Reclaiming the State in Michoacán

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Introduction

The assassination of Uruapan Mayor Carlos Manzo on 1 November 2025 was a sharp reminder of how deeply organized crime has taken root in parts of Mexico. His killing in one of Michoacán's most contested regions showed just how far criminal groups have advanced into local politics and everyday governance. Only a few days later, President Claudia Sheinbaum announced the Michoacán Plan for Peace and Justice, a wide-ranging

initiative that brings together security measures, justice reforms, economic investment and youth-focused programmes. The plan was launched shortly after the attack and is backed by 57 billion pesos (around 2.8 billion euros).

This brief looks at how the Michoacán Plan is supposed to restore state capacity in a region marked by long-standing violence, corruption, and political pressure. A central question is whether the justice and institutional reforms can keep pace with the scale of military involvement, something that previous strategies in Mexico often failed to achieve. The plan's core components range from federal deployments to economic support for local producers. The plan also has implications beyond the state itself. Because fentanyl production, weapons trafficking, and illicit financial flows tie Michoacán directly to the United States, the way this strategy unfolds is likely to influence U.S.–Mexico security cooperation at a moment when the bilateral relationship is already under strain. Understanding why such an ambitious intervention is seen as necessary requires looking at the deeper structural weaknesses that have allowed criminal groups to act as de facto authorities in many parts of Michoacán.

National Security Crisis

Michoacán, an agricultural center and a major exporter of avocados and lemons to the United States, has now become a focus of systemic breakdown and violence. Historically, this territory in Mexico is vital for cannabis production, and the state has served as a center for cartel territorial advancement since the mid-2000s. Many high-profile incidents including the murder of the Uruapan mayor and a lemon growers' leader, illustrate the deep rooted criminal organizations of the region and how state and federal response mechanisms are insufficient. This wave of violence driven by organised crime involves drug trafficking, which has led to massive death counts since 2006. Even local police forces have proven to be incapable of handling the expansion of criminal activities. Such widespread security crisis in Michoacán is caused by the illegitimacy and ineffectiveness of municipal police. This failure by municipal police has been exploited by criminal groups establishing themselves as local governing brokers.

Although the police agencies are the government's most immediate public representation, they represent corruption and administrative deficiencies in Mexico. In 2016, an evaluation of capacity, results, and legitimacy by the International Association of Police Sciences Mexican police forces ranked among the lowest above countries such as Nigeria and Kenya. This distrust reflects the State's fundamental problems with legitimacy. Historically, state and local law enforcement were used as powerful instruments by governors and mayors, but due to the insufficient resources and low professional standards, local police are unprepared.

Interventionist approaches such as the "War on Drugs" launched in 2006 failed to decrease violence and instead triggered escalation, causing crimi-

nal groups to fracture and expand their economic reach. Current reforms such as President Sheinbaum's proposed "Plan Michoacan" deployed after recent killings involves the use of force but is characterised as a new strategy. The plan focuses on three main pillars: security and justice, economic development, and education and culture, with the goal of addressing the root causes of violence through a combination of increased federal security forces and long-term social and economic investments.This strategy does echo some of the aspects of the War on Drugs such as an overreliance on federal/military presence rather than focusing on the complex essential tasks of rebuilding security institutions. For example, some of the elements announced include the deployment of federal forces, coordination with state prosecutors, intelligence-sharing, institutional tweaks, and more social programs. This clearly illustrates a reliance on the use of force reflecting the tactics used for the War on Drugs.

Some analysts argue that addressing the police legitimacy crisis requires strengthening the rule of law and improving local democracy. Police forces would need to shift toward mediation roles to rebuild public trust. For President Sheinbaum, this is a major test, since it demands breaking with long-standing collusion networks that allow cartels to act as local power brokers. These ties often extend into state and municipal governments. As Denise Dresser notes, meaningful reform will require transparent budgets, stronger civilian policing, and protection for local officials which is a shift that could also help improve cooperation with the United States.

The Michoacán Plan for Peace and Justice

President Claudia Sheinbaum announced the Michoacán Plan for Peace and Justice on 9 November 2025 in response to rising violence and the expanding influence of criminal groups over local institutions. Backed by 57 billion pesos (around 3.1 billion USD / 2.8 billion EUR), the plan was introduced only days after the assassination of Uruapan Mayor Carlos Manzo and is presented as a comprehensive effort to restore state authority in one of Mexico's most contested regions. It combines a major deployment of federal and National Guard forces with justice reforms, economic initiatives, and social programmes designed to weaken the conditions that sustain organised crime.

The security and justice component includes deploying more than 10,500 federal personnel to Michoacán, creating new investigative and anti-corruption units, and strengthening coordination with state prosecutors. These institutional measures aim to reduce impunity and rebuild public trust in a justice system that has long struggled to counter entrenched criminal networks.

The economic pillar focuses on infrastructure investment, support for farmers and small businesses, and protections for agricultural producers who have faced widespread extortion. These initiatives are intended to

reduce local dependence on illicit markets and weaken the economic leverage criminal groups hold in rural communities.

The third pillar of the plan centers on youth programmes, civic education, and reintegration efforts to address the long-term social drivers of criminal recruitment. As highlighted by Americas Quarterly, this reflects a broader attempt to move away from strategies that relied almost exclusively on militarised force and often produced only short-lived reductions in violence.

Taken together, these reforms represent a shift toward a more integrated security model that links federal intervention with institutional rebuilding and social development, an approach meant to confront the structural weaknesses that have allowed criminal organisations to exert authority in parts of Michoacán.

Opportunities and Risks

The Michoacán Plan links security operations with justice reform and social investment, creating some real openings for change. Strengthening investigations, building anti-corruption units, and improving coordination with state prosecutors could begin to chip away at the impunity that has long enabled criminal groups. Research on municipal policing in Michoacán shows how weak local institutions have allowed cartels to gain territorial control and undermine state authority. These reforms will not transform the situation overnight, but they could start to rebuild public trust in institutions that many communities view as ineffective or compromised.

The economic dimension of the plan is also significant. Many communities depend on activities that criminal groups tax or control, particularly in the agricultural sector. Analysis from the European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies study on criminal governance in Michoacán shows how extortion and parallel market regulation have become key sources of cartel income. By improving infrastructure, supporting producers, and expanding legal economic options, the plan aims to reduce this dependency and weaken the economic leverage criminal groups hold over local households.

Social programmes targeting youth, education, and reintegration also matter. As highlighted by assessments of the Sheinbaum administration's security challenges, long-term reductions in violence require addressing the recruitment pipelines that sustain organised crime. These initiatives offer an opportunity to shift away from reactive policies toward a more preventative approach.

However, the plan faces clear structural limits. Mexico's past experiences show that military deployments often produce only temporary improvements when underlying institutions remain weak, a pattern described in research on the political trajectory of urban violence. Criminal power in Michoacán is deeply rooted, tied to political networks, economic incentives,

and long-standing social relationships that cannot be transformed solely through federal intervention. External pressures further complicate the picture. Transnational factors (including fentanyl production, U.S. weapons flowing south, and illicit financial networks) lie beyond the reach of a single regional strategy and require sustained bilateral cooperation to address.

The central question, ultimately, is whether the federal government can maintain political will and whether civilian institutions can become strong enough to take over once the military presence scales back. The plan creates openings for long-term institutional change, but it also risks repeating earlier cycles of short-term gains followed by renewed criminal entrenchment if reforms do not keep pace with security operations.

Implications for U.S. and Mexico Security Cooperation

The Michoacán Plan is likely to influence U.S.-Mexico security cooperation because it targets many of the same structures that sustain cross-border crime. But the context in Washington has shifted. Since returning to office, the Trump administration has adopted a far more forceful regional posture, illustrated by recent U.S. military strikes on vessels suspected of carrying Venezuelan narcotics. In September, a U.S. Navy operation killed eleven people on a boat off the Venezuelan coast, and additional maritime deployments to the Caribbean and eastern Pacific signal that Washington increasingly views drug trafficking networks as a regional security threat rather than only a law-enforcement challenge.

This harder line also shapes expectations for Mexico. The United States has already signaled that bilateral cooperation should deliver quick and measurable results, especially reductions in fentanyl production, weapons trafficking, and illicit finance. The creation of a new bilateral Security Implementation Group focused on security and financial crime, launched in September 2025, reflects Washington's push for closer intelligence sharing and for Mexico to weaken local political protection networks linked to organised crime.

In this environment, the Michoacán Plan could either support or complicate cooperation. Its focus on prosecutors, forensic capacity, anti-corruption bodies, and community-level prevention aligns with long-term U.S. interests in stabilising drug-producing regions. At the same time, analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies shows that U.S. policymakers remain sceptical of slow institutional reforms and tend to favour rapid, enforcement-heavy outcomes. This creates pressure on Mexico to prioritise immediate crackdowns over deeper capacity-building, potentially pulling the Michoacán strategy away from its more balanced design.

If both governments treat the plan as a shared responsibility, it could create space for a more stable and long-term partnership. But if cooperation becomes politicised, there is a real risk that both sides will fall back on

militarised responses that have repeatedly failed, leaving Mexico with fewer tools to regain lasting control in regions where criminal groups remain deeply entrenched.

Conclusion

The Michoacán Plan for Peace and Justice is an important attempt by the Mexican government to regain a foothold in a state where criminal groups have shaped daily life for years. Its mix of security forces, justice reform, economic support, and youth programmes goes further than past strategies that relied almost entirely on military deployments. Whether this effort works will depend on how firmly these reforms take hold in areas where local policing is weak and political networks have long been intertwined with criminal interests.

The results will matter beyond Mexico. Michoacán is directly linked to the United States through drug production, weapons flows, and illicit finance, so the trajectory of the plan will inevitably shape the future of U.S.–Mexico security cooperation. Recent assessments by the Center for Strategic and International Studies highlight how Washington's expectations have become more demanding and results-driven, especially under the current administration. If the plan succeeds in strengthening local institutions and reducing criminal influence, it could support a more balanced and stable partnership. If it falters, both governments may fall back on short-term enforcement and militarised responses; approaches that have repeatedly struggled to change the underlying dynamics.