

## The Merida Initiative: Security-Surveillance Harmonization in Latin America

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*Abstract:* This article analyses the Merida Initiative, whose objective is to coordinate the information systems used against terrorism, organized crime, and drug and arms trafficking between the United States, Mexico and Central America. It implies the introduction of communication equipment, data bases and surveillance technology, which not only reinforces the security policies of the ‘western hemisphere’, but also consolidates and broadens the spaces of exception in Mexico and Central America, thus eroding their already weakened democratic institutions. *Keywords:* Merida Initiative, surveillance, security, borders, space of exception.

Following the events of 9/11, the United States has established a policy that envisions greater control of its borders. With this objective in mind, diverse types of surveillance devices have been called for, such as the construction of electronic walls that would allow for an increase in the observation of the population in Mexican territory, and the use of surveillance technologies that provide territorial depth to border strips. The U.S. government has required agreements made through diplomacy (Hardt y Negri 2000) with other countries in order to install these surveillance devices, which would work with those already in place in their territories (Lyon 2007).

This is the case of the Merida Initiative, whose objective is to establish a mechanism of cooperation between the United States, Mexico and Central America, with the goal of reducing drug trafficking, stopping trans-national crime organizations, as well as detecting possible terrorist attacks that would affect the ‘western hemisphere’. This agreement appears to be reactivating mechanisms of cooperation in the region, and at the same time, its investment in equipment would seem to guarantee public security in relation to crime and terrorism, but not to revolutionary movements. In contrast with the years of the Cold War, the conditions of cooperation have changed, and thus the Merida Initiative largely supports the installation of various surveillance technologies. Most importantly, the Initiative has been established within the context of implementing military operations in certain Latin American countries in order to guarantee internal security. Such operations are characterized by restricting the civil rights of the population, which leads to the propagation of spaces of exception (Hannah 2008). In this sense, the surveillance technologies implemented by the Merida Initiative not only would provide territorial depth to the United States-Mexico border by broadening its boundaries, but also would reinforce control mechanisms and social classifications inside the countries involved, as stated by Zureik and Salter (2005), and favouring the change in the concept of a border, understood as a point of entry and departure of people, either legally or illegally. That is why this Initiative implies different relationships between countries with different histories – even though interlinked – and different levels of technological development, as mentioned by Lyon (2007).

In this way, the central argument of the Initiative departs from the position that surveillance technologies and mechanisms of regional coordination are positioned solely to reinforce the borders in order to verify ‘western hemisphere’ security policies, but instead consolidate and broaden spaces of exception in Mexico and Central America, thus eroding their already weakened democratic institutions.

### **State, borders and surveillance**

The systematic surveillance of population groups and individuals is a central element in the groundwork of modern nation-states. The emergence of a bureaucracy that administers to the different aspects of life increases concomitantly with the expansion of democracy. This results in the manner by which surveillance is necessary to establish a basis that responds to the demands of equality and equity, assures civil rights and, in the same way, provides a form of social control (Dandeker 1990). In this process, the delineation of borders among countries results, perhaps, in one of the primary definitions upon which the surveillance organization of the population of a nation-state is stated. In general, the formal and informal practices of border control regulate the mobility of citizens and non-citizens in various ways, such as through the consideration of different categorizations of people.

Any nation-state that considers its territory in danger works hard to efficiently regulate the crossing of foreigners over its borders (Bigo 2006). This is exactly what has happened in a majority of developed countries after 9/11. It has generated a process to delocalize borders (Lyon 2003), which implies – apart from an increase in different surveillance technologies – profound changes in the nature of social control and in the governance of societies. With the intention of preventing security risks, delocalization has revealed that the border itself can be moved outside the national territory (Franko Aas 2005). In fact, it can be observed in the composition of global politics, thanks to the coordination of distinct surveillance nodes among different national territories that apparently provide intelligence and more centralized observation of the movement of people, which considers this as the best answer against the effects that the free movement of people now causes (Bigo 2006).

This induces the countries that form part of the Merida Initiative to create mechanisms that permit the coordination and configuration of surveillance – to bring different systems together either for control, security or governance (Haggerty and Ericson 2006). That is why it is necessary to examine, even briefly, the historical relationship between the United States, Mexico and Central America in regard to security.

### **From the Cold War to transnational cooperation**

During the Cold War, the government of the United States established a strategy in Latin America directed at the control and administration of information which would permit the confrontation and minimization of the effects of the national liberation struggles and popular rebellions in Central and South America. This logic was articulated through a military strategy capable of reacting in an effective way when faced by armed insurrections in the region. This would constitute two aspects

of the same plan: to defend the United States, using as a precautionary mechanism the intervention in a foreign territory. To reach this objective, the first conference of American Armed Forces took place in 1960, under the auspices of 'Security in South America', which intended to identify the 'common enemy': communism. In 1962, the Inter-American Defense College in Fort McNair, Washington D.C., was founded. The U.S. government provided training programmes targeted at foreign senior military and government officials with the intention of reinforcing the Panama Canal Zone militarily. Fourteen forts were eventually opened in Latin America, which included military schools coordinated by the headquarters of the U.S. Southern Command. These schools had as their objective the coordination of military and intelligence activities, supervision of assistance programmes and maintenance of communication and logistics.

In 1963, the U.S. Army School of the Americas (USARSA) – better known as School of the Americas – was opened. This school taught, above all else, command and combat operations, counterinsurgency techniques; offered training on the 'nature of the communist threat', and how to thwart its 'diabolic' effects through military intelligence and interrogation methods that included torture. Through these methods, vital information was collected about the opposition leaders in Latin American countries (Mattelart 2007). Next, information was exchanged, classified and selected in order to design counterinsurgency strategies. The U.S. security projects in Latin America also included assisting local police in maintaining order and combating immediate threats in the interior of the countries. The police organized and exchanged information using a military logic of interrogation and torture (Mattelart 2007). However, as the ghost of communism was exorcised, the United States opened another combat front in Latin America: the war on drugs. This strategy gave a twist to the form of obtaining information. Many of the military personnel trained in the 'war on communism' were now converted to combating the world of drug trafficking mafias, particularly in Mexico and Central America. Surveillance methods evolved into a strategy that was not necessarily physical but virtual and non-evasive. In Mexico as well as Central America, several of these methods could be used, such as wiretaps (Lyon 2003) and undercover operatives. Their objective was to bring about the control of the population in general, and, as Lyon (2003) states, an increase in the perception of border control management.

The implementation of The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the mid-1990s did not specifically change the border control policy of the United States towards Mexico, or Central America. The treaty completely left out the subject of immigration. However, a bi-lateral commission was created to facilitate the cooperation of the police in the fight against illegal immigration (Pellerin 2005). In fact, with the signing of NAFTA, immigration policies worsened with the installation of physical and virtual walls at different border crossings between the United States and Mexico. In addition, under pressure from the United States, Mexico began to reinforce its southern border.

Following 9/11, the United States expanded its policy of control over its northern and southern borders, militarily reinforcing them, as stated by Andreas (2006). However, in comparison to Canada, the surveillance of the border with Mexico was heavier, supported by a certain policy that there is an overflowing criminality both in Mexico as well as in Central America, and that this requires a stricter sur-

veillance of those countries beyond their physical borders. Inherent in this policy is a racist reasoning based on physical differences between Mexicans and Americans (Bhandar 2008).

The efforts of cooperation between the United States, Mexico and Central America have seen a significant crystallization since March 2007, following a tour by President Bush in Latin America. At the end of the tour, he met with Mexican President Calderón Hinojosa in the Mexican city of Merida, state of Yucatán. The subject of immigration was discussed as well as public security in Mexico and the protection of the southern border of the United States. The presidents spoke ‘about more sharing of information among law enforcement agencies, as well as about the possibility of the United States providing high-tech scanning equipment for Mexico’s ports’ (*New York Times*, 14 March 2007). Four months after the Merida encounter, the governments of Mexico and the United States announced talks that would discuss the development of a joint agreement to provide economic support for the fight against drug cartels in Mexico, guarantee the protection of mutual borders and combat terrorism.

Even though details of the agreement were kept secret, in a meeting between both countries and Canada it was disclosed that aid would include ‘money and training for the Mexican police, as well as advanced eavesdropping, surveillance and other spying technology’. The agreement would not include ‘operations by the United States military or drug enforcement agents on Mexican soil, as has happened in Colombia and Peru’. On the contrary, this agreement would have as its final goal ‘[...] seeking money, training and advanced technology for its state and federal police forces [for Mexico]’ to maintain control of distinct flows that included drugs, arms, criminals, terrorists and money. Eduardo Medina Mora, then Attorney General of the Mexican Republic stated: ‘The bottom line is precisely some help with equipment so we can do our job from a more solid perspective’ (*New York Times*, 14 August 2007).

This initiative was considered by the United States not so much as ‘an assistance package [...]. We see this as increased cooperation’ (*New York Times*, 14 August 2007). In October 2007, president Bush asked the U.S. Congress to approve an aid package totalling 1.4 billion dollars divided into 550 million dollars annually (500 million for Mexico, 50 for Central America) for 3 years. The agreement has been defined as a ‘security cooperation initiative’, where each part would administer different aspects of the surveillance of their borders and territories. Formally known as The Merida Initiative: United States-Mexico-Central America Security Cooperation, its objective is to produce a more protected western hemisphere where criminal organizations threaten the governments and the region (Office of the Spokesman, 22 October 2007). Its supporters consider it as a new paradigm for security cooperation.

### **Merida Initiative: a new border configuration**

The goal of the Initiative is to reduce the increasing asymmetry between Mexican agents (police, intelligence and army) and drug traffickers by providing arms and advanced information equipment, in addition to high technology, equipment and software for keeping an eye on the borders and the interchange of information.

Additionally, it seeks to professionalize the police and public prosecutors in the use of these tools. The training would be provided by both U.S. judicial agents and private contractors (Freeman 2008). In the words of the Official White House Spokesman, the Merida Initiative implies having:

- o Non-intrusive inspection equipment, ion scanners, canine units for Mexican customs, for the new federal police and for the military to interdict trafficked drugs, arms, cash and persons;
- o Technologies to improve and secure communications systems to support collecting information as well as ensuring that vital information is accessible for criminal law enforcement;
- o Technical advice and training to strengthen the institutions of justice — vetting for the new police force, case management software to track investigations through the system to trial, new offices of citizen complaints and professional responsibility, and establishing witness protection programs;
- o Helicopters and surveillance aircraft to support interdiction activities and rapid operational response of law enforcement agencies in Mexico (Office of the Spokesman, 22 October 2007).

In general, as pointed out by Fyke and Meyer (2008), this is the first proposal that has established economic support of Central America through issues of security. As these authors state, the responsible parties for acts of insecurity in this region are found in gangs, organized crime and drug trafficking. In this way, the Merida Initiative intends to balance an ‘asymmetry’ in the administration of security in Central America. In is conceived, therefore, as a transnational cooperation project in the sense of a ‘comprehensive package’ that involves the respective governments. Its supporters believe it is comprehensive because the agreement encompasses security and all its components. However, the Merida Initiative goes further than a simple surveillance strategy. It also intends to generate the assemblage of various surveillance devices that would allow the broadening of regional cooperation between the United States, Mexico and Central America for combating crime (Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, 23 October 2007). The idea is to articulate the different surveillance spaces that each member of the Initiative builds, so that it can guarantee the security of the region. Such assemblage is derived from the United States’ own security architecture that it has put in practice, and that interlinks politics, bureaucracy, army, judicial system, police and crime control. The Merida Initiative would attempt to fight crime, assemble more advanced surveillance technology, and train human resources in their governmental administrations in each country.

In the same way, for Mexico and Central America, the Initiative implies recovering the feeling of control over their territories. As stated by the Public Security Secretary of Mexico, ‘[...] the Merida Initiative has the intention of monitoring national territory in an integral manner. What we are doing [with this initiative] is potentializing the surveillance scheme [of national territory]’ (Public Security Secretary, 24 October 2007). That is why the Merida Initiative gives more weight to the army than to the police. In the case of Mexico, for example, the different military operations against drug trafficking and against public insecurity in various states of the Republic has been characterized by the exclusion of municipal police and, in some cases, state police. Most coordination is carried out between the army

and federal police. According to Fyke and Meyer (2008, 208), the strategy is not approached from the perspective of the police, but from that of the armed forces.

Therefore, it would appear that the Merida Initiative reinforces the capability of surveillance of the Mexican and Central American armies over the population within their territory. This originates from a false idea, since according to Astorga, the trafficking of drugs ‘[...] has not completely escaped from the control of the State, and is practiced [...] by the institutions formally in charge of combating illicit drug trafficking and the drug traffickers’. Moreover, in the case of Central America and Mexico, one cannot speak of cartels as acting with an end to directly create political instability, inasmuch as there does not exist a coordinated action amongst them, [...] what exists instead is an open competitive market with a dynamic of internal and external social control [...]’ (Astorga 2005, 154). This implies that the violent conflicts between the armed forces and criminal gangs in these countries are carried out in a dispersed, continuous and sporadic manner.

The expansion of special surveillance technologies tends to reduce the continuation of, rather than to end, violent acts, drug trafficking, and money laundering. The installation of such surveillance technologies is a new machinery of government that could not only be used in the spaces considered in danger or at risk, but which could also be extended to monitor the population in general. Mexico and Central America are constantly considering the necessity of extending surveillance toward the population as a whole in order to bring violence to a halt, articulated in a process of delocalizing borders that the United States carries out in the war against terrorism and drug trafficking. The application of such a security agreement should include the requirement of certain definitions of limitations of surveillance in each country, indeed. Traditionally, physical borders were enough to control, but with the Merida Initiative, borders have acquired another dimension altogether when supported by coordinated electronic surveillance databases. This dimension is yet another example of what Lyon (2007) considers a vision of the inter-operation of systems to increase the opportunities to protect borders and defend them against terrorism.

## **Final reflections**

The U.S. government considers the Merida Initiative necessary because ‘[...] organized crime presents a very real threat to the stability and well-being of democratic states in Mexico and in Central America’ (Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State, 23 October 2007). However, while it is being put into place, the policy of combating crime in Mexico can also be seen as generating a risk to the democratic system itself, because the operations to ensure public security are making use of the army. The participation of military personnel violates articles 118 and 129 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States.

While the Mexican government presides over the spaces of exception, at the same time it dispenses with the rules in order to guarantee the security of the population (Agamben 2003). However, this act of sovereignty of the government in order to maintain democracy and political stability over its population and territory is based on an illegal act. In Mexico and Central America, the violence linked to the presence of various criminal gangs is believed to weaken the governments and

constrain their authority without pretending to overthrow them. In this way, a policy of war cannot be established against the criminal gangs unless ‘spaces of exception’ are created to strengthen the action of the State against drug trafficking. This appears to be the potential objective, which is supported by the installation of surveillance mechanisms directed at the population as a whole; since in the logic of this type of scenario, nothing resembles a criminal or a terrorist more than an ordinary man (Agamben 2007).

In coordinating surveillance using the logic of justice and security of the United States, the Latin American countries involved in the agreement have taken part in the proposition that, ‘every person is guilty until proven otherwise’. The security institutions, in the sense in which they would be organized in this plan, would look for the conditions and the structure which makes it possible to identify a potential suspect. The surveillance devices may seem, in this context, to distribute an administration and management of the law by dividing and suspending the state of rights according to the situation of asymmetric violence and, with that pretending to guarantee, paradoxically, individual freedoms. This leads to bending the law by an *ad hoc* relaxing of the rules (Lyon 2007). If all of this is added to the discourse of ‘war’ that currently suffuses the public security programmes, as well as the significant increase in military and private institutions, we are facing a complex mechanism of surveillance operating under the call of ‘combating insecurity’ that will constantly seek to adjust to a logic of regional security, like the one that professes to be constructed through the Merida Initiative.

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