



GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

Mexican Intelligence¹

by José Medina González Dávila

Over the last fifteen years several members of the Mexican government, opinion leaders, mass media, and academics have stated that the Mexican intelligence services are in a deep state of “crisis.”² While their perceptions can be interpreted differently, an important fact is that very little is publicly known or acknowledged regarding the Mexican security and intelligence services. While secrecy is required for any intelligence organization to operate and contribute to the government’s decision-making, in the case of Mexico the lack of public information has created an impression of a lack of accountability and fostered doubt, a general perception of corruption, and distrust in such government entities.

While there are many elements of the Mexican state and its federal government that are acknowledged formally, there are many that are not. Secrecy has been such that the citizens and academic specialists do not know of the existence of all elements. This prevents observers, including the academic community, from studying intelligence organizations and limits one’s analytic perspective.

The Origins of Mexican Intelligence³

During the eleven years of the Mexican Revolu-

tion (1910-1921) most of the country was disorganized, lacked leadership, and was in a state of constant chaos and turmoil. The nation lacked any degree of economic, political, social, or diplomatic cohesion. There were eleven presidents during that period of time, but there was no effective public administration in the country. Most regions of Mexico were governed by “caudillos”: regional political and military leaders that ruled through the use of indiscriminate violence. The ineffective central government during that period of time also was wracked by several “cloak and dagger” political conflicts at its highest levels.

On 1 December 1924, General Plutarco Elías Calles took office as the President of Mexico, succeeding his mentor, Alvaro Obregón, a former general and commander of the Mexican Army, and president from 1920 to 1924. One of Calles’ first priorities was to establish political and security measures to protect his administration. Obregón had conducted a series of political assassinations and/or negotiations with the caudillos in order to subdue them and gain control of the entire Mexican national territory, which helped him maintain his authority and power as President. However, Calles searched for institutional mechanisms to protect the Office of the Presidency against political intrigues and internal threats. He appointed a hand picked group of Mexican Army officers for that task, whose sole purpose was to protect the President by providing physical security and information to support his political decisions. Such was the humble inception of Mexican intelligence service.

In 1929, President Emilio Portes Gil created the “Confidential Department” (*Departamento Confidencial*) as part of the Secretariat of the Interior (*Secretaría de Gobernación*). Its purpose was to provide political information and analysis and to serve as an “administrative police force.” The Confidential Department was Mexico’s secret police, and its primary role was strictly political. Military and defense matters were relegated to the Army. However, the main focus of the Mexican Government was internal policy and public domestic administration. In 1939, President Lázaro Cárdenas re-named the Confidential Department the “Office of Political Information” (*Oficina de Información Política*), maintaining the focus on political and social themes.

In 1942, in the context of World War II, the Office of Political Information was transformed into the “Social and Political Investigations Department” (*Departamento de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales*), whose purpose was to maintain information regarding political and social movements, the activities of foreigners in Mexican Territory, and any potential

1. This article is one of the first academic looks at the subject of the Mexican intelligence services. Because of that, much of the discussion regarding specific organizations, their activities, roles and functions in the top-level decision making process are excluded.

2. These general comments have been shared with the author on several occasions between 2004 and 2015 and have been discussed several times in the Mexican media.

3. The historical information presented in this section, as well as in the rest of the paper, is a brief synthesis of Sergio Aguayo, *La Charola* and information published by the Mexican Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB), Secretariat of National Defense (SEDEFNA) and Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR).

conflicts and subversion within the country. Its agents were oriented towards physical law enforcement and information gathering, and there is little evidence of analytical processes that turned such information into our current concept of “finished intelligence.” This would change in 1947.

President Miguel Alemán Valdés, recognizing the potential threats that Mexico could experience in the context of the Cold War, created the “Federal Security Directorate” (*Dirección Federal de Seguridad*, DFS), appointing Army Lieutenant-Colonel Marcelino Inurreta de la Fuente as its first director. DFS was organized based on the previous Mexican secret police forces and with the assistance of several US agencies. The Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigations were among the “role models” for DFS, as were their doctrine and operative roles.⁴

DFS focused almost exclusively on domestic matters, political espionage, counterinsurgency, law enforcement, and to provide “confidential”⁵ services for top Mexican government officials. At the same time, DFS was a “power tool” to the Mexican political leadership for operations against communism. During the 1950s and 1960s, DFS consolidated its position as a government institution, augmented the number of agents and operatives, created informant networks, and developed specific analytical capabilities. The main consumers of its “intelligence” were the Office of the Presidency, the Secretariat of the Interior, and the American CIA.⁶

However, by the mid 1970s the DFS was totally infiltrated by Mexican and transnational drug cartels and other criminal organizations, and corruption permeated the entire institution. DFS agents and leadership were involved in numerous international scandals and conflicts involving drug trafficking, abuse of authority, illegal activities, clandestine political espionage, violation of human rights and other crimes. Most notorious of all was DFS participation in the assassination of Mexican journalist Manuel Buendía and US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena Salazar in 1985.⁷

Because of these scandals and resulting foreign pressure, President Miguel de la Madrid disbanded the

DFS and created the “General Directorate of Investigations and National Security” (*Dirección General de Investigaciones y Seguridad Nacional*), which in 1989 was “re-named” by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari as the “National Security and Investigations Center” (*Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional*, CISEN), under the leadership of General Jorge Carrillo Olea, as part of the Secretariat of the Interior (*Secretaría de Gobernación*).

CISEN’s main role and purpose was to become “the maximum house of intelligence in Mexico”, to consolidate all intelligence to support top-level decision making, and to provide the necessary analytical support for the Mexican Federal Government⁸. Its focus was strictly internal, related to domestic political, social and economic matters. However, from its creation in 1989 to 2005, there was a lack of legal authorities — a “vacuum” that was not to be corrected until the presidency of Vicente Fox Quesada almost fifteen years later.

National Security Law and the Contemporary Structure of Mexican Intelligence

During the 1990s CISEN gained a reputation as the “Mexican Central Intelligence Agency.”⁹ It played an important role during the Zapatista insurgency movement that erupted in southern Mexico in 1994-1995 and other political and social crises. With the inclusion of Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, new diplomatic, regional and global pressures and commitments were exerted on the Mexican Government, on its security and defense capabilities and on general public policy and administration. The need for legal and institutional resources to provide adequate levels of security and international exchange of information became critical, and CISEN was the only civilian intelligence organism tasked with such responsibilities.¹⁰

The Mexican Economic Crisis of the late 1990s created an even more complex environment for its intelligence community, not only because it limited

4. This statement has been made to the author on several occasions by top-level Mexican intelligence officials, and is also referred to in numerous historical sources.

5. Such services included illegal activities, political coercion, exercise of violence against political enemies, and cooperation with organized crime in Mexico.

6. This also has been told to the author by several sources.

7. For further discussion on this matter, see Esquivel, Jesús, *La CIA, Camarena y Caro Quintero*. Grijalbo, Mexico, 2010.

8. Different senior Mexican intelligence officials have made this statement to the author on several occasions, and it is a common expression used by CISEN members in official and academic environments.

9. This perception is common among many Mexican citizens, several academics and scholars, and by CISEN personnel themselves. However, other intelligence organizations do not agree with such a reputation.

10. This is the analytic synthesis of the author based on his research.

resources but also because of the emergence of new social movements and potential threats to domestic security. While officially CISEN spearheaded the efforts to provide actionable analysis and intelligence to top policy makers, the Army and Navy intelligence organizations obtained new resources and capabilities as well.

At the beginning of the presidency of Vicente Fox Quesada (2000-2006)¹¹ there was a public and political discussion on the role, scope and potential limits of Mexican intelligence and national security. While these topics were discussed in academic circles and there were varying definitions used in Mexican military and public policy doctrine since the 1980s, there was no legal definition for them. In 2005, the Federal Government adopted the “National Security Law” (*Ley de Seguridad Nacional*), focused on establishing the legal fundamentals for the management and conduct of the nation’s intelligence elements.

However, the bill by itself is limited in several aspects;¹² first of all, “National Security” is defined in the law as a “set of actions” (Article 3), not as a necessary condition and/or a prerequisite for the adequate development of national economic, social and political activities. This limits to a high degree the actions of the Federal Government and its institutions, and places strict boundaries on the information gathering, intelligence analysis and dissemination of intelligence to support top level, strategic decisions.¹³

The National Security Law also stipulates clearly that the main focus of the Mexican intelligence agencies and services is to be focused *within the national territory*. This excludes developing foreign intelligence capabilities, adequate measures to exchange information with other countries and organizations, and leaves a void in all aspects related to transnational threats and intelligence processes. It is understood that international cooperation is mandatory in the globalized world; however, the bill does not mention it *per se*.¹⁴ All Mexican Intelligence efforts are limited to the inside of the country.

The National Security Bill of 2005 creates the “National Security Council” with the President of Mexico as its head and the Secretary of the Interior

as second-in-command. CISEN is recognized as the “primary” intelligence agency, and the bill grants it authority to coordinate intelligence and operational efforts related to National Security. This places CISEN in a central role in Mexico’s intelligence networks and in national security matters; however presidential political decisions suggest otherwise.

Conflicts and Tensions Within Mexico’s Intelligence Services

Several official and unofficial sources have revealed that during the presidency of Vicente Fox Quesada, despite the National Security Law of 2005, there was an intention to disband CISEN because of political reasons. Because of CISEN’s background as a political espionage organization, numerous scandals and conflicts of interest, and systematic abuses of authority, President Fox considered it necessary to disband CISEN and create new intelligence organizations.¹⁵ However, by the end of his administration, he had not done so. His need for CISEN impeded such an action. However, other government agencies, both civilian and military, deeply distrusted the “Center.”¹⁶

CISEN gained a reputation as a “gatherer and concentrator of all the intelligence, but shared none with anyone,” a situation that deeply irritated other government organizations.¹⁷ While secrecy and compartmentalization of information is required in any intelligence organization, as the Americans have learned after the attacks of September 11, 2001, sharing information horizontally among different national agencies promotes efficient results and is an operational requirement. CISEN’s reputation motivated other government organizations to create and/or strengthen their own intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities.

In the civilian sector, the Attorney General’s Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, PGR) and the Federal Police (*Policía Federal*, PF) created their own intelligence departments. Focused on law enforcement and combating transnational organized crime, the PGR created the “Criminal Investigations Agency” and strengthened the “Under-office for the Investigations of Organized Crime” (*Subprocuraduría de Investigación en Delincuencia Organizada*, SIEDO). The PF

11. Modern Mexican presidents serve six-year terms of office.

12. The following are the author’s analytic conclusions based on an in-depth study of the National Security Law of 2005 and on its operational practice by the Mexican Federal Authorities.

13. These perceptions are shared by several top-level intelligence officials in Mexico, which have shared their opinions with the author.

14. For further information, see Cámara de Diputados, *Ley de Seguridad Nacional*, Mexico, 2005.

15. This perception is common knowledge in the Mexican Intelligence Community, and several specialists and officials agree that this was the President’s intention at the time.

16. Several military and civilian intelligence officers have shared this perception with the author.

17. *Ídem*.

first created its “Section 2” (*Sección Segunda-Inteligencia*) and then the “Mexico Center” (*Centro México*) tasked with gathering information related to drug trafficking, organized crime, and to monitor potential threats to public safety and internal security.

At the same time, the PGR also funded the inception of the “National Center for the Planning, Analysis, and Information to Combat Delinquency” (*Centro Nacional de Planeación, Análisis, e Información para el Combate a la Delincuencia, CENAPI*), intended as an agency to integrate all crime information and to serve as a “center” of all criminal investigations and a national liaison with international organizations such as INTERPOL, the DEA, FBI, and the US Marshalls Service.¹⁸

Despite the efforts of the PGR and the PF to strengthen their intelligence capabilities, the military possessed far superior resources for intelligence. The Mexican Army had its “S-2” (*Sección Segunda*) within their Secretary of Defense’s Staff (*Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional*), with a corresponding section in the Air Force (*Sección Segunda del Estado Mayor de la Fuerza Aérea*).¹⁹ During the administration of President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012), the Mexican Federal Government decided to counteract drug trafficking and transnational organized crime. Mislabeled the “Mexican War on Drugs” by the media, such efforts prompted all Mexican security organizations to develop greater intelligence capabilities and to organize specialized criminal intelligence organizations.

The Mexican Army, in addition of their S-2 and the Air Force S-2, created the “Antinarcotics Information Center” (*Centro de Información Antinarcóticos, CIAN*), which later evolved into the S-7 and then the S-10 of the National Defense Staff (*Sección Séptima y Sección Décima del Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional*). The primary mission of these military organizations is to develop intelligence to counter drug trafficking and other manifestations of organized crime. The S-2 now focuses on broad subjects related to National defense and security.

The Mexican Navy also has an S-2 in the Naval General Staff (*Estado Mayor de la Armada de México*), whose functions and missions are similar to the Army’s. The Navy has developed the “Naval Intelligence Unit” (*Unidad de Inteligencia Naval, UIN*), whose

purpose is to develop strategic intelligence, develop tactical intelligence to counteract transnational maritime crime and drug trafficking, and to generate “special intelligence” to the high command.²⁰ The UIN integrates the efforts of their Army counterparts as well as develops special reconnaissance and analysis related to maritime intelligence.

The S-2s in both the Mexican Army and the Navy have similar structures and roles, to include (but not limited to) counterintelligence, security of information, protection of sensitive material, secure communications, and management of Mexican military attaches abroad.

Other Intelligence Organizations in Mexico

In broad terms, the organizations mentioned in the previous section represent the major players of the Mexican intelligence community. It should be noted that while the leadership of these organizations has made important efforts at cooperation, there remains a high level of distrust and tension among their personnel. Tensions between the Army and the Navy can be considered traditional; but over the last several years a high level of competition has emerged between the military and civilian organizations.²¹

Within the military and civilian organizations there are other more discrete agencies. Both the Army and the Navy have their “Sensitive Information Groups” (*Grupos de Información Sensible, GIS*) whose purpose is to manage and process critical intelligence for the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Navy respectively. Furthermore, the Presidential Staff (*Estado Mayor Presidencial, EMP*)²² has its own intelligence section. The Office of the President also has an intelligence department, in charge of collecting, processing and supplying the Commander in Chief with critical political, social, economic and military information.

The Secretariat of the Treasury (*Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público*), the Secretariat of Foreign Relations (*Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*), and the Secretariat of Economics (*Secretaría de Economía*) have their own information and analysis departments.

18. For further information see Procuraduría General de la República (Mexico) www.pgr.gob.mx.

19. In Mexico, the administrative entity for Defense is the Secretariat of National Defense (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, SED-ENA*), and its armed-operational components are the Mexican Army and the Mexican Air Force as separate entities.

20. By “special intelligence” it is understood specific communications interceptions, special reconnaissance, infiltration of specific cells of organized crime, and (sometimes) political intelligence; which are considered critical by the Naval High Command and Staff.

21. Numerous military and naval intelligence officers in Mexico have shared these perceptions with the author.

22. The EMP is a separate military organization under the president, trusted with his personal security.

However, as with the rest of the Mexican Federal Government, their interests and focus are largely domestic, inside Mexican boundaries. In the case of the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, their activities are limited to obtaining and analyzing information only if it pertains to Mexican citizens, corporations and/or Mexican government entities.

For much of its international information, Mexico relies on other countries, such as the United States, Canada, Germany, and Israel. Using well-established international cooperation mechanisms, Mexico relies on foreign agencies for certain information directly related to Mexican national security.²³ Such cooperation binds specific agencies in the United States with specific organizations in Mexico. Administrative and management conflicts regarding such information are still a problem within Mexican intelligence services and are likely to continue in the future.

With the new administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), there was a high level of expectations regarding the efficient operation of Mexican security services – and their intelligence organizations – based on his statements during his political campaign. At the same time, since President Peña's party is the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party [*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*] which ruled Mexico for over seventy years and is considered by many citizens as a very corrupt party) general perception of the efficiency and integrity of the security services remains low. While there has been significant successes by the intelligence community – such as the arrest of several leaders of drug cartels and other organized crime structures²⁴ – their integrity and efforts are still questioned by the media, the academic world, and other political parties.

The Future of Mexican Intelligence

As described, there are many Mexican intelligence organizations across the Federal Government. Given their backgrounds and histories, their roles and missions overlap. This results in a less than optimal

efficiency, mostly because of the distrust and lack of sharing among the security services. In terms of public administration and management this represents the main challenge in future years. International cooperation, while helpful, also causes tension inside Mexican intelligence: not because it is deficient, but because different organizations and agencies compete for exclusivity of the information received from abroad.

Like all complex systems, any intelligence community benefits from a good and healthy degree of competition, especially in analysis. However, in the case of the Mexican services, such competition has led to a lack of trust and a less than efficient cooperation. This represents a major challenge towards the future.

Based on this brief description of the Mexican intelligence services, and recognizing the challenges they face in the new millennium, it would be appropriate to discern if there is a “real” crisis of the Mexican intelligence, or it is only a “perception.” While it is undeniable that Mexican intelligence services, both civilian and military, have come a long way since their humble beginnings in the first quarter of the last century, it is also undeniable that high levels of corruption, inefficiency, tensions and conflicts between services, private and political interests, and even less-than-adequate leadership are constant factors within the Mexican intelligence community. These are challenges that must be faced both as government entities and as intelligence and information organizations.

At the same time, the scope, reach and focus of Mexican intelligence is mainly within its national borders, and lacks sufficient and efficient resources to cooperate effectively with international organizations and to develop foreign intelligence. Furthermore, there are no adequate means or measures to develop “strategic intelligence” as other countries do. This places important limitations on the Mexican intelligence services, its value for strategic decision-making, and its support of public policy and administration.

In this regard, the “real crisis” of Mexican intelligence is not based on the internal problems of the various services, but in the relatively limited concept that shapes the Mexican intelligence network. This represents a major challenge to Mexico's government, since the 21st century brings new conditions to the international community, its security and development. Mexico cannot isolate itself from its responsibility on these matters as a member of the global community; and because of this the Mexican State must adapt its security organizations to meet such challenges. To do so will represent a major national

23. During the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) the Mexican Federal Government established several international agreements to share information with other countries, such as the famous “Merida Plan” with the United States. For further information refer to the “Merida Initiative” document available on the US Embassy in Mexico's website (<http://mexico.usembassy.gov/eng/ata glance/merida-initiative.html>)

24. Some of the drug cartel “leaders” that have been captured during Peña's administration are Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán of the Sinaloa Cartel in 2014, and Servando “La Tuta” Gómez of the Knights Templar Cartel of Michoacán in early 2015.

and international advancement; not to do so will represent a major setback for the Mexican State and its society. ✎

READINGS FOR INSTRUCTORS

Little is published in English about Mexican intelligence except for references in American newspaper articles, usually associated with an operation against a drug cartel leader. For those proficient in Spanish the following are relevant resources.

Aguayo Quezada, Sergio. *La Charola: Una historia de los Servicios de Inteligencia en México*. Grijavlo Editorial Group, Mexico, 2001.

Cámara de Diputados. *Ley de Seguridad Nacional*. Mexico's Legislative Power, Mexico, 2005.

Centro de Estudios Superiores Navales. *Inteligencia Estratégica*. Naval Superior Studies Center, Secretariat of the Navy, Mexico, 2014.

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