

Pentagon drafts border plan as Mexico hits US protectionism

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Relations between the US and Mexico deteriorated further this week as the Mexican government imposed a set of tariff increases against some 90 US imports in retaliation for the Obama administration signing legislation that ended a pilot program allowing Mexican long-haul trucks to operate on US highways.

The trade dispute has erupted in the midst of growing tensions between the two countries over the increasingly militarized drug war being waged by the Mexican government against narcotics traffickers. The Pentagon's US Joint Forces Command issued a recent report comparing Mexico to Pakistan as potential "failed states" facing the danger of a "rapid and sudden collapse." The State Department, meanwhile, has issued a travelers' warning in response to the drug violence, which has claimed 1,000 lives so far this year.

While for the past year Washington has been committed to providing Mexico with some \$1.4 billion in military hardware and "technical assistance" under the so-called Merida Initiative, which is modeled largely on the counterinsurgency Plan Colombia, top US officials have signaled that the American military is preparing to become much more directly involved.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, Gen. Gene Renuart, head of the US Northern Command, revealed that the Pentagon is reviewing plans to send US troops to the Mexican border.

"Certainly, there may be a need for additional manpower," Renuart told the Senate panel. "Whether that is best suited or best provided by National Guard or additional law enforcement agencies, I think, this planning team will really lead us to." A comprehensive strategy proposal should be ready within a week, he added.

Renuart told the senators that the US military is already operating on the border and employing "techniques developed in the war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan." These methods include the use of piloted spy planes and drones.

Last week, in an interview with regional newspapers, President Barack Obama also raised the possibility of deploying US military forces on the border. "We're going to examine whether and if National Guard deployments would make sense and under what circumstances they would make sense," said Obama.

The growing collaboration between the Pentagon and the Mexican military, to which Renuart referred in his testimony, is undoubtedly having a substantial effect in the increasing and unprecedented militarization of Mexico under President Felipe Calderón.

As the Spanish daily *El País* reported this week, not only has the military been used to patrol the streets, arrest civilians and engage in armed confrontations with drug gangs, but it has also provided up to 80 percent of the personnel in the country's federal police force, made up largely of soldiers who have changed uniforms.

The paper also reported that Mexican political parties are vetting their candidates with the country's defense department's intelligence unit to ensure that they are not running individuals tainted by drug ties. Moreover, the military command is pushing for a law that will grant the armed forces impunity, giving them a blanket protection against any legal actions brought by their civilian victims in Mexico.

This militarization has taken its most visible form in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, where some 7,000 soldiers and 2,000 federal police have been deployed to patrol the city. On Monday, the government installed a retired Mexican army general as

head of public safety in the border city and a retired colonel as head of the city's police force. Meanwhile, an active-duty military officer has been assigned to Ciudad Juarez's Mayor José Reyes Ferriz as his "security adviser." The city has been placed effectively under martial law, ringed by roadblocks and with civilians subjected to constant stops and searches.

It is in the context of this explosive situation that Washington has unleashed the threat of trade war between the US and Mexico, with the move by the Democratic-led Congress and the Obama administration to scrap a program allowing a limited number of Mexican truckers to operate on US soil.

The program was initiated in 2007 following a 12-year effort by the Mexican government to convince Washington to comply with the terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Under the NAFTA agreement, Mexican trucks were to be allowed to travel anywhere in four border states—Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas—by December 1995, and to travel freely throughout the US by 2000.

Under pressure from the Teamsters union bureaucracy and the US trucking industry, the Clinton administration violated the agreement, refusing to allow Mexican trucks to deliver goods beyond a 30-mile-wide commercial zone on the US border, where they would have to be transferred to American long-haul trucks to reach their destination. Some 70 percent of US-Mexican trade is carried out via trucking.

The chauvinist union bureaucracy and the Democratic politicians have always insisted that their opposition to allowing in Mexican trucks was based on safety concerns. Even after Mexico won an arbitration decision in 2001, allowing it to impose trade sanctions, Washington continued to block them, while imposing rules and restrictions that apply to neither US nor Canadian trucks.

Finally in 2007, the US and Mexico signed an agreement allowing 100 carriers from each country to join in a demonstration project aimed at quelling the safety complaints. With 45,000 border crossings since then, there have been no significant verified complaints about the safety of Mexican trucks.

Nonetheless, when Congress passed the \$410 billion omnibus spending bill last week it attached a provision denying any funding for the continuation of the project and thereby halted even the limited access granted to

Mexican trucking.

Mexico responded angrily, denouncing the action as protectionism and slapped tariff increases on 90 products ranging from pet food to toilet paper. The goods account for just \$2.4 billion out of the \$367 billion in annual trade between the two countries, but Mexican officials said that they had been selected in part for maximum effect on different industries located in a large number of US states.

Mexico's secretary of the economy, Gerardo Ruíz Mateos, said that the tariff hikes were imposed on Tuesday after lengthy and unsuccessful attempts to get Washington to change its position on the trucking program.

In a sharp criticism of US policy, the minister stated, "In these moments of economic crisis, when we should avoid protectionism at all cost, the US decision goes in the opposite direction and sends a negative signal to Mexico and to the rest of the world."

"The action of the United States is wrong, protectionist and clearly violates the Treaty," Ruíz Mateos added. "In deciding to protect its transport sector it has decided to affect the competence and competitiveness of our countries and of the region, impacting many other productive sectors."

On Monday, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs opened a press briefing by referring to Mexico's announcement of its intention to impose the retaliatory trade measures. He stated that the Obama White House recognizes "the legitimate concerns of Congress" over the Mexican trucks, but added that the administration would attempt to negotiate with both Congress and the Mexican government to initiate a new program.

Whatever the final outcome of this process, the clash over the issue is symptomatic of growing tensions between US and Mexico under conditions of the mounting global economic crisis in which the US economic slump is threatening to create a massive increase in joblessness and poverty south of the American border.



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