them into the conversation this afternoon. Aileen, just let's talk about your brief. Thank you so much for that outline. I guess I have a bunch of questions. You mentioned that kingpin strategy. Can you talk a little bit about that? And reading your brief, I took from that that, you know, we've been very focused on the heads of cartels, this idea that we can take them out and somehow that would disrupt the activities, and it's actually had the opposite effect in many cases.

### **Aileen Teague 11:01**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, in short, the Kings, the kingpin strategy, which the United States has practiced since the 1980s, since the Reagan administration has been taking out top cartel leadership, and not necessarily planning contingency planning for, for what happens, the instability and the violence that that that results from from taking out sort of the head honchos of the cartels. And I mean, this is, it's a lack of foresight. I mean, it's similar template to what the United States has done in its global war on terror. And other sort of counterinsurgency type measures where you take out what you think is, you know, El Chapo Guzman, or or Osama bin Laden, for example, and you expect that there will be significant gains to be made in a Pacific a specific policy outcome. And what happens is that, I mean, there are other people that are propping up this leadership, I mean, these kinds of organizations, terrorist organizations, drug cartels are highly decentralized organizations and taking out top level leadership is not going to fix the problem. And in many cases, it's produced unexpected outcomes in which other people

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have been empowered. Power, different power brokers have kind of come up to the foray. And, and this is not a victory. I mean, these kinds of these kinds of policies, campaigns, etc, kind of premised on black and white issue sorts, such as wins and losses. And that sort of thing is not going to kind of make progress in the longer term.

### **Kelley Vlahos 12:35**

I know we only have a short period of time this afternoon, but a lot of your focus of your paper is on how Plan Mérida failed. Can you talk a little bit about what fundamentally was wrong with the militarization aspect of that plan? And how it boomeranged in terms of creating more violence in places where there was a focus on, on, on decreasing violence that actually had, like with the king pen strategy, the opposite effect?

### **Aileen Teague 13:12**

Yeah, the United States has a very colored history of empowering military actors as their preferred partners in Latin America, and it's manifested at, you know, at different levels and different scopes at different times in history. And with respect to the drug war. It's been sort of a manifestation of the United States' kind of criminalized approach towards, towards dealing with its domestic drug problem. It's kind of reverberated overseas. And the way that this is worked in with Plan Mérida, and similar initiatives is that most of the aid is funneled into military organizations now 2014 2015, we start to see a decrease in that aid. I mean, but the initial years of Plan Mérida was to wage a so called drug war, and that meant escalating military power, using the military and other and to a lesser extent, other police forces. I mean, Plan Mérida was focused on Mexico, but it also includes Central America and even parts of the Caribbean. And what has happened is sort of this policing aspect, this over focus on enforcement and policing has created at different moments in time human rights violations. And while there was supposed to be money directed towards your building up legal institutions and that kind of thing. I mean, the preferred policy of the United States and its partners has been using force against the drug war. And I'm not saying in this brief that that can be kind of taken away overnight. But there has to be a different way of speaking in which we we focus in development issues, which with which we focus in on empowering and, and working with a variety of actors. In the region, both military and police to some extent, but also nonprofit organizations and other sort of non militarized actors in the region.

So that we start to practice a different type of approach. And so that is, where Plan Mérida kind of comes out of is the fact that we applied force, especially in the initial years, there was criticism due to human rights violations by violations and other instances of corruption. And now, there's been a gradual decrease, at least in military aid. But we're not seeing any kind of, of a positive outcome. And we're seeing frustrated partners, especially in the case of President Lopez Obrador and Mexico. And we're kind of in a standstill for all intents and purposes, Lopez Obrador pulled out a Plan Mérida in 2021. And now, there's really kind of nothing out there that has the fate of of stakeholders, and both the United States and Mexico, and while the Bicentennial Framework Plan Mérida Initiative, or replacement initiative has been announced,

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we're not really kind of talking about it and and dissecting it in in the public discourse and, and in our policy kind of briefs and what we study and this comes amidst, it gives off the perception that there's not really much being done at the same time that leading Republican candidates then want to continue to adopt old ways and practice militarized policies.

### **Kelley Vlahos 16:26**

Christy, I see you nodding your head, it seems to me that it's almost a not a not a no brainer, that initiatives like planned Mérida, should have a definite development component, a non militarized component. And it sounds like from Aileen's brief, when she lays out the background of plan Mérida, that that was absolutely a component and to the point where and correct me if I'm wrong, Aileen, that the Pentagon wasn't even supposed to be directly involved in plan Mérida. So can you talk a little bit, Christy, about how how do these initiatives end up sliding into like militarization? When there does seem to be a lot of energy and a lot of instinctual know how, in terms of what actually needs to be done to address the issues and in an in a non-securitized fashion?

### **Chirsty Thornton 17:42**

Yeah, thanks for that question. I think it's an important one. And there are a number of aspects to it, right? Obviously, these are these are kind of complicated policies in which as I liens brief points out, right, we have multiple agencies involved, we have multiple levels, we have both the sort of executive level decision making, and we have the, you know, sort of congressional imperatives, et cetera. I think one of the reasons that, you know, something like Plan Mérida, ends up looking the way that it does. And we see this with a great deal of what's called security assistance. If we sort of get down to brass tacks, right, it's where is the money actually being spent of the billions of dollars that go into the Mérida initiative, right, the vast, vast majority of that money ends up getting spent here in the United States, it ends up getting spent among on military contractors, it ends up getting spent, you know, goes into the bank accounts of General Dynamics, and Raytheon and these kinds of defense contractors, because they are the ones providing the surveillance equipment, providing helicopters, et cetera. And so for that reason, you can see from a sort of domestic policy perspective, the way in which providing development aid that would necessarily be sort of checks that are actually written to other countries to pursue policies is a very different kind of imperative than is the imperative to say, okay, Mexico, we are going to help you by the US government writing billions of dollars of checks to our own defense contractors to our own military trainers, right, and spending that money here at home.

And so I do think that this issue, particularly is one where that long standing question of what we actually spend US security assistance on is really very relevant. Now, the question of sort of, has this kind of slid into militarization? Why there isn't the development component? I think that basic political economic aspect is a part of it. But I also think that this issue, the issue of sort of security assistance, and particularly the drug war, these are both issues on which questions of domestic policy and domestic politics come to bear very strongly on foreign policy. And so sort of what I hear from people in Washington at the Office of National Drug Control Policy, etc, is

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that they understand in the abstract, the ways in which militarized US policy has only created new markets for these kinds of drug trafficking organizations, but they always say to me, you know, these are smart people who come from, you know, they have they have really good backgrounds, they understand these issues deeply. And then we say, well, you know, this is Washington politics. And so I do think that that's one of the key things that really needs to be changed here is the idea that we must surrender. Are to the sort of most fringe elements with regard to the border with regard to drug policy, etc. The Biden administration has actually taken incredible steps on the domestic front on drug policy reform. You know, this is the first administration that has ever used federal resources directed toward harm reduction policy. This is the first time the federal government has ever said, Yes, we think harm reduction is a legitimate policy framework on drug control here in the United States. And that hasn't come with an attendant shift toward how we think about this overseas. And so the military always becomes the sort of easiest, least, the sort of path of least resistance and the one which will continue giving the contracts to the defense contractors, whose you know, constituents in particular places in California, in Connecticut, the places where these places are located, right. We have lots of good paying jobs that depend on that kind of defense contracting. So I do think the domestic political and political economic remains really important here.

### **Kelley Vlahos 21:00**

Miguel, let's can we broaden it out a little bit, because I feel like we're seeing the mirror of all of this in other parts of Latin America, where we've had as a US military policing assistance in the drug war, whether it be Honduras or Colombia, and it's resulted in the same problems. Can you talk a little bit about whether or not leadership and other Latin American countries are trying to do things differently? And whether or not the relationships are as strained over militarization and the drug war? Or are they have they fallen into a pattern, in which this is just going on autopilot? I mean, where is it on these other fronts, in terms of the war on drugs?

### **Miguel Tinker Salas**

Invariably, the issue of the war on drugs is is a continental issue. And this is not simply a matter between Mexico and the US. These trends these are these drug cartels are transnational organizations whose tentacles reach into every part of Latin America, Africa and Asia. And again, they may be based in Mexico, but we saw in Ecuador recently was the fact that two Mexican drug cartels, the Cartel Jalisco and the Sinaloa Federation, the Sinaloa Cartel. And it's important to highlight that there are Federations, they're not cartels that are controlled by one individual. There is a plethora of individuals below that bring together and these these cartels recognize the weaknesses, they existed in Ecuador, particularly in terms of national security. They also recognize that as you put pressure in Colombia, and put pressure in Peru, that the the the movement now became to control Ecuador as a particular trade route. And that's the case of Quelakl which is in the terms of a port, the major port of Ecuador, which is in Latin American terminology. It's the last part of the Caribbean because it looks so much like the Caribbean. So in that sense, we see the transnational cartels establish a presence, a foothold, make alliances with local groups in in Ecuador, at the same time that the Ecuadorian state for

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the last 12 years, under Lasso and Moreno have been decentralizing the state reducing security apparatus, allowing the cartels to flourish to take over the jails in much the same way, as occurred in Mexico. And even in the US, I should dare say. And in that context, we see the spread of that process. But again, we can replicate this. Colombia has experienced the same thing of Mexico experience that Venezuela has experienced that the countries of Central America have experienced it. I think the issue here is that it requires a continental discussion.

And this is the problem. We're unable to have that conversation. We want to externalise the crisis, we want to say it's Mexico's problem. It's El Salvador's problem. It's Honduras' problem. No, no, the US is the largest market for illegal drugs in the world. And if we don't start from that premise, and we're unable and unwilling and incapable of having that conversation, and rather externalize the crisis, and now in a in a political election year, we're 50% of the American population, according to a Reuters poll, supports military action against Mexico. Without understanding that Mexico, it represents Latin America, that you're talking about intervention in Latin America, because it went so well in Afghanistan and Iraq, right? We're gonna send now troops to Mexico, where 50% of Americans with support some direct intervention in Mexico, and it's become so normalized. I mean, you hear a politician say it, and this is reported as if it was nothing. The second largest trading partner, the US has the border, a 2000 mile border. Can you just imagine what military action in Mexico would do? It would destabilize the Mexican government, it would change dramatically the relationship with the rest of Latin America even And with the diminished pink tie that exists, there is still a sense of sovereignty, independence in Latin America that would not look with with with passively at an intervention in Latin America. So I think it really be, it's beautiful to behold, in the US to understand the failures of the past, we spent a trillion dollars on the drug war. And where are we at today? Hundreds of 1000s dead, millions displaced. It has a direct relationship to immigration. It has a direct relationship to what the so called crisis at the border, because it's not a crisis at the border. It's a crisis that exists about models of development in Latin America. That's the crisis that exists. And again, sending a million dollars to Mexico or a million dollars. So Salvador is like putting a BandAid on a cancer.

### **Kelley Vlahos 25:50**

Aileen, just just riffing off of what Miguel said about this idea that the United States is going to invade Mexico with Special Forces to go after the drug cartels. How has President Lopez Obrador responded to that? What kind of strain as that put on the relationship with the Biden administration? Has he responded at all in depth about the prospect of a military invasion by their neighbor?

### **William Figueroa 27:32**

Yeah, I mean, there hasn't been a huge response from from Lopez Obrador. I mean, because this is this is talk of political candidates going office. I mean, who knows what's gonna happen with with the, with the outcomes of the elections in both countries, but the Biden administration and many of its allies have expressed no desire to I mean, it's they've expressed sort of their response has been very much like, the response has been in Mexico, that idea is is ludicrous,

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and it makes no sense. And it definitely it sort of reeks of, of ignorance of kind of like the broader trajectory of how border security and US Mexico relations has worked.

### **Kelley Vlahos 27:04**

Let me ask a quick question, getting into the weeds a little bit, but in terms of like the security structures and apparatus in Mexico, whether it be the local police or the military, who is providing the best security for communities today? What That's my first question, Eileen. And my second is the security assistance that we are sending over there, is it getting lost or corrupted to the point where it's actually fueling human rights violations and corruption on the ground? And would that be through the military, local police? Like, can you just give our viewers just some sense of what the security dynamics are in Mexico? Right now?

### **Aileen Teague 27:51**

Yeah, I mean, those are two very important and very big questions. And I'll lay a couple of ideas out, and so I'm not talking too much. I'll also invite my fellow panelists to kind of to chop on some ideas as well. I mean, because this brief has was focused more on, you know, the the bilateral relationship and the militarization of of policing. But I could probably write a whole nother brief on problems of civil military relations in Mexico right now, especially getting into the Lopez Obrador administration. He put a lot of effort into a National Guard, which was supposed to be sort of the the civilian demilitarized and I speak about this in my brief answer to, to the militarization of the drug war to kind of his his effort to, to get away from that the military and the some of the corrupt local police from from being too involved in the policing of drugs and crime. The problem is, is the fact that the National Guard has while it's supposed to be sort of separate from the military, and it was created after Lopez Obrador disbanded the Federal Police, which was the Federal Judicial Police, the Federalists, which were corrupt. The National Guard has been created, and it's drawn from, it has the same recruitment, many of those that are in the National Guard came from the military, I mean, so you're kind of just repeating the problems or taking the problems from one area and just moving them to another. And in a study done in 2020, which I cite in the in the brief. There are more human rights violations that have been recorded for National Guard members, then Mexican military members. And so there is a huge problem with with the Mexican government kind of securing public safety in Mexico and finding out what the best way forward is. I mean, because Lopez Obrador has kind of proclaim this hugs, not bullets strategy, but then at a few times, especially more recently, as the security situation situation in Mexico has gotten worse. He's had to kind of go back to policies that are arguably very, very militarized to include the National Guard, which the post was, which was supposed to be sort of the de-militarized solution of, you know, to this to this response. I mean, so it depends on the area that you're talking about. I mean, but some of the areas that were you know, absolutely lovely and completely safe in Mexico 10 years ago, are are ridden with crime. Now Jalisco places like want to walk, though, I mean, the the locus of sort of the, these issues with public safety are are shifting and the Lopez Obrador administration, especially recently has had trouble taking a concrete stand on on them. So I think that that answer is mostly your first, your first question. But I and I want I have some things to add, but perhaps my fellow panelists



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want to add it, I mean, just some of these problems that they see in in Mexican public safety issues. And I mean, who are the policing authorities?

### **Christy Thornton 30:57**

Yeah, I would jump in very quickly to just say that, you know, one of the things that particularly human rights advocates and people who have studied the long history of the Mexican military and the use of militaries in Latin America, and in kind of state building projects in general that really concerns people in Mexico right now is the increasing reliance of the Lopez Obrador administration on the military for a whole host of sort of state functions. And so we have seen the military being given authority over the building of a new international airport, over the construction of the new tourist train in the Yucatan peninsula Tremaya, and you know, so the use of the military has gone far beyond sort of the security apparatus. And one of the reasons for that, and this is one of the most sort of complicated and naughty things in Mexico right now, is that the military has long been one of the most trusted institutions in Mexican public life, right? So you look at these surveys in Mexico, and you ask people, do you trust your local government? Do you trust the local police? Do you trust the political party, though all those questions, those those people all get terrible marks, and frequently over and over and over, the military got really high marks for, you know, sort of trustworthiness of the public. And so the Lopez Obrador administration has sort of leaned into that they've said, this is the only trustworthy public institution we have, we are going to use it for all sorts of things. And what that has created is a lot of people, human rights, activists now argue that this is really creating a kind of culture of impunity in the Mexican military, that is actually broadening because as you ask the military to do more and more things, as the state becomes more and more reliant on it, the ability to hold people accountable for corruption for human rights abuses, et cetera, becomes diminished. And so we've seen this in some of the struggles over between the administration and the families of the disappeared students from the DOJ not but normal school, for example. And so there there is a way in which I do think that there is a kind of militarization of public life in Mexico, that has not been the case in previous administrations, even when, you know, for instance, Felipe Calderon relied very heavily on sending the military into the streets to go after, you know, so called delinquents and organized crime. Now, we have seen a kind of greatly enhanced role for the military and public life that makes holding them accountable for these sorts of human rights abuses and corruption. You know, the see and flag offs case that Eileen mentions in her in her brief is really important. I think that that the increasing role for the military is really has been a problem under the Lopez Obrador administration.

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 33:33**

Yeah, I think I think also that the the key issue here is that overload, as you pointed out, Christie looked at the horizon and saw, where do I put my emphasis on? And unfortunately, that became the military. But the reality is that that even leaves that role for the military. The National Guard has proven incapable, impossible. Here you have a situation where you start a war and Mitch Wakhon Felipe Calderon started the drug war and in Mitch McConnell in 2007, dressed himself in military garb and walked down there, unlike any other Mexican president in the past, because

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Mexico historically had a very interesting relationship with its military members, one of the only countries in Latin America that never had a military coup after the 1917 revolution, in many ways, because the military had a particular role to play within the state function state institution. But that's changed dramatically with the war on drugs. The military now has a presence everywhere. Unfortunately, it's incapable one day, it's Michiupan, the other it's Chiapas, where the cartels are fighting for control of the border entrance and Tapachula. So there you send them the national guard there, it has become this constant movement of troops from place to place because again, though, there is no broader approach that can actually function and the military confronted challenge itself. How was it able to do that? There's been efforts to pick the National Guard and make it part of Savannah to put under the control of Savannah, the Congress rejected that. But again, the larger question is, how will countries like Mexico, keep in mind that this is a problem, not just in Mexico, it's a problem in everywhere in Latin America, where the cartels have the capacity to corrupt not only the state, but also the military, also the military. And that's a fundamental feature. When you take a group like the military, or the police, yeah, federal preventiva, Federal Police prevented a force and you make them now National Guard without having that boondoggle or cleanse that process, you are replicating the process over and over and over again. And it becomes a catch 22. In Mexico, where the military is sent, wherever there has been a crisis, unfortunately, they always arrive after the incident or the development has happened, there is no real way to plan for this on long term basis. I think the larger question is also within Mexico, within Latin America, how to grapple with these cartels, that now are not only militarily, politically, culturally, economically, socially integrated into the broader society.

### **Christy Thornton 36:08**

If I can just add to that, you know, the reason as Miguel says that the military ends up chasing, you know, particular, you know, groups from within these drug trafficking organizations all over the country, and indeed, all over the hemisphere, right is because of our fundamental inability to think of this as a kind of market driven problem. And so because we are here in the United States, the largest, you know, demand market for these substances, right? We need to then think about this as a global supply chain, if we think about this from a kind of supply chain perspective, and we look at how this is organized, that gives you a very different perspective than a kind of prosecutorial strategy that we've seen here in the United States based on a kind of outmoded cartel strategy, which is to say, as Eileen was saying, you have a kingpin at the top and he controls everything all the way down. No, we have a very flexible just in time integrated global supply chain, in these precursor chemicals, and in the substances themselves. And so when a particular you know, aspect of that supply chain goes offline, for whatever reason, as happens in illicit markets, right, you have some you have an outage in one plant, another plant in the kind of, you know, in our globalized economy is going to pick up and take that part of it, you have one transport company that gets taken out by the Federal Police or by the military, another transport company is going to pop up and do that, because there is the the sort of market imperative to do so. And until we address that market imperative, and we start thinking about this as a supply chain, rather than as a sort of, you know, Al Capone style cartel, then we will always be addressing the wrong problem. And I should say that the reason that it's

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organized that way, and the reason that kingpin strategy continues to exist, is the only way to prosecute somebody like El Chapo, he's never you never catch him on the street with the drugs, right. And so you have to prove this conspiracy. And this has long been the, you know, from the Justice Department, how they think about these things. And so in order to prove this conspiracy, they have to build this picture of this top down drug trafficking organization that just doesn't actually fit, what this kind of very flexible just in time global supply chain in these illicit substances is. And so until we recognize that, and we address this as a supply chain issue, like we would anything else in the global economy, we will continue to be fighting the wrong war.

But, I also think we need to address it from another perspective, and that is public health. We keep militarization of this drug war, but we really wouldn't want to address it as a public health issue. Why is there such a demand for fentanyl in the US? Why is it such a demand for illicit drugs in the US? How do we tackle that put more people millions more in jail? Is that the solution? That wasn't the solution when that when when there was a quote unquote, prohibition era? Eventually, you had to negotiate that. So then again, the larger issue here is, and from the perspective of Latin American countries, and again, underscore that the US is the largest market for illegal drugs in the world. How do we address this from a public health issue? And where do we put the emphasis there, as opposed to simply the militarization of a relationship that has that has not succeeded? It has failed, we have spent a trillion dollars, I keep insisting, and this is where we are today. The cartels are stronger. They're more developed, they're more diversified. They have tentacles and everywhere in the world, and the crisis continues in the US.

### **Christy Thornon 39:22**

And the drugs are pure, stronger and cheaper.

### **Kelley Vlahos 39:45**

Christy, you mentioned tackling this as a supply issue. Is that what you're talking about, like our supply chain issue, rather? Are you talking about squelching or blunting the supply demand side? Or is are you thinking of something different when you say, let's get at this as a supply chain issue? What do you mean by that?

### **Jake Werner 43:14**

I mean, I do think that the demand side comes first and Miguel is absolutely right. That you know until we address why it is that people need want feel they need to use these substances, right? And we have a very outmoded idea here in the United States of who that kind of Medium drug user is and why people are using these kinds of substances, we have a very sort of racialized and stigmatized understanding. And in fact, at the level of demand that we're talking about plenty of people who you know, in your everyday life are using these substances, right. And there are plenty of people who are fully functioning, you know, go to work every day users of these substances here in the United States. So we need to recognize that and deal with, of course, questions of addiction, questions of abuse, those sorts of things. And I think actually, the

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Biden administration is doing a better job than previous administrations where they're picking up some of those threads from the Obama administration. There's a real focus in the O MDCP. On the idea of going after the kind of the financial transactions trying to get at the kind of, you know, banking transfers, and then those kinds of questions. And so there is, there is at least a recognition from the Biden administration, that that that that part of the, you know, sort of drug market is important to address.

But what we come back against every single time is the idea, as Aileen writes about so well in her brief, right, that if we could go after the leadership of these particular organizations, that somehow that will dismantle something about the supply chain. And so to me, the kind of addressing this overseas requires the same kind of care and recognition of our failures that I do think that Dr. Rowel Gupta, the head of the AU MDCP right now has sort of given on the domestic side, that's not to say that all domestic policy is perfect. And obviously drug policy happens at the local level, at the state level at the federal level. So it's a very complicated framework. But I do think that, you know, there have been good gains made. And, you know, we have a new kind of rhetoric for thinking about, you know, drug use here in the United States on the domestic level, but we have not shifted that at all with regard to the questions overseas. And so, you know, we've been, we're now 10 years out from, you know, major Latin American heads of state, writing op eds, in the, you know, in major national newspapers, people like Ernesto Zedillo, right, not raging leftists, writing that the way that the war on drugs has been conducted has only been counterproductive has to end. And it again, it stumbles on the question of domestic politics, it stumbles on the sort of, you know, militant, tough on crime idea that there is a constituency for this kind of militarized, militarized policy. And so until we here in the United States can shift that policy and say, in fact, we don't think that, you know, sending more of this military equipment, doing more military training, encouraging more militaries to go into the streets is the right way to do this. Those are not the policies that we're supporting. Instead, we're thinking about, you know, why it is that these markets exist, and how you might address the kind of market consequences of them, then, you know, we are going to continue to see these failures, and we're going to continue to see people die here in the United States. I mean, the dangerousness of the drug supply is entirely a consequence of these failures, right? The issue, the existence of these new synthetic opioids like fentanyl, right, and we're even moving beyond fentanyl. Now we're moving into new kinds of synthetics that, you know, and the the ways that these will be transformed the markets, you know, are really to be seen, we saw, you know, I've kind of huge transformation, there was a massive poppy economy in Mexico, when heroin was the most important kind of illicit export. And that required small farmers in the mountains in places like Wahaca, and get an arrow and, and mutual icon. And now those people have no market at all right. And so thinking about this from a kind of political economic perspective, I think makes clear why it is that the military interventions fail over and over.

### **Aileen Teague 43:44**

Kelley, just real quick, I mean, just off Christy's point here, I mean, of 2022 fy 2022 And fy 2023. Were the first years that the US Federal Drug Control budget had devoted as much to treatment and prevention as as to enforcement and security type aids since the 1980s. I mean, so this is

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just this is a very new sort of transformation. And I think what Christie says about the in the about focusing on sort of the the mechanics of the illicit economy, I mean, is spot on. And I think that what we don't focus on enough is this very weird interaction between securitized policies and the illicit economy. And just the way that that works, and I'm teaching a class this semester on on prohibition and alcohol prohibition. I mean, some of these questions get out get get kind of come down to a very simple question about the failures of like prohibitive punitive type policies. And that's the sense is that like, we think that these sorts of securitized militarized policies are going to stop the drug trade. But why is it that Americans continue to want to pay more I mean, get themselves into more dangerous situations and take more licit substances when these policies are supposed to stop that but they don't. And with respect to harm reduction, I mean, I still know Americans, I still talk to people who are still sort of anti harm reduction policies, despite the fact that they are sort of mainstream now. And the more we continue to practice these prohibitive punitive policies, the more intensive our harm reduction policies are going to need to be. I mean, during the 1970s, it was sort of some people didn't accept the fact that methadone, methadone maintenance, for example, was a was a legitimate treatment option. And now, I mean, with fentanyl, I mean, people have to get three or four times the dosage of methadone to support a methadone addiction, I mean, so the more intensive the drug trade becomes, the more intensive the substances become, the more intensive our harm reduction is going to need to be in order to support the demand in our society.

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 45:53**

I want to go back to it for a second if I can, is the issue of the supply chain, because one of the things about the cartels is they operate in with the, with the logic of neoliberalism, they operate with the logic of a free market. And in an effort to interdict those supply chains, you would have to actually then have a challenge for the very system, you're talking about the very operative system, we work and function, benefits tremendously from free trade, so that the ability of the cartels to expand internationally, the ability of the cartels to function on a global level is particularly tied to the very nature of free trade. An old friend of mine, Carlos masiva, is in Mexico, an intellectual, would used to say that the cartels are the clearest expression of neoliberalism. They're the clearest expression because they benefit Exactly. They parallel exactly the trade system, the economic system, and they operate within that logic. So to confront this issue, we have to confront that logic as well, in many ways.

### **Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 46:48**

I want to ask all three of you the same question. You're in a town hall. And you're facing Americans, you know, of all colors and stripes and socio economic background. And you're in a debate with one of these Republicans who are, you know, Foursquare going in getting at the cartels parachuting in and saying, This is how we are going to stop the fentanyl from getting into our communities? What argument do you make to those people who are saying, Hey, we just had two overdoses at our high school, these kids thought they were taking Adderall, it was cut with fentanyl. When one kid actually died, this actually happened in my community. How do you? How do you explain to those participants, that there is a way to both get at the fentanyl

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and keep it from coming into the country without further militarizing the situation? Because I completely understand your arguments here. But when you're looking at communities that say, I want this to stop now, is there is there, how would you articulate that argument against militarization?

### **Jake Werner 51:28**

I mean, I, I feel this question very strongly I, I lost my mom to the kind of long war on drugs in a complicated way, but it was entirely because of the stigma. And the idea that people who use drugs are sort of unworthy of our love and attention and hair care and help, that she died prematurely. And so you know, that is the situation that I deeply empathize with, I would say to those parents, the reason that there is fentanyl in what your children think is Adderall that they are buying is because of those militarized policies. It's because of the prohibitionist policies. And so you've seen this over time, right? The drugs that, quote unquote, come across the border, have changed dramatically over time, right in the 1970s, you know, the beginning of our means book, the operation intercept, the idea was to kind of stop what was seen as a flood of cannabis coming across the border Mexican marijuana coming for us, right? And then eventually we get into cocaine transshipment we get into heroin transshipment. As we militarize and go after these things, you can see that there is always a, an imperative to find a drug that is stronger, smaller in volume, right, and therefore more profitable. And so it is, in fact, the militarization of the border. It is that crackdown that has led to these market innovations, and that's what we should think of them are they are innovations in the market, right to say, Okay, how if we're looking at our supply and demand, we're looking at our inputs, we're looking at our export market. If you know militarized interdiction is one kind of, you know, market constraint. How do we get around that we come up with drugs that are stronger, smaller and volume easier to smuggle? Right, and will still allow us to make these profits and so The existence of fentanyl, the kind of massive uptake of fentanyl. And the way that it has become one of the big things that's coming across the border is because it is so much stronger and therefore so much smaller in volume and therefore, so much more profitable. Right? And so the reason that kids are now not smoking marijuana, right, but might be taking a pill that has some fentanyl in it is entirely because of that prohibitionist framework. The the way that the market imperatives are driven by that militarization gets that fentanyl in that school for that kid to take. And that is that is the ultimate tragedy of this politics of the prohibitionist politics is that it actually furthers the thing that it thinks it's trying to go after.

### **Kelley Vlahos 50:43**

So long term, decriminalization, short term, what do you do? I mean, is there a law enforcement answer here that doesn't involve more militarization in the long term?

### **Aileen Teague 55:19**

I think more I mean, I echo some of the things that that Christy says in terms of focus on public health and demand and empathy and compassion, and destigmatization, because I fear that I

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mean, I see what you asked Telly as two separate questions. I mean, what I'm reading about now is how members of drug cartels completely circumvent militarized policies. I mean, they have snapchat now to get in touch with youth. I mean, they don't even need the border these days with, you know, with the dark web with ways in which with the fact that the United States and Mexico's economies, despite the fact that there are there, it's intense, tensely fortified the borders, I mean, these countries are still very economically connected. But youth are getting access to fentanyl or drugs laced with fentanyl right now through social media. And people don't even need to cross the border to get a hold of some of these drugs. I mean, so I don't know what its future policies. I'm talking about the fact that there's people that are, are preying upon young kids, I mean, they don't even they might be connected to a criminal organization, they might be living in the United States, they might be a citizen that crosses back and forth. I mean, what I'm reading about here, in in Texas suburbs, in Dallas most recently, I mean, it's the fact that youth are, I mean, there are people there connections, there are chains. And it's very easily it's very easy to circumvent the border and these, these militarized policies and to connect with, with potential consumers in ways that that hadn't been before. I mean, you can use sometimes USPS and other kinds of mail services to get a hold of some of these substances. I mean, this is, these are substances that are not produced in get it or other poppy fields in Mexico, these are substances that are produced in laboratories and compounds can very easily be changed in order to kind of circumvent authorities. I mean, so I think that what I'm almost concerned with is in 10 years that we're going to be focusing a lot less on the militarization of and more on more and more on other complicated questions of how people are able to relatively easily get a hold of the substances, because criminal organizations have been so able to use technology and other phenomena to adapt to their, you know, their new economic constraints and still get through. And so yeah, I don't know, I've obviously the enforcement aspect will probably still be there. But but the the drug market, I think is, is rapidly changing.

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 52:12**

It's evolving. It's changing. And it's not just in Mexico, it's here in the US, the production happens in the US, there is a drug market in the US. I think the first question to go back to what you suggested Kelly, talking to a family talking to a group is to show compassion, to show humanity to show that we understand that experience, but to also underscore that we're not going to bomb our way out of this, we're not going to kill our way out of this. We're not going to build walls to get out of this, that this is really an issue that requires human intervention, that you have to have compassion, that you have to have a mechanisms instead of simply militarization that we have a whole healthcare system that can focus on this issue, that we have a healthcare system that can provide an antidote that can provide a because again, this is fentanyl today, the same way it was marijuana, Poppy cocaine. Now methamphetamines now, fentanyl, it'll be something else next year or the year after that. So we can't bomb our way out of this. We have been unable to bomb ourselves out of this. Imagine if that trillion dollars had been spent on human cost on interest on health care and mechanisms to make this a reality in the US and in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, that's really the challenge we face. The challenge we face is how to grapple with this issue where we prioritize the human being, prioritize the individual, prioritize the person to understand why they feel compelled to take those drugs, why

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are they doing that, instead of trying to think that we're going to put them in jail, and that's going to resolve it, because the jails are the school houses where the cartels come out of.

### **Christy Thornton 55:25**

And if I can just add to that, you know, a thing that I think is so important about the Quincy Institute addressing this is that there is a way in which we can have a domestic policy conversation where we say, okay, we can understand the kind of harm reduction perspective, something focused on treatment, etc, within the domestic sphere, and we can define who we think is worthy of that, etc, right, we can change our domestic understanding of the drug user. And I think, you know, we've seen important aspects of that Chris Christie, former governor of New Jersey, multiple time presidential candidate, right, talked about how in New Jersey, he had, you know, people in his family who went through the kind of opioid crisis, and therefore he understood a little bit better, that kind of empathy, I think, is really important. What I think needs to be coupled with that is a refusal of the sort of demonizing, you know, the kind of parallel between the drug trafficking organizations and Isis that we see coming from the current presidential debate, and from the Republican field, if we begin to understand the kind of economic imperatives that get people into this business in the first place, right, what jobs exist for people, there aren't those jobs in a place like Sinaloa. And so you work for the DTO, right, you do some kind of low level transportation, etc. If we, again, if we use that framework, and we think about why it is that people are participating along this whole supply chain, that's not to say that there aren't people making tons of money, right, and people who should not be sort of addressed by the criminal legal system on that front. But thinking about extending that compassion to the way that we think about our foreign policy, refusing the demonization of Mexicans in general, the idea that you could bomb Mexico, that you could invade Mexico, and that that would somehow solve it. I mean, that isn't that there is a fundamental sort of racialized logic to the idea that the people beyond our borders don't matter, right, we can protect the people within our borders, but the people beyond our borders don't matter. And really the Human Rights consequences, the environmental consequences of the way that this drug war has been prosecuted throughout Latin America are really profound, the consequences for democracy have been really profound. And so we need to extend that kind of compassionate lens to our foreign policy, we need to take the lessons that we are beginning to learn from domestic policy and extend them into our foreign policy lens to come up with new solutions. I really think that's key to how we begin to change this conversation.

### **Kelley Vlahos 57:48**

we have two minutes left. So I wanted to ask in terms of like looking forward, and I'm sorry, to our q&a. Folks, I've tried to incorporate some of your questions into my questions and paraphrasing. But looking towards the future. What happens in the next iteration of Mexican leadership? Claudia shine balm powder, Pardo? Sorry, are we are we looking at status quo? Do you think that there will be a maybe more of a reckoning with the United States over the militarization a better relationship and more strained relationship? What if we were dealing with it on on our end as well? We may have a Republican administration after next year, so can each



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of you like maybe to offer just a few parting thoughts on what the future might look like as political dynamics change?

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 58:55**

Yeah, barring anything fundamental in Mexico, Claudia Sheinbaum, by all accounts is will be the next president of Mexico. I see a continuation of status quo, but understanding that that status quo includes militarization that that status quo, AMLO already asked for American advisors in November, he requested before the Mexican Congress permission to bring in American advisors, American paratroopers or in Mexico training Mexican soldiers. So we see a continuation of that policy, but I see Claudia Sheinbaum, largely status quo, but that will depend also on the US election, because again, that may force Mexico's hand into taking a more approach of nationalism or sovereignty and independence rely more on Latin America. So again, that's going to depend on several factors. But right now, it looks like Claudia Sheinbaum will be the next president, I perceive status quo. But again, that status quo includes tremendous levels of militarization.

### **Aileen Teague 59:58**

I mean, just a couple of things. I know that we You know, we don't really address domestic immigration issues here. But this is something that runs kind of counter to, to what we're talking about with respect to militarized policing. I mean, there's still a border crisis, there's still people that continue to migrate cyclically to the United States, alongside the fact that there are these huge drug flows coming into the United States, sometimes across the southern, the US southern border. I mean, I think that domestically, in addition to continued reform, of drug policy, I mean, we still kind of have to angle for that comprehensive immigration reform. I mean, because what we're seeing now is the fact that I mean, there's presidential candidates and who knows what will happen, what will happen with the US presidential election will be critical to shaping sort of what will happen in the next stage. I mean, U.S. Northern Command is still heavily involved as well as other US enforcement entities in training exercises in Mexico. But they're still I mean, at the municipal and local level, or the municipal, local and state level here in Texas. I mean, I see it, I mean, you have a lot of power brokers on the border, like Governor Abbott, for example, that had their own ways of wanting to kind of address this issue. And so I think that there just needs to be a strong federal posture up at the top and it's unclear whether or not that will happen from from the US perspective.

### **Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:01:25**

Christy, you have the last word.

### **Christy Thornton 1:01:26**

Oh, no, I mean, the last word is is good for me. Thank you so much.

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**Kelley Beaucar Vlahos 1:01:31**

Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate this. As you are right, Eileen, we could have went on for another hour. There were a number of questions I didn't get to. But thank you so much. And since you're all and our F's of Quincy Institute, will probably be seeing you again, on this and many other issues dealing with Latin America, securitization and the United States. Before our viewers exit, I just want to let you know that I will be moderating another panel tomorrow at noon. So that's Wednesday at noon, where I will be interviewing us China and Taiwan experts on the recent elections on Saturday in Taiwan and interpreting the results of those elections and impacts on on the relationships. We have our Senior Research Fellow Michael Swaien will be joining us, Shelly Rigger, she is a vice president for academic affairs, and at Brown University, and at Davidson College. She teaches there what as well, and Steven Goldstein over at the Taiwan studies workshop at Harvard University will be joining us. So, it's going to be a pretty exciting conversation that again, that's noon tomorrow and thank you so much for everybody that joined today. And sorry, I didn't get to all the questions. And thank you Aileen for a wonderful brief and I hope everybody checks it out at the Quincy Institute website, that's Quincy Institute. org and check out Aileen, she her bio and her paper and look forward to seeing you both Miguel and Christy at another webinar.