Mexico grapples with direction of intelligence and security reforms

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Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador came to power with a promise to shift the country's security policy away from a focus on the military and to reform the intelligence services. *Pablo Uchoa* **examines the outlook for the reforms to Mexico's security apparatus under the new administration.**

Key Points
- The rate of murder and kidnapping has increased in Mexico during 2018–19, potentially undermining efforts to shift the country's security policy away from an emphasis on armed confrontation with organised criminal groups.
- The creation of a new national intelligence agency, the CNI, appears primarily intended to mark a break with the service's controversial predecessor, CISEN.
- There are questions over the overall direction of the CNI, with experts telling *Jane's* about ongoing tension between the demands of its national security and criminal intelligence roles.

The death of 22-year-old student Norberto Ronquillo galvanised public attention in Mexico in June 2019. Ronquillo was kidnapped on 4 June and murdered, despite his family paying a ransom. Speaking to journalists on 10 June, his mother Noelia Hernández said that her son's death "has to be a watershed and from now on the authorities have to start doing something [to reduce criminality levels]".

Later the same day, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said that his government was working to "ensure peace and tranquility in the country and in Mexico City". On 14 May, López Obrador had signed the National Public Security Strategy (Estratégia Nacional de Seguridad Pública: ENSP) into law, saying that "Mexican society is damaged by violence" as well as economically affected by high levels of criminality.

In 2018, there were a record 33,341 murders in Mexico and an impunity rate of 99.3%, according to official statistics, and various estimates suggest that the murder tally for 2019 by late July had already passed 20,000. Kidnappings increased by 36.5% between January and May 2019 compared with 2018, and on average 38 kidnappings were reported in Mexico each week between December 2018 and May 2019 – more than five per day, according to Alto al Secuestro (Stop Kidnappings), an organisation that tracks crime statistics.

Amid this rise in criminality, attention has focused on Mexico's security apparatus. López Obrador's creation of a new National Guard (Guardia Nacional: GN) to take over many functions formerly performed by the police has prompted protests from the public and police personnel. Moreover, his creation of a new national intelligence agency, the National Intelligence Centre

(Centro Nacional de Inteligencia: CNI), has failed to counter criticism that Mexico's intelligence apparatus is overly politicised and lacking in focus.

National Guard

Members of the Federal Police block the Periférico highway outside the Federal Police headquarters in Mexico City on 3 July 2019 to protest against the annexation of the force to the newly inaugurated National Guard. The protests also highlighted the level of distrust between the federal police and the military. (Ronaldo Schemidt /AFP/Getty Images)

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Following his inauguration on 1 December 2018, López Obrador promised to shift the priorities of public security policies from armed confrontation with drug cartels to violence prevention and improving citizens' security. Since 2006, successive Mexican governments have focused their security efforts on fighting the drug cartels and have relied on the navy and the army because of their higher standards of professionalism and training compared with poorly trained and corrupt police forces at municipal, state, and federal levels, and because police forces are also often infiltrated by organised crime groups.

López Obrador's first major decision was the 26 March creation of the GN, a new civilian force under the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection (Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana: SSPC) that is tasked with preventing crime, ensuring public security, and combating criminality across the country. The GN is not a clean break with past services as it will draw mainly on the federal, military, and navy police to reach its intended establishment of up to 150,000 officers.

Although the GN law explicitly defines it as a civilian force, the Mexico City branch of Amnesty International said that it was "concerned that army and navy personnel assigned to the GN are not trained to carry out public security tasks". In an email to *Jane's* on 18 July, Amnesty's analysis and advocacy coordinator Edith Olivares Ferreto wrote, "While military personnel assigned to the GN must be subject to civilian command and the laws governing it, Amnesty International has expressed concern about whether there was sufficient time for such personnel to be trained in the content and application of these laws."

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