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Why a US Invasion of Mexico would end in disaster

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*Since before his inauguration, those in President Trump's close circle have advocated for military action in Mexico to combat drug cartels. **Kevin Zapata Celestino** and **Omar Alejandro Loera***

***González** write that from a historical, political, diplomatic and social standpoint, military action against Mexico would be impractical but also deeply counterproductive for the US, potentially transforming the cartels and other criminal organizations into symbols of resistance.*

Donald Trump's second administration has shown a willingness to cross previously unthinkable lines in foreign and diplomatic affairs, including turning its back on long-standing US allies amid major geopolitical events. For instance, the US has taken a radical stance on Ukraine, calling into question its role as Europe's primary military ally and significantly weakening the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Likewise, the White House has recently escalated economic tensions by engaging in a **tariff war** against Canada and the European Union.

Military action against Mexico appears to be a real US option

In the same vein, Trump's administration has placed Mexico in an unwarranted position. Ahead of Trump's inauguration some of his allies explicitly suggested **military action** on Mexican soil to combat drug cartels, particularly in response to fentanyl trafficking. This discourse has gained traction following the designation of certain Mexican cartels as **Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)**. Such a designation would set a legal precedent for unilateral military action, which would be a blatant violation of Mexico's sovereignty. Amid the thunderous start of the second Trump administration, the debate in some policy circles is no longer whether the US would intervene in Mexico, but rather what form such an intervention might take.

While some statements from high-ranking officials suggest that any **"intervention"** could be more nuanced than initially expected, it would not be far-fetched to speculate that significant military action remains a real option on the table, given Trump's unpredictable and confrontational attitude. It is therefore crucial to explore what a potential US military incursion into Mexico would mean not only for bilateral relations but for

regional stability and the broader implications of such a move. Based on US history and socio-political reality in Mexico, we would anticipate that an incursion of this kind would backfire spectacularly for US national interests.

Interventions are costly and Mexico would be no exception

From an historical perspective, US military interventions in foreign nations – whether in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan – have often resulted in costly failures, in terms of budget, lives lost and the (lack of) long-term strategic benefits. And it wouldn't be the first time that the US has intervened in Mexico with marginal results. The **1916 Punitive Expedition** to capture revolutionary warlord Francisco Villa, after Villa's attack on Columbus, New Mexico, not only failed but inadvertently turned Villa into a folk hero who symbolized defiance against American aggression and evoked strong nationalist sentiments in Mexico.

From a political viewpoint, a US incursion into Mexico would inflame these very same nationalist sentiments, strengthening rather than weakening the so-called "Fourth Transformation" regime led by President Claudia Sheinbaum. The US seems to underestimate the unifying power of **Mexican nationalism** in the face of perceived foreign threats. Such an operation would reinforce Mexico's long-standing narrative of sovereignty against foreign intervention, making it even harder for Washington to exert influence over Mexico's leadership. Instead of curbing cartels, military intervention would likely legitimize the Mexican government's resistance to US pressures and bolster anti-American rhetoric, the crucial cornerstone of Mexican governability after Mexico's revolution of 1910.

From a diplomatic standpoint, a military operation in Mexico would further erode US credibility in Latin America and beyond. Washington's historical influence in the region has already been challenged by emerging **global powers**, and direct military action would accelerate regional realignments away from US strategic interests. Moreover, US military intervention in Mexico would likely terminate existing bilateral security cooperation agreements, such as intelligence-sharing initiatives that facilitate the targeting of high-profile cartel figures. Rather than weakening transnational criminal organizations, the erosion of US-Mexico collaboration would hinder law enforcement efforts on both sides of the border.

It would also generate widespread instability just south of the border, exacerbating violence across the country. Historically, large-scale military operations have led to power vacuums, triggering internal cartel conflicts and escalating brutality as rival groups fight for **territorial control**. Such instability would have severe economic repercussions, particularly in sectors deeply embedded in US supply chains. Industries such as automotive manufacturing, agriculture, and electronics, all of which rely on stable production and cross-border trade, would suffer significant disruptions, ultimately harming both the Mexican and US economies. Being both countries' each other's **main trade partners**, the major implications of disrupting this fragile stability in an asymmetric interdependency, are hard to quantify.

“President Trump Travels to Texas” (Public Domain) by The Trump White House Archived

How US intervention In Mexico could backfire on the US

From a social perspective, the situation is even more complex. Many cartels and criminal organizations in Mexico have deep-rooted ties to local communities through a form of ‘**clandestine welfare**,’ providing jobs, security, and services where the state has failed. In some regions, these groups function as de facto parallel governments with substantial local support. Any US military action would not only have to contend with these well-armed groups but also face stiff resistance from the very communities that rely on them.

In the worst case scenario, military intervention could unintentionally transform cartels and other criminal organizations into symbols of resistance, “**heroes**” and “**martyrs**” in the eyes of many vulnerable communities. Rather than being seen as liberators, US forces would likely be perceived as aggressors imposing an external agenda, further

alienating local populations. Thus, strengthening the very criminal organizations the intervention seeks to dismantle, ultimately making them more entrenched and resilient.

The designation of Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations introduces further complications. Under US law, providing material support to terrorist groups carries severe legal penalties, including life imprisonment. It would raise significant legal and ethical questions regarding the accountability of American actors involved in arms trafficking to these groups. Each year, an estimated **200,000 firearms** cross the border from the United States into Mexico, fueling cartel violence. Would US-based gun manufacturers, dealers, and intermediaries who intentionally or inadvertently supply these weapons be held legally responsible under anti-terrorism laws? If so, the implications of such legal measures would extend far beyond Mexico, forcing a re-evaluation of US domestic policies regarding arms exports and regulatory oversight.

With these historical, political, and social dynamics in mind, a US military intervention in Mexico would be not only impractical but also deeply counterproductive. It would escalate instability, strengthen nationalist resistance, hurt both economies and entangle the US in yet another protracted and unwinnable conflict. Ultimately, addressing the challenges posed by transnational criminal organizations requires a more comprehensive strategy that prioritizes intelligence cooperation, economic development, and diplomatic engagement over unilateral military action. Any attempt to impose a military solution on Mexico's security crisis would not only fail to achieve its objectives but would also worsen the very problems it seeks to resolve.

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