

BOOK REVIEW

Mexico's Security Failure: Collapse into Criminal Violence

Edited By Paul Kenny¹ and Monica Serrano², with Arturo C. Sotomayor³

New York; Milton Park, Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

ISBN: 978-0-89327-5

Hardcover, 235p.

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Mexico is not a failed state, but a security failure rooted in the development of the modern Mexican state. This is the core argument of Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano's edited volume, which brings together a number of specialists from the country's academic community providing insight into the state's internal and external failure to protect peoples within and beyond its borders.

The atrocities resulting from Mexico's drug wars have figured prominently in the headlines of the global media since the country's collapse into violence in 2008. Analysts grapple with the complex realities of cartel competition, paramilitarisation and the role of state agencies in violent assaults on alleged traffickers. *Mexico's Security Failure* is therefore timely, and a balanced and reflective presentation of the empirically extremely rich chapters. The volume is organised into a clear three-part structure, the first of which provides a background to Mexico's current state of security affairs. The remaining two parts unite well-readable, short chapters speaking to the internal and external dimensions of the Mexican states' security failures respectively. The trade-off is a rather weak empirical

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link to the existing theories of peace and international security. Some of the chapters, most notably Alejandro Anaya's contribution on human rights and Raúl Benítez and Arturo Sotomayor's account of Mesoamerican security, build on available analytical frameworks; however, their conclusions are not exploited to scrutinise specific theoretical propositions.

Though the book does not explicitly discuss security in terms of human security, one of its stated aims is to overcome International Relation's orthodoxy to separate the international from the domestic.⁵ Nevertheless, the volume's chapters are organised into a part treating Mexico's security failure at home and abroad, and it remains unclear what the latter specifically refers to. The editors allude to a "regional and international norm that states ought not to threaten the security of their neighbors",⁶ which hinges on an ultimately state-centric perspective. And indeed, all three contributions treating the implications of the country's security problem 'abroad' fail to answer the standard questions of *who securitises, on what issues, for whom, and why*⁷ in a conclusive manner. Their emphasis on the US and the US's perceptions of Mexico as a security threat is obvious and justified, yet a more explicit take on the US-Mexican relation and its inbuilt power asymmetry is necessary to unravel standard assumptions about the meaning of security on either side of the border.

The volume sets off to address the paradox stated in the declared goal of Felipe Calderón⁸ to reduce violence, on the one hand, and the actual increase in civilian and military casualties the country has experienced since his government assumed power in 2006, on the other hand. Contrary to the dominant discourse in the media and policy circles, the main claim the editors advance is that Mexico's security failure is not the tail of a failed state as it has been said of sub-Saharan Africa's experiences since the 1990s. On this view, an increasingly conflated debate on the security threats emanating from failing states both obfuscates the Mexican reality and leads to wrong conclusions on how to come to grasp with the various problems associated with organised crime. Instead of focusing on the challengers to centralised state power and the dimension of institutional capacity, the book raises the question of what *kind* of state is being challenged by recent developments.⁹ Posing the question in this way helps the contributors to develop the overarching argument of the volume better. Accordingly, Mexico's illicit drug business was a prevailing problem from the country's authoritarian period (1929-1994), and the choice to combat it by militarising not only reinforces the very patterns that sustained it, but also exacerbated violence. Though Mexico's security collapse is dated from 2008, the problem, as the authors of Chapter 2 convincingly show, originated much earlier and in the false start of Vicente Fox's administration in 1994 which set off a "path of democracy without transition".¹⁰ Hence, the only possible outcome was precisely what the country is suffering today: sustained violence, which eventually has gotten beyond control.

⁵ Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano, p.10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde (1998), *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p.32.

⁸ Presidential term: 1 December 2006 – 30 November 2012

⁹ Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano, p. 11.

¹⁰ Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano, p. 55.

The historical perspective on the development of Mexico's modern state and the failure to overcome the authoritarian legacies both in its institutional design and practice is the recurrent theme in the volume's chapters. Otherwise rather loosely drawn together, it is unfortunate that the editors' final chapter fails to explicitly draw on the conclusions reached in the individual contributions. Instead, it takes up the debate on state failure discussed in the introduction to restate its conceptual shortcomings. An analytically intriguing section puts the impact of political organised violence on the Mexican state in the light of the Colombian experience. The obvious and commonly evoked analogies aside, the authors argue convincingly for a differentiated view on the threats faced by the two countries and the differences in responding to these within the respective political structures.

Moving to possible solutions to Mexico's insecurity, a particular strength of the volume is the reflected and clear stance it takes on the question of responsibility. Echoing most Latin American voices, the US's failure to tackle the demand side of the problem is clearly laid out.¹¹ Likewise, the shortcomings and failures of its policies towards Mexico are thoughtfully discussed. On the other hand, the contributors highlight the socio-political structural deficiencies impeding necessary reforms to successfully meet organised crime¹² and the editors do not shy away from holding the Mexican elite and their denial of the country's security failure equally liable.

The caveats notwithstanding, *Mexico's Security Failure* provides a rich source and a promising starting point for both Peace Studies and the security literature to build on the Mexican experience to push on some of its established concepts. It offers an extremely well accessible account of the country's security challenges without losing on depth and complexity, and is therefore highly recommended for scholars in peace and conflict studies with both an interest in Latin America and contemporary security challenges more generally.

¹¹ See especially Jorge Chabat, *Drug Trafficking and United States-Mexico Relations: Causes and Conflict*, pp. 143-160.

¹² See Ernesto López-Portillo, *Accounting for the Unaccountable*, pp. 107-121.