European Journal of International Security (2025), page 1 of 19
doi:10.1017/eis.2025.6

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From the 'war on drugs' to the 'war on guns': South–South cooperation between Mexico and the Caribbean

Yonique Campbell[1], Anthony Harriott[1], Felicia A. Grey[2] and Damion Blake[3]

[1]Department of Government, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica; [2]Political Science Department, University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, MI, USA and [3]Department of Political Science and Public Policy, Elon University, Elon, NC, USA
Corresponding author: Yonique Campbell; Email: yoniquecampbell@gmail.com

(Received 6 January 2025; accepted 3 February 2025)

Abstract
This article explores security cooperation between the Caribbean and Mexico,looking specifically at strategies being pursued to shift the focus in Latin America and the Caribbean from 'the war on drugs' to 'the war on guns' to address the problem of gun trafficking. This is a shift away from the United States' priority to that of the region and a move towards a more assertive model of South–South security cooperation. The Caribbean Community and Common Market's (CARICOM's) strategy to support Mexico's tortious and historic lawsuit against American gun manufacturers and to declare a 'war on guns' reflects its inability to independently influence the United States' priorities within the region. Mexico, a Southern country, makes a difference because of its geopolitical relevance to the US, their shared border, and Washington's attempt to stop the flow of Mexican immigration. We read the Mexico–Caribbean coalition as a significant development in South–South security cooperation (SSSC). Our analysis contributes to an understanding of the nuances and complexities of security cooperation, capacities for scaling up action through SSSC, and the political and legal manoeuvrings involved in challenging hierarchies of power between the so-called global North and South.

Keywords: Caribbean; guns; Mexico; security; South–South cooperation

Introduction

This article examines security cooperation between the Caribbean and Mexico, looking specifically at strategies being pursued to shift the focus in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) from 'the war on drugs' to 'the war on guns' to address the problem of gun trafficking. This is a shift away from the United States' priority towards that of the region and a move towards a more assertive model of South–South security cooperation (SSSC).[1] The strategy taken by the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) – the main regional organisation in the Caribbean – to support Mexico's tortious lawsuit against American gun manufacturers and to declare a 'war on guns' is realistic and reflects its inability to independently influence the United States' priorities within the region. Mexico, a Southern country, makes a difference because of its geopolitical relevance to the US, their shared border, and Washington's attempt to stop the flow of Mexican immigration. We read Mexico's lawsuit and its coalition with the Caribbean as significant developments in South–South security cooperation and attempts to challenge hierarchies of power between the

[1]For a definition of South–South security cooperation, see Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller, 'South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue).

so-called global North and South. Understanding these processes can enrich security studies, a subfield which has largely overlooked the experiences of the South in the formulation of dominant concepts and theories.[2] As South–South security cooperation takes shape in different regions[3] and assumes greater importance and diverse forms and challenges, it is critical to understand its role in the 're(making) of global security governance'.[4]

For more than three decades, the trafficking of illegal firearms from the US to LAC has presented a transnational security challenge for the region. It is estimated that 60–90 per cent of guns used in criminal acts in LAC are trafficked from the United States.[5] There are about 8,000 illegal weapons in Trinidad and Jamaica, for example, and for some CARICOM countries as many as 200 illegal firearms are trafficked from the US on a monthly basis.[6] Caribbean countries like Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Saint Lucia face high homicide rates of 25 per 100,000, over four times the global average of 6 per 100,000. In 2023, Jamaica recorded 1,393 murders,[7] ranking it among the top 10 most murderous countries in the world. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Saint Kitts and Nevis ranked 7th and 9th, respectively, among countries with the highest global homicide rates.[8] Despite this twin security problem of high homicide rates and the flow of illegal guns from the US, American security cooperation with the Caribbean has, and remains, largely focused on drugs. This is a source of frustration for Caribbean countries and the main impetus behind Caribbean Heads of Government declaring a 'war on guns' at the 2023 Regional Symposium in Port of Spain, Trinidad, which aims 'to combat, and urgently adopt and implement measures to stop the illegal exportation of firearms and ammunition into the Caribbean'.[9]

The prime ministers of CARICOM countries also declared their support for Mexico's lawsuit against US gun manufacturers and distributors, making South–South security cooperation (SSC) a key strategy in shifting from the 'war on drugs' to the 'war on guns'. This is cooperation by necessity and in response to a crisis. Mexico[10] is a powerful, independent foreign policy actor with a shared border (where Mexicans affected by gun violence attempt to flee for their lives) and deep interdependent economic ties with the United States. This positions Mexico as a country with important political leverage. Realism, a classical International Relations theory, asserts that 'the strong do

[2]Jana Hönke and Markus-Michael Müller, 'Governing (in)security in a postcolonial world: Transnational entanglements and the worldliness of "local" practice', *Security Dialogue*, 43:5 (2012), pp. 383–401 (p. 385).

[3]Adam Sandor, Philippe M. Frowd, and Jana Hönke, 'Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa: The case of the G5 Sahel', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue); Enze Han and Sirada Khemanitthatha, 'Political crisis and dilemma of security cooperation between Myanmar and Thailand', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue); Markus Hochmüller and Markus-Michael Müller, 'Homologies and modelling in Colombian South–South security cooperation', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue); Xue Gong, 'Ponder the path of thy feet: How China's security–development nexus works in the Mekong region', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue).

[4]Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller, 'South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance', *European Journal of International Security* (this issue).

[5]Arindrajit Dube, Oeindrila Dube, and Omar García-Ponce, 'Cross-border spillover: U.S. gun laws and violence in Mexico', *The American Political Science Review*, 107:3 (2013), pp. 397–417. See also Small Arms Survey study: Gergely Hideg and Anna Alvazzi del Frate, 'Still not there: Global violent death scenarios, 2019–30', SANA Briefing Paper (February 2021), available at: {https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-BP-GVD-scenarios.pdf}. See as well Liz Mineo, 'Stopping toxic flow of guns from U.S. to Mexico', *The Harvard Gazette* (18 February 2022), available at: {https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/02/stopping-toxic-flow-of-gun-traffic-from-u-s-to-mexico/}.

[6]See Anne-Séverine Fabre, Nicolas Florquin, Aaron Karp, and Matt Schroeder, 'The Caribbean Firearms Study', *Small Arms Survey* (April 2023).

[7]See recent data from the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF), available at: {https://jcf.gov.jm/stats/}.

[8]United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2023* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), available at: {https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/Global_study_on_homicide_2023_web.pdf}.

[9]See CARICOM, 'Declaration by CARICOM Heads of Government: War on Guns' (18 April 2023), available at: {https://caricom.org/declaration-by-caricom-heads-of-government-war-on-guns/}.

[10]Though located in North America, Mexico, based on its economy and political institutions, is considered to be a 'Global South' country. We are using the global South as a political, not a geographical category.

what they can and the weak suffer what they must'.[11] This applies to the Caribbean coalition by itself. The new SSSC strategy, which includes Mexico, allows for greater agency and strengthens the case being made by CARICOM and Mexico that illegal guns are a shared, existential threat that American gun manufacturers should be held accountable for.

CARICOM's strategy to partner with Mexico highlights its limited ability to independently shift US security priorities from drugs to guns in the Caribbean. Comprising 16 small middle-income countries and five associate members, CARICOM faces capacity constraints that hinder its ability to achieve its security goals autonomously. This makes SSSC with Mexico a crucial strategy (and partnership) and ensures that the demand is commensurate with the leveraging power of this South–South coalition. The early victory in the US Court of Appeals, affirming that Mexico properly brought the case, and the Supreme Court's decision to hear the case give regional and global legitimacy to the issue. While CARICOM's coalition with Mexico is bound to create tensions with the US, there is complementarity on some security issues (which is what makes cooperation possible) but divergence on issues of violence, and gun violence in particular.

While we do not attempt to resolve all conceptual and practical security cooperation problems that this case presents, our study raises a set of interconnected questions. What is the advantage of the current Mexico–Caribbean cooperation strategy? Does it reflect a new model of cooperation in CARICOM? Through what lens can we best understand CARICOM's decision to join Mexico in pursuing legal action against US gun manufacturers? What is the likelihood of success and what existing capacities are there to capitalise on the moment? By strategies, we mean rational means–end alignment and partnerships to accomplish desired goals and objectives. By capacities, we mean a set of technical competencies as well as financial and human resources that reside in regional and national institutions.

Our article analyses Mexico and the Caribbean's move to challenge the US as a great power through American courts to secure greater cooperation on gun control. This case highlights the nuances and complexities of regional cooperation, capacities for scaling up action through SSSC, and the political and legal manoeuvrings involved. We use this case to support our argument that CARICOM is moving towards a third model of security cooperation, characterised by greater assertiveness and reliance on SSSC. In providing a basis for comparison, we propose three models of cooperation. Our analysis also draws on speeches delivered by CARICOM leaders at the April 2023 Regional Symposium, 'Violence as a Public Health Issue: The Crime Challenge'. At this symposium, nine prime ministers delivered speeches. Senior government officials including commissioners of police and specialists in the field participated in the discussions. Discussions took place over two days, and we listened to nine hours of presentations. Rather than merely reproducing these speeches, we analyse them to understand how CARICOM is framing cooperation based on shared interests, calls for shifting the focus from the war on drugs to the war on guns and its strategic decision to pursue this through a South–South coalition with Mexico.

We recognise diversity and power asymmetries in the South. It is their heterogeneity, especially in economic and military capabilities, that gives the South (as a whole) the impetus and ability to contest global power hierarchies. This is particularly relevant for small states. Conceptually, we emphasise shared interests and collective capabilities as the basis for South–South security cooperation. We see the South as coalitions of shared interests that seek to reorder the power dynamics between themselves and the North and promote stability within the South. Mexico and the Caribbean, both in the LAC region, share high rates of gun violence and a common history of colonialism (under different colonial powers), followed by US hegemony. There is therefore a shared interest in challenging the US. This strengthens and is more important to the coalition than internal power differences. Mexico is not using its alliance with CARICOM for any larger strategic goals within the Caribbean; it is not contending with the US or any other regional power for

[11] Thucydides, 'Melian Dialogue', *History of the Peloponnesian War*, available at: {https://www.nku.edu/~weirk/ir/melian.html}.

supremacy. CARICOM is not a zone of contention between regional middle powers.[12] This makes the Caribbean different from regions where middle powers use security cooperation and regional organisations to contend for control.

In positioning small island developing states (SIDS) in CARICOM, as well as Mexico, a more powerful Southern actor, within global security hierarchies, we avoid drawing a sharp distinction between large and powerful countries, seen as rational actors, and less powerful countries seen as relying on normative narratives. Large countries dominate international relations and often impose their will on less powerful countries, but middle and smaller powers also pursue their own interests within (or pushing beyond) the constraints and structures imposed by the international system. This is increasingly evident as countries in the global South form blocs like BRICS (Brazil, India, China, Russia, and South Africa) not only to change international norms or persuade the hegemon to take their interests into consideration, but also to assert and leverage their own power.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section examines security cooperation in CARICOM and models of security cooperation as well as the United States' approach to security cooperation in the region. Next, we explore the drug problem as the main driver of security cooperation and analyse the context for a shift to a 'war on guns'. The final section addresses SSSC and CARICOM's strategy of joining Mexico in its court case against US gun manufacturers.

CARICOM as a mechanism for regional security cooperation

Security cooperation within the Caribbean as well as externally, with countries such as the US, is pursued through CARICOM. CARICOM was established in 1973 under the Treaty of Chaguaramas. It includes 20 countries: 15 member states[13] and 5 associate members.[14] Economic integration, foreign policy coordination, human and social development, and security are CARICOM's main priority areas.[15] Following the collapse of the 1958 West Indies Federation, CARICOM was envisioned as an economic union. The failed West Indies Federation was established by Britain's colonial office as the basis for granting independence in the Caribbean.[16] After both Jamaica (following a referendum) and Trinidad pulled out, the Federation effectively collapsed. The establishment of CARICOM was meant to provide an institutional and political mechanism for regional integration, addressing the viability and survival of Caribbean economies, given their small size and associated vulnerabilities.[17]

Given increases in violence and transnational organised crime across the region, security was adopted as the fourth pillar of CARICOM in 2007 by the heads of government at the Eighteenth Inter-Sessional Meeting. CARICOM's Strategic Plan for 2015–2019 also signals the importance of security in the region, identifying eight areas for immediate focus. These include pursuing functional cooperative security engagements to manage shared risks and threats, enhancing human resource capabilities, strengthening regional security systems, and improving border security and maritime and airspace awareness.[18] CARICOM's third Strategic Plan 2022–2030 focuses on the issue of transnational organised crime, violence reduction, the intersection of citizen and state

[12]Venezuela's engagement with the Caribbean through the PetroCaribe agreement, signed in 2005, was used by Venezuela to break its isolation and seek new alliances, not for any larger ambition.

[13]These include Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. See 'Member States and Associate Members', available at: {https://caricom.org/member-states-and-associate-members/}.

[14]These include Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, and Turks and Caicos. See ibid.

[15]See 'Who We Are', available at: {https://caricom.org/our-community/who-we-are/}.

[16]Derek O'Brien, 'CARICOM: Regional integration in a post-colonial world', *European Law Journal*, 17:5 (2011), pp. 630–48.

[17]Norman Girvan, 'Assessing Westminster in the Caribbean: Then and now', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 53:1 (2015), pp. 95–107.

[18]See Caricom Impacs, available at: {https://www.caricomimpacs.org}.

security, and the need to deepen functional cooperation in order to strengthen enforcement and implementation.[19]

Institutions have been established to implement these plans and strategies. CARICOM developed a Regional Task Force on Crime and Security in 2001 and an Implementing Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS) in 2006, which reports to the Council of Ministers and National Law Enforcement. IMPACS has responsibility for 'the implementation of the regional crime and security agenda and a collective response to the crime and security priorities of Member States'.[20] The Joint Regional Communications System and the Regional Fusion Centre, which focus on intelligence, were also established as part of this implementation mechanism. In 2019, CARICOM adopted the Caribbean Firearms Trafficking Priority Actions, and in 2022 it formed a Caribbean Crime Gun Intelligence Unit (CGIU). CARICOM also has a Ministerial Council for National Security and Law Enforcement (CONSLE), a Regional Security System (RSS) which provides training and a collective response mechanism for the smaller Organization of Eastern Caribbean (OECS) countries, the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force (CFATF), and the Caribbean Customs Law Enforcement Council (CCLEC).

The development of these institutions has been accompanied by increases in national budget allocations to security and attempts to reduce reliance on external funding. In Jamaica, for example, security spending amounts to approximately 20 per cent of the national budget, most of which is allocated to the police.[21] In Trinidad, the national security budget has also increased, with the police being allocated 43 per cent of this.[22] With higher spending, the region has faced growing pressure to reduce insecurity and gun violence and move towards more effective models of security cooperation.

Cooperation models: Towards an assertive South–South security cooperation model

We propose three main models to analyse how cooperation has been approached in CARICOM and the shift that is being attempted. These models also shed light on political strategies and considerations. They are the *facilitative, ameliorative*, and *assertive* models of cooperation. In the first model, CARICOM plays the role of facilitator, bringing together diverse political actors in pursuit of a solution to a security challenge originating outside its immediate borders. The security challenge in question has implications for CARICOM's security but is not perceived as an imminent threat by its nationals. The risks mainly involve spillover effects such as illegal immigration and long-term concerns with transference of threats. As facilitator, CARICOM does not extend its own resources but instead relies on resource mobilisation – financial, military, and technical – mostly from external sources. The main example of this is the case of CARICOM's efforts to assist Haiti, one of its member states, which has suffered from major political instability owing to a surge in gang violence following the assassination of its president, Jovenel Moïse, in 2021. The gang problem in Haiti has implications for stability in the region, and Haitians seeking to escape the violence unleashed by gangs have attempted to move to countries like Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados. CARICOM has been central in the negotiations regarding the establishment of a Transnational Council to oversee the transfer of power and elections in Haiti. Lacking in military and police capacity to assist Haiti's efforts to achieve political stability, CARICOM has also spearheaded an agreement with Kenya to lead a police intervention, with a funding pledge from the US and Canada

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]See, for example, 'More cash for crime: $2b jump for national security but capital spending falls', *Jamaica Gleaner* (12 February 2020), available at:{https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/lead-stories/20200212/more-cash-crime-2b-jump-national-security-capital-spending-falls}.

[22]CARICOM, 'Opening Remarks by Dr the Hon. Keith Rowley, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad And Tobago to the Regional Symposium: Violence as a Public Health Issue – The Crime Challenge', 17 April 2023, available at: {https://caricom.org/opening-remarks-by-dr-the-hon-keith-rowley-prime-minister-of-the-republic-of-trinidad-and-tobago-to-the-regional-symposium-violence-as-a-public-health-issue-the-caricom-challenge-april-1/}.

Table 1. Points of divergence and convergence in US–Caribbean security cooperation.

Priorities	Caribbean	United States
Drugs	X	X
Human trafficking		X
Terrorism		X
Scamming	X	X
Violence	X	
Organised crime	X	X
Guns	X	

of approximately 300 million US dollars.[23] Kenya is seen as a politically acceptable country for this kind of intervention. In 2024, Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, participated in a CARICOM high-level meeting on Haiti, held in Jamaica, which aimed at expediting the Multi-national Security Support mission deployment in Haiti and Haiti's political transition.

In the second ameliorative model, CARICOM cooperates with the strategy of a more powerful actor to address a perceived direct regional threat, opting for a collaborative approach rather than an assertive or confrontational stance. CARICOM uses this model to compensate for weakness in military capabilities and the capacity to absorb any retaliatory action. In this model, CARICOM does not initiate cooperation but is instead reactive to the actions of the more powerful country. One of the best examples of this is US/CARICOM cooperation in the signing of the Shiprider agreement,[24] on the United States' terms, to address the problem of drug trafficking. This agreement gave the US the authority to search vessels in the Caribbean Sea. The use of the ameliorative model in this case involved sacrificing the sovereignty of CARICOM countries to appease the US.

The third model is a more assertive one, where CARICOM is signalling an intention to adjust its cooperation strategy to reflect its own priorities. This kind of cooperation is used in cases where other methods of cooperation have been exhausted or where it involves a decision to challenge a more powerful country to change its cooperation strategy. This is a model best pursued through SSSC. The best example of this is the recent declaration (examined in this article) by CARICOM to engage in a '*war on guns*' and join Mexico in their lawsuit against US gun manufacturers and dealers. Mexico brings resources, political clout, and other ingredients for success. Although this is an assertive model, it is also in some sense non-confrontational, as it seeks to avoid a direct clash with the American political elite by using the courts to pursue action against gun manufacturers rather than against the American state itself. Assertive models of security usually generate tension with more powerful countries. While there are tensions around the main points of divergence, in this case violence and guns, there is also convergence on specific security issues (see Table 1).

Assertive security cooperation models also tend to arise out of crisis and where opportunities exist to join with more powerful actors. Violence and guns pose real threats to CARICOM citizens and constitute a crisis for regional governments. The threat from violence and guns, as an objective

[23]DÁnica Coto, 'US pledges an additional $100 M for a multinational force awaiting deployment to violence-hit Haiti', *The Washington Post* (11 March 2024), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/11/blinken-haiti-jamaica-prime-minister-gangs/0bb502be-dfa9-11ee-95aa-7384336086f3_story.html}.

[24]Holger Henke, 'Drugs in the Caribbean: The "Shiprider" controversy and the question of sovereignty', *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe/European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies,* 64 (1998), pp. 27–47; Stephen Vasciannie, 'Political and policy aspects of the Jamaica/United States Shiprider negotiations', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 43:3 (1997), pp. 34–53; Hilbourne Watson, 'The "Shiprider solution" and post-Cold War imperialism: Beyond ontologies of state sovereignty in the Caribbean', in Cynthia Barrow-Giles and Don Marshal (eds), *Living at the Borderlines: Issues in Caribbean Sovereignty and Development* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), pp. 226–74.

reality, is supported by various studies and data (see LAPOP, for example).[25] These studies indicate that it is not just governments, but Caribbean peoples across the region, who have consistently regarded violent crimes as either the number one or number two policy priority. Gun violence also put immense stress on the rule of law. The Jamaican state, for example, has resorted to the persistent use of states of emergency to solve the problem of gang and gun violence.[26] In 2016, a majority of Jamaican citizens reported that they would be willing to tolerate a military government if it solved the problem of violence.[27] These developments have triggered a shift towards a new and more assertive model of cooperation, an SSSC model.

The United States' hegemony and priority-setting role in the Caribbean

US security relations in the region have been largely an ebb and flow of hegemonic control, insularity, and cooperation.[28] US security cooperation priorities in the Caribbean are largely defined by both its foreign policy and domestic politics. This matters for understanding the grounds for SSSC between CARICOM and Mexico and why CARICOM has opted for this particular strategy. Historically, the US has taken a realist stance, engaging in policies that support its rational self-interest for geostrategic security and political hegemony. Consequently, US–Caribbean relationship can be best understood through the paradigms of hegemonic control and the pursuit of rational self-interest.[29] In this view, security means preservation of a state's national security goals and its pursuit of power.[30] The US, as the hegemonic actor in the region, has prioritised its own border security and national interests above those of its neighbours, largely determining the terms of security cooperation. This dates back to the Protectorate era (1898–1933), when the US was mainly concerned with protecting the region from continued European imperialism. Thereafter, the Good Neighbour policy (1933–53) was enacted by the US to support political and economic stability in the region.[31]

From 1953 to 1990, the Cold War era, the US engaged in intense ideological and security based foreign policy strategies to counter the spread of communism and promote democracy and democratisation.[32] During this period, the US engaged in several military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-led covert operations across the region to further its security and geopolitical interests. Several countries were affected by the United States' anti-communist foreign policy, among them, Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1961, the Dominican Republic in 1965, and Grenada in 1983.[33]

[25] Anthony Harriott Mona UWI, Balford A. Lewis, Carole J. Wilson and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, *The Political Culture of Democracy in Jamaica and in the Americas, 2016/2017: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Governance* (2018), available at: {www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/jamaica/AB2016-17_Jamaica_Country_Report_English_V2_Revised_W_11.30.18.pdf.}

[26] Yonique Campbell and Anthony Harriott, 'The resort to emergency policing to control gang violence in Jamaica: Making the exception the rule', *Journal of Latin American Studies,* 56:1 (2024), 115–36, available at:{http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X24000075}.

[27] Harriott et al., *The Political Culture of Democracy in Jamaica and in the Americas.*

[28] Bridget Blanckenberg, 'US hegemony and Latin American regional security: The United States' hegemony in the Organisation of American States (OAS). Implications for Latin American regional security', PhD diss., University of Pretoria (2021); Yonique Campbell, 'Security cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean: Threats, institutions and challenges', in Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Patricia Daley (eds), *Routledge Handbook of South–South Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 309–19.

[29] Anthony Payne, 'Rethinking United States–Caribbean relations: Towards a new mode of trans-territorial governance', *Review of International Studies*, 26:1 (2000), pp. 69–82; Stephen Randall, 'The tragedy of American diplomacy revisited: US relations with Latin America and the Caribbean', *Latin American Research Review*, 38:2 (2003), pp. 167–79.

[30] John Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of international institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994–5), pp. 5–49.

[31] Stephen Rabe, 'Eisenhower and Latin America', in Chester Pach (ed.), *A Companion to Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 435–52.

[32] Robert Pastor, *Exiting the Whirlpool: US Foreign Policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Anthony Payne, 'US hegemony and the reconfiguration of the Caribbean', *Review of International Studies*, 20:2 (1994), pp. 149–68.

[33] Alan McPherson, *A Short History of US Interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

The US developed a realist outlook on the Americas (inclusive of the Caribbean), which it considered to be its 'backyard'.[34] This also resulted in the US engaging in military interventions in Haiti during 1915–34, and economic policies such as the current trade and financial embargo against Cuba from 1962. The US has continuously signalled its rational self-interest position to maintain its hegemony in the region.[35]

From the late 1970s into the 1990s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, the focus of US foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America shifted towards the fight against the narcotic trade of marijuana and cocaine, the latter originating from the Andean region in South America, trans-shipped through the Caribbean and then sold to consumers in the US.[36] The war on drugs policy has been a top priority of the US and the anchor for security cooperation and bilateral arrangements with Mexico and CARICOM countries. The security challenge of drug trafficking from South America through the Caribbean Corridor into North America is viewed as a national security threat to the US, resulting in several militaristic, diplomatic, and covert intelligence operations to wage a war against drugs and drug trafficking organisations. Policies such as the Shiprider Agreement, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), and the Mérida Initiative are examples of the United States' counter-narcotics strategies in the region.[37] Under these agreements, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have diverted resources and developed police units to support the US-led war on drugs.

The 1997 US-initiated Shiprider agreement with CARICOM effectively gave the US the right to police and search vessels in the Caribbean Sea on its own terms.[38] Jamaica and Barbados showed determination in rejecting this agreement with the US.[39] Their main concern was the dangerous precedent in matters of sovereignty and territorial integrity that this agreement would occasion. In the end, the agreement was signed between CARICOM and the US, without serious focus on Caribbean priorities, including anti-gun-smuggling. Following this, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) was established in 2010 between the US and CARICOM, and, again, with primary focus on drug trafficking.[40] Under the CBSI, the US spends about USD$70 million annually on 'maritime domain awareness' and interdiction, radar coverage, sharing capacity, enhanced port security, equipment, and training.[41]

In the case of Mexico, the Mérida Initiative is the main security cooperation agreement between Mexico, Central America, and the US, focusing mainly on capacity building through training, intelligence, and equipment to support the war on drugs. While the initiative can be credited with pursuing leaders of major drug trafficking organisations (DTO), other DTO leaders usually emerge

[34]William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[35]Anthony P. Maingot and Wilfredo Lozano, *The United States and the Caribbean: Transforming Hegemony and Sovereignty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); see this editorial piece on the legacy of the US–Cuba relations since 1962: Isabella Oliver and Mariakarla Nodarse Venancio, 'Understanding the failure of the U.S. embargo on Cuba', *WOLA Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas* (4 February 2022), available at: {https://www.wola.org/analysis/understanding-failure-of-us-cuba-embargo/}.

[36]Damion Blake, 'Researching violence: Conducting risky fieldwork in dangerous spaces across Latin America and the Caribbean', *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 14:3 (2020), pp. 153–69; Bruce Bagley, 'The evolution of drug trafficking and organized crime in Latin America', *Sociologia, problemas e práticas*, 71 (2013), pp. 99–123; Ivelaw Griffith, *Caribbean Security in the Age of Terror: Challenge and Change* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2004).

[37]The Merida Initiative was established in 2007 as a bilateral counter-narcotics and security policy between the US and Mexico, while the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative was formed in 2009 to tackle the trans-shipment of drugs from the region into the US.

[38]Stephen Vasciannie, 'Political and policy aspects of the Jamaica/United States Shiprider negotiations', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 43:3 (1997), pp. 34–53.

[39]Ibid.

[40]See Office of the United States Trade Representative, 'Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI)', available at: {https://ustr.gov/issue-areas/trade-development/preference-programs/caribbean-basin-initiative-cbi.}

[41]Ibid.

to replace them, and the impact on violence is minimal.[42] Moreover, accusations of human rights abuses, including torture, and increasing threats to the rule of law under a militarised approach to the war on drugs, have affected the achievement of sustained reductions in violence and drug trafficking. Mexican politicians, including former president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, have criticised and called for an end to the Mérida Initiative and the war on drugs for its inattention to Mexican priorities and needs, and its tendency towards militarisation.[43]

Despite ongoing efforts in the war on drugs, Latin America and the Caribbean continue to face significant security challenges, and the war on drugs has been perceived as a failure or as a partial success, at best. Success has been mainly measured by cocaine seizures, failing to account for other expected benefits such as a reduction in violence. The war on drugs has instead been associated with rising, steady gun violence in the Caribbean, over five decades in the case of Jamaica and at least two decades for several other CARICOM countries including Saint Kitts, Saint Vincent, Belize, Trinidad, and Saint Lucia.

From the war on drugs to the war on guns

The US-driven war on drugs has for many decades eclipsed major challenges with gun trafficking, relegating it to near obscurity. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, there were instances of illegal transborder firearm transfers in Antigua and Barbuda and Jamaica. The former was a subject of a Commission of Enquiry and involved transfers from Israel to criminal gangs in Colombia that were corruptly facilitated by high state officials.[44] And in the case of Jamaica, there were alleged transfers from Cuba and the US to the ruling and opposition parties, respectively. Around 500 political killings occurred in Jamaica in 1980. Still, the gun-trafficking problem was subordinated to the drug-trafficking challenge. One obvious explanation for this is the priority-setting role of the US as the hegemon in the region. Another related point is that violence in the region was framed as a function of the drug problem. With a drastic reduction in political violence in the 1990s and the rise of drug lords[45] and prominent gangs who used earnings from the drug trade to increase their power relative to that of politicians, the prioritisation of drugs seemed reasonable. Despite an increase in gang violence, gun trafficking was seen as a more indirect factor. Solving the drug problem was expected to solve the violence problem and related issues, including the problem of gun trafficking. Thus, the war on drugs became the dominant framework for regional security cooperation. It came to be seen by practitioners, and academics alike, as the main threat to democracy and sovereignty.[46]

This focus on the war on drugs, as argued by CARICOM countries, led to a neglect of the flow of guns from the US to Latin America and the Caribbean, which is responsible for over 70 per cent of homicides. As noted, this is a major problem for the Caribbean, which is facing a crisis of violent crimes and gun violence. This can be seen in high homicide rates in countries like Jamaica (53 per

[42]Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, 'US–Mexican security cooperation: The Mérida initiative and beyond' (2011), available at: {https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/765713-1.pdf}.

[43]Mary Beth Sheridan, 'Facing stunning levels of deaths, U.S. and Mexico revamp strained security cooperation', *Washington Post* (8 Ocotber 2021), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/10/08/mexico-merida-initiative-security/}.

[44]Ivelaw Griffith, 'Illicit arms trafficking, corruption, and governance in the Caribbean', *Penn State International Law Review*, 15:3 (1996), pp. 487–507; Paul Sutton, 'The politics of small state security in the Caribbean', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 31:2 (1993), pp. 1–32.

[45]Damion Blake, 'Shadowing the state: Violent control and the social power of Jamaican garrison dons', *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 8:1 (2013), pp. 56–75; Campbell and Harriott, 'The resort to emergency policing to control gang violence in Jamaica'; Yonique Campbell and Colin Clarke, 'The garrison community in Kingston and its implications for violence, policing, de facto rights, and security in Jamaica', in Tina Hilgers and Laura Macdonald (eds), *Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Subnational Structures, Institutions, and Clientelistic Networks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 93–111.

[46]Ivelaw Griffith, *Drugs and Security in the Caribbean: Sovereignty under Siege* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010).

100,000), Trinidad and Tobago (39 per 100,000), the Bahamas (31 per 100,000), Saint Lucia (27 per 100,000), and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (40 per 100,000).[47] These all represent higher rates than the global average of 6 per 100,000. Gun homicides are also high in the Caribbean region, especially in high-violence countries. In the Bahamas, gun violence amounts to over 75 per cent; in Jamaica, over 80 per cent; and in Barbados, over 60 per cent.[48]

Recent data on firearms movement from the US to the LAC region underscores the significant challenges of violence, chaos, and devastation that these weapons have caused within communities across these countries. illustrates the percentage of US sourced guns which end up in several Caribbean countries.[49]

> Most of the guns trafficked into the LAC region which are used to commit violent crimes in fact originate from the US. Annual figures show that over 250,000 firearms are purchased in the US and trafficked into Mexico.[50] In the Caribbean, only 8 per cent of the guns recovered at crime scenes and traced were legally exported from the US. This means over 90 per cent are illegally trafficked, mainly from the US.[51] Firearms traced to the US, responsible for over 60 per cent of homicides in the LAC region,[52] have contributed to political instability in places such as Haiti and have had significant consequences across the region.[53] According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2023 Global Homicide Study, gun-related homicides stood at 89,100 in the LAC region in 2021. As the report points out, there is growing concern about the 'iron pipeline' involving networks of dealers and brokers who smuggle firearms, ammunition, parts, and accessories from the United States in particular to countries in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.[54]

The evidence is clear that democracy and state stability in Mexico, the Caribbean, and the wider LAC region are being threatened by the illicit weapons flows. These weapons empower gangs, challenge state security and law enforcement, and enable violent non-state actors to rival the legitimacy and power of governments.[55] They are also facilitating extra-legal violence[56] and high levels of fear among citizens. Additionally, research indicates that there is an association between levels of life expectancy and gun-related homicides in the LAC region.[57] Consequently, Mexico and its CARICOM neighbours have a strong case in their efforts to lobby the US to wage a war on guns.

[47] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2023* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), available at: {https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/Global_study_on_homicide_2023_web.pdf}.

[48] Anne-Séverine Fabre, Nicolas Florquin, Aaron Karp, and Matt Schroeder, *Weapons Compass: The Caribbean Firearms Study* (Port of Spain, Geneva: CARICOM IMPACS and Small Arms Survey, 2023), available at: {https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/weapons-compass-caribbean-firearms-study}.

[49] See 'The Caribbean is awash with illegal American guns', *The Economist* (5 October 2023), available at: {https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/10/05/the-caribbean-is-awash-with-illegal-american-guns}.

[50] Tropher McDougal, David A. Shirk, Robert Muggah, and John H. Patterson. 'The way of the gun: Estimating firearms trafficking across the US–Mexico border', *Journal of Economic Geography*, 15:2 (2015), pp. 297–327.

[51] Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives: see {https://www.atf.gov}.

[52] See Hideg and Alvazzi del Frate, 'Still not there'.

[53] Blake, 'Shadowing the state'; Yonique Campbell, *Citizenship on the Margins: State Power, Security and Precariousness in 21st-Century Jamaica* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Tina Hilgers and Laura Macdonald (eds), *Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Subnational Structures, Institutions, and Clientelistic Networks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); 'The Caribbean is awash with illegal American guns', *The Economist*.

[54] The full report can be accessed here: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Homicide and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean', *UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023*, p. 11, available at: {https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/GSH_2023_LAC_web.pdf}.

[55] Blake, 'Shadowing the state'; Campbell, *Citizenship on the Margins*; Hilgers and Macdonald (eds), *Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

[56] Markus-Michael Müller, 'Governing crime and violence in Latin America', *Global Crime*, 19:3–4 (2018), pp. 171–91.

[57] Vladimir Canudas-Romo and José Manuel Aburto, 'Youth lost to homicides: Disparities in survival in Latin America and the Caribbean', *BMJ Global Health*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 1–9.

South–South cooperation and Mexico's legal challenge

Mexico's tortious lawsuit against American gun manufacturers marks the first time that a foreign government has sued the US gun industry.[58] Tort law aims to provide relief to those parties who have been injured by the actions of others and also imposes liability on those parties who cause such harm. It also functions as a deterrent to those who may commit harmful acts.[59] Torts can be intentional, where they are based on the wilful misconduct of others,[60] or strict liability, where those involved in abnormally dangerous activities or manufacture defective products can be held liable.[61] Negligence is another type of tort. Here, a person's actions, or failure to act, can be deemed negligent if they fail to act with the level of care that a reasonable person under the same circumstances would have observed.[62] To bring a cause of action for negligence, the plaintiff must prove that the defendant owed them a duty or standard of care as recognised by law, that there was a breach of that duty, and that harm was proximately caused to the plaintiff as a result of that breach.[63]

In *Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc.*,[64] the plaintiff, Estados Unidos Mexicanos (Government of Mexico) brought a suit against several US-based weapon manufacturers whose guns are most often recovered in Mexico. These comprise Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Century Arms, Colt, Glock, and Ruger. Barrett, which produces a sniper rifle that is very popular among drug cartels, as well as Interstate Arms, a Boston-area wholesaler which the majority of the manufacturers use for resale of their guns throughout the United States, were also included. In its suit, Mexico sought relief for several claims of negligence, arguing that the defendants 'have legal duties to distribute their guns safely and avoid criminals in Mexico'.[65] Mexico also argued that the defendants are legally bound to follow the gun-import and tort laws of Mexico, as well as the companion applicable federal and state tort laws in the United States. In its complaint, Mexico painted a dire picture of the trilateral relationship between guns, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. It alleges that 70–90 per cent of all guns recovered from Mexican crime scenes are trafficked from the United States, and that drug cartels who possess these weapons engage in the nefarious drug trade, as they aggressively market drugs such as fentanyl. The resultant violence has caused many persons to fear and flee for their lives, leading to an influx of migrants, with some Mexicans internally displaced, or making the treacherous journey to destinations like the United States. This is particularly vexing for Mexico, since it has very strict gun laws, and only one gun store operates in the country. This gun store issues fewer than 50 gun permits each year, yet Mexico has seen an astronomical spike in gun-related homicides, rising from fewer than 2,500 in 2003, to more than 3.9 million in 2019.[66]

Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc. is important in many respects. It is, for instance, the first time that corporate responsibility[67] has been included in efforts to combat arms trafficking.[68] Adding this dynamic to this lawsuit is therefore noteworthy in that if the judgement

[58] Chantal Flores, 'Are U.S. gun-makers responsible for violence in Mexico?', *Foreign Policy* (24 October 2023), available at: {https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/24/mexico-united-states-guns-arms-trafficking-lawsuit/.}

[59] 'Tort', *Legal Information Institute*, Cornell Law School, available at: {https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/tort.}

[60] Assault, battery, trespass to land, and defamation are examples of this type of tort. See, for example, Frank August Schubert, *Introduction to Law and the Legal System*, 12th ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Cengage, 2023), pp. 437–85.

[61] Ibid.

[62] 'Negligence', *Legal Information Institute*, Cornell Law School, available at: {https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/negligence}.

[63] Schubert, *Introduction to Law and the Legal System*.

[64] *Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc.*, 633 F. Supp. 3d 425 (D. Mass. 2022).

[65] Ibid., p. 14

[66] *Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc.*, 633 F. Supp. 3d 425 (D. Mass. 2022).

[67] Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a management concept used by businesses where they integrate social and environmental issues within their operations. See Tim Stobierski, 'What is Corporate Social Responsibility? 4 types', *Harvard Business School Online* (8 April 2021), available at: {https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/types-of-corporate-social-responsibility}.

[68] Toya Jordan and Stephania Corpi, 'Mexican government vows to continue legal fight against U.S. gun manufacturers', *Texas Public Radio* (10 October 2022), available at {https://www.tpr.org/border-immigration/2022-10-10/mexican-government-vows-to-continue-legal-fight-against-u-s-gun-manufacturers}.

should go in Mexico's favour, gun manufacturers will have to pay closer attention to how their arms are distributed, and the reasonable, foreseeable consequences that may follow this distribution within society. Thirteen US states have signalled through their attorneys general that they are backing Mexico.[69] Mexico's complaint is therefore unprecedented in that it simultaneously invokes legal recourse in American courts from a foreign government while calling for greater corporate social responsibility from American gun manufacturers. This marks a paradigmatic shift in how the issue has been normally approached. The aim of the lawsuit is to reduce access to US manufactured weapons and crimes committed through their use.

Mexico's original complaint was struck down by Chief Judge Dennis Saylor, who argued in his judgement that US laws allow gun manufacturers to have immunity from liability in the event that their weapons are used illegally by criminals. Central to Mexico's arguments was the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA), an Act of Congress which was passed in 2005. PLCAA prohibits 'civil liability actions from being brought or continued against manufacturers, distributors, dealers, or importers of firearms or ammunition for damages, injunctive or other relief resulting from the misuse of their products by others'.[70] Mexico reasoned that there were exceptions to this Act, and so its challenge should hold. The court held, however, that Mexico's presumption of the extraterritoriality of the Act did not apply because it attempted to hold the gun manufacturers and wholesaler responsible for actions that occurred in the United States and not Mexico. The court also reasoned that the counts for negligence and other violations that Mexico argued were covered under common law and not statutory law. They therefore did not meet the exceptions as delineated in PLCAA, 15 U.S.C.S. § 7903(5)(A)(iii). Additionally, because Mexico did not allege that any of the manufacturers were the de facto sellers, the exception for negligence per se as outlined in § 7903(5)(A)(ii) would not apply. In essence, even though the PLCAA provides for certain exceptions in which claims can be brought against gun manufacturers, the court held that based on the arguments presented by Mexico, they did not apply to its complaint.[71] Mexico appealed the decision. On 22 January 2024, the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit sided with Mexico. It held that the dismissal of the case was improper because the claim that Mexico alleges is a plausible statutory exemption from the general prohibition against gun manufacturers and sellers under 5 U.S.C.S. §§ 7902(a) and 7903(5)(A). The court also found that Mexico made an adequate allegation against the defendants for knowingly aiding and abetting the 'unlawful downstream trafficking of their guns into Mexico'. Judge Saylor's decision was therefore reversed, and the matter remanded to the lower court.[72] This is therefore a positive and hallmark judicial decision that has important implications for the trajectory of the case. In addition to this early victory in the American courts, Mexico has also brought a second case in an Arizona Federal Court against gun distributors and gun shops.[73] This shows intentionality on Mexico's part as it seeks to not only curtail the selling and smuggling of guns into its territory, but to also hold gun distributors accountable for negligence through judicial relief in American courts.

To get a better understanding of the context for this lawsuit and the subsequent calls for a war on guns policy, it is important to retrace the US–Mexico anti-gun-trafficking policies. The history of gun-control between the US and Mexico illustrates the divergent national security priorities and interests of the two countries. The former's approach to gun control is more laisser-faire,

[69]Dakin Andone, '13 states have backed the Mexican government's lawsuit against a group of US gun manufacturers', *CNN* (6 February 2022), available at {https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/06/us/mexico-lawsuit-us-gun-manufacturers/index.html#:~:text=The%20attorneys%20general%20of%2013,in%20Mexico%2C%20fueling%20gun%20violence}.

[70]Public Law No. 109–92 (10/26/2005), 'S.397 – Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act', available at: {https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/senate-bill/397/text}.

[71]*Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc.*, 633 F. Supp. 3d 425 (D. Mass. 2022).

[72]*Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Smith & Wesson Brands, Inc.*, 91 F.4th 511 (1st Cir. 2024).

[73]*Estados Unidos Mexicanos v. Diamondback Shooting Sports, Inc.*, No. CIV 22–472-TUC-CKJ, 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 111888 (D. Ariz. 27 June 2023).

with a strong gun-possession culture among its citizens, supported by the second constitutional amendment.[74]

A central difference between US and Mexican gun laws is the way each country structures its weapons administration. In Mexico, gun laws are much more restrictive than in the US. Gun laws are enacted at a federal level, giving limited autonomy to individual states within the Mexican Federation. Conversely, in the US, gun laws are primarily managed by individual states, and the federal government has limited powers and reach. In 2004, the US government removed its Federal Assault Weapons Ban (FAWB). This policy shift resulted in an increase in the trafficking of assault firearms, which are used frequently by drug-based cartels in the perpetration of homicides, kidnappings, extortion rackets, and other violent crimes. Firearms coming from the US, including handguns and AR-15 and AK-47 assault weapons, are the main implements used by these organised criminal organisations.[75]

Most guns tracked to the US from Mexico come from one of the four border states with Mexico: Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas.[76] Since 2004, firearms trafficking into Mexico has added to the nation's rising violence.[77] A high percentage of the violence committed on the Mexican side of the border is carried out by the nation's drug-based cartels. From 2007 to 2012, over 47,000 homicides took place in Mexico by drug trafficking cartels locked in a vicious war for control of the profitable drug trade which flows to consumers in the US. During the period from 2007 to 2011, nearly 70 per cent of the 99,691 firearms seized from violent crimes in Mexico and subsequently submitted for tracing to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) originated from US manufacturers or were acquired through US dealers.[78] Additional data from the ATF indicates that between 2017 and 2022, nearly 124,000 guns were retrieved at crime scenes in Mexico. These were subsequently traced, and 68 per cent of those guns (approximately 83,000) came from the United States.[79] In 2023, the US Customs and Border Protection agency intercepted 1,171 guns prior to them being trafficked into Mexico. This is significantly higher than the 173 guns intercepted in 2019.[80] The data is overwhelming; violence in Mexico is strongly associated with the trafficking of weapons from the US.[81]

The strategies used by the US and Mexico to counter the illicit flow of firearms across the southern border often lead to these very firearms ending up in the hands of drug-based cartels and other criminal syndicates. These strategies have been extremely US-centric and have proven largely ineffective. Take, for example, the US initiated gun-tracing programme, Fast and Furious, which was administered by the ATF between 2009 and 2011. The programme was intended to track illegal

[74]See here current debates on gun rights and gun control in the US. It shows the deep cultural and legal embrace of gun possession in the US: {https://www.pbs.org/newshour/tag/second-amendment}.

[75]June Beittel, 'Mexico: Organized crime and drug trafficking organizations', *Current Politics and Economics of the United States, Canada and Mexico*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 181–223; Diana Palaversich, 'The politics of drug trafficking in Mexican and Mexico-related narconovelas', *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 31:2 (2006), pp. 85–110; Ieva Jusionyte, *Exit Wounds: How America's Guns Fuel Violence across the Border* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024); Mark Ungar, 'The armed arena: Arms trafficking in Central America', *Latin American Research Review*, 55:3 (2020), pp. 445–60.

[76]See also data from the ATF's National Tracing Center gun tracking system here: ATF, 'Firearms Trace Data: Mexico: 2017–2022', available at: {https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/firearms-trace-data-mexico-2017-2022.}

[77]Vivian Chu and William Krouse, 'Gun trafficking and the Southwest border', Congressional Research Service (2009).

[78]Jessica Eby, 'Fast and furious, or slow and steady: The flow of guns from the United States to Mexico', *UCLA Law Review*, 61:4 (2014), pp. 1082–133; GAO, 'Firearms trafficking: U.S. efforts to disrupt gun smuggling into Mexico would benefit from additional data and analysis' (22 February 2021), available at: {https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-322}.

[79]See *The Trace*, a publication that captures data from the US law enforcement agency the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives: Alain Stephens, 'U.S. agents are seizing more guns headed to Mexico', *The Trace* (7 March 2024), available at: {https://www.thetrace.org/2024/03/us-mexico-gun-trafficking-border-cbp/#:~:text=Data%20from%20the%20the%20Bureau,came%20from%20the%20United%20States}.

[80]See Stephens, 'U.S. agents are seizing more guns headed to Mexico'.

[81]David Pérez Esparza, Shane D. Johnson, and Paul Gill, 'Why did Mexico become a violent country? Assessing the role of firearms trafficked from the US', *Security Journal*, 33 (2020), pp. 179–209.

firearms traffickers operating between the United States and Mexico. The operation involved allowing straw purchasers to buy weapons illegally in the United States with the intention of tracing them to Mexican drug cartels. However, the operation quickly spiralled out of control, with many of the guns lost or unaccounted for, and some later found at crime scenes, including the murder of a US Border Patrol agent Brian Terry.[82]

The power imbalance between Mexico and the US has greatly hindered attempts to curb the illicit trafficking of firearms across their shared border. So too their divergent gun laws and policies, spanning from manufacturing regulations to possession rights, create substantial challenges in achieving effective collaboration to combat gun smuggling. Mexico, over the years, has had to grapple with an American 'iron triangle'[83] comprising of gun rights lobby groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) and Gun Owners of America (GOA), bureaucracies such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) that regulate firearms usage, and congressional subcommittees such as the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security. This, in turn, affects the relative success that interest groups have in making sure that they elect congressional representatives who are sympathetic to their causes. When Congress passes bills, these are sent to bureaucracies for implementation. These laws are often vague, and it is up to the bureaucracies to use their discretionary power, consistent with the provisions of the law, to put the policy into practice.[84] Interest groups, bureaucracies, and Congress therefore work in tandem on what issues are considered important, which representatives take them on as they run for office, and also which administrative bodies create policies that implement laws once they are passed.

Blackman and Gardiner provide some insight on why the NRA has been so effective in its lobbying. They argue, for instance, that the NRA has a membership that is committed to the Association's goals. This translates to an active membership that communicates with legislators about their opposition to restrictive gun laws. The NRA is also strategic in keeping its focus on issues that have broad consensus within its body and avoiding those that are divisive. It also seeks ways in which it can get support from law enforcement and commits to crime-control mechanisms whereby criminals are punished.[85] The NRA's effective lobbying has seen court decisions that continue to uphold the right to bear arms and acts such as the PLCAA, which restricts the extent to which firearm makers and sellers can be held liable. Any change in the laws would have to come from legislators who have a different view on the issue, and they would have to be elected to Congress in the first place. Bureaucratic changes would also be needed to amend existing policies. Mexico's legal challenge is therefore one which many domestic actors have previously taken on but in which they have largely been unsuccessful.

Finding a balance between gun-ownership rights and the mitigation of gun violence and crimes has therefore been a delicate task. Issue networks, however, though more loosely connected than the iron triangles, have given rise to different types of advocacy groups acting within and across borders, campaigning for change. Moreover, Mexico recognises that there is a triad of issues, with gun violence, illicit drugs, and migration all intertwined. It therefore highlighted in its complaint that there is a 'correlation between the increase in gun production in the U.S. and the percentage

[82]See additional information about the Fast and Furious programme: 'Operation Fast and Furious Fast Facts', *CNN* (16 September 2022), available at: {https://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/americas/operation-fast-and-furious-fast-facts/index.html}.

[83]Gordon Adams uses the concept of an iron triangle to describe the policymaking relationship that exists among interest groups, bureaucracies, and Congress in American politics. See Gordon Adams, *The Iron Triangle: The Politics of Defense Contracting* (New York: Council on Economic Priorities, 1981).

[84]Wendy N. Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, SAGE, 2020).

[85]P. H. Blackman and R. E. Gardiner, 'Effect of the NRA (National Rifle Association) as a citizens special interest group concerned with the criminal justice system', *NCJRS Virtual Library* (1984), available at: {https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/effect-nra-national-rifle-association-citizens-special-interest#:~:text=The%20lobbying%20effectiveness%20of%20the,to%20its%20supporters%20and%20concentration.}

of homicides in Mexico committed with a gun'.[86] Additionally, drug violence was also found to be perpetrated with trafficked weapons, causing many Mexicans to 'seek security in the United States'.[87] These migration outflows were also found to be 'higher in border cities where homicide rates were highest and drug-related violence most prevalent'.[88] While not all Mexican migrants are refugees, some indeed flee because of turmoil within their country, some of it due to gun and drug violence. This nexus between the issues suggests that declaring a war on guns is but one part of the triad that must be fixed in addition to the other two issues, since none of them exists in isolation.

Challenging global power hierarchies: South–South security cooperation between Mexico and CARICOM

Caribbean countries have decided to support Mexico in its lawsuit against American gun manufacturers by filing an amicus curiae. These countries, along with the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Human Security (SEHLAC),[89] which works with NGOs and professionals on disarmament strategies in the LAC region and across the world, filed their arguments in the United States Court of Appeals on 21 March 2023. Similar to the arguments presented by Mexico, these nations and NGOs reasoned that a sizeable portion of the violence experienced in the region has been perpetrated by people using firearms that have their origin in the United States. Gun violence is therefore a public health crisis in the LAC region which, though comprising just 8 per cent of the world's population, accounts for an astounding 37 per cent of global homicides. This, the amicus curiae brief finds, can be mainly attributed to the 'ubiquity of illegal firearms' that are trafficked from the United States.[90] US gun industry practices therefore lead to irreparable and dire harm not just to Mexico, but also to LAC countries.[91] Examples from the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, Belize, Costa Rica, Haiti, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago were included to show the deleterious effects of illegal American guns and violent crimes in these countries.[92] Hence, while Mexico was the only plaintiff, LAC nations used the amici curiae brief to demonstrate to the court that many other countries are harmed and continue to suffer harm from the US gun industry. This is despite their national and collaborative efforts to stem the flow of unlawful gun trafficking to their shores. They therefore appealed to the court to shift the balance of power and not allow 'the gun manufacturers and distributers from a single nation [to continue to] hold hostage the law-abiding citizens of an entire region of the world'.[93]

Given the realities of US foreign policy and limited political leverage to influence Washington's priorities in the region, the decision by Caribbean countries (initially just Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, The Bahamas, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago)[94] to join Mexico in its $10 billion lawsuit against eight gun manufacturers in the US is noteworthy. This is a strategic, South–South cooperation effort, which recognises the benefits of cooperating with a larger more significant country with shared ideas and beliefs and national security priorities. Mexico has a population of 126 million people, while the population of the entire CARICOM is

[86] *Estados Unidos Mexicanos vs. Smith & Wesson et al.*, U.S. D. Mass., filed 4 August 2021, available at: {https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mexico-smith-wesson-complaint.pdf}, para. 443}.

[87] Ibid., para. 471.

[88] Ibid.

[89] SEHLAC members are in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru, while its partnering NGOs are in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay. See *Brief of Amici Curiae Latin American and Caribbean Nations and NGO in Support of Plaintiff-Appellant and in Favor of Reversal*, Case 22–1823, filed 21 March 2023, available at: {https://portales.sre.gob.mx/acervo/images/Litigio_armas/Comunicados_firmantes_de_escritos_de_amigos_de_la_corte/Countries_Amicus_Brief.pdf}.

[90] Ibid., pp. 1–2.

[91] Ibid., pp. 9–10.

[92] Ibid., pp. 10–17.

[93] Ibid., p. X.

[94] The Caribbean Council, 'CARICOM states join Mexico's anti-gun lawsuit in the US' (31 March 2023), available at: {https://www.caribbean-council.org/caricom-states-join-mexicos-anti-gun-lawsuit-in-the-us/}.

approximately 18 million people. Mexico's nominal GDP is $1.811 trillion, while nominal GDP for CARICOM is $145.3 billion. And while the land mass of CARICOM is 458,480 km^2, that of Mexico's is 1,972,550 km^2. But similar to the Caribbean, a large number of guns trafficked into Mexico are from the US.

The current push by Mexico and its CARICOM allies to engage the US in a mutually beneficial security relationship is illustrative of how the issue of gun trafficking is framed as a shared threat and how combating gun trafficking is constructed as being mutually impactful and beneficial. By framing the issue as a collective security threat, Mexico and the Caribbean seek to engage the US in dialogue and a more assertive cooperation strategy to combat the trafficking of firearms which contribute to high rates of homicide, gun crimes, and gang violence.[95] This is expected to decrease levels of gun violence in Mexico and the Caribbean.[96] This in turn could benefit the US by reducing the flow of migrants seeking to escape violence in their home countries. Trinidadian prime minister Keith Rowley underscored the importance of the Caribbean's participation in Mexico's lawsuit in his remarks to Parliament: 'our association with the Mexicans in pursuing this matter at this time has no cost attached to it … This is more of a diplomatic attachment where we're supporting Mexico's actions in the US courts … As a sovereign nation, we're making our voices heard and we're standing alongside another sovereign nation that's having the same problem that we have.'[97]

Rowley's emphasis on sovereignty mirrors the Caribbean's struggle for autonomy in foreign policy. Mexico moves the Caribbean closer to real sovereignty and provides an ally with shared beliefs, interests, and ideas. For Mexico and the Caribbean, illegal guns are a symbol of gang warfare, power, and instability. The need for its control stems from the reality of high and increasing homicide rates. Philip J. Pierre, the prime minister of Saint Lucia, argued that it is urgent to 'quickly explore new approaches to the problem of violent crime in our country. Our homicide rate jumped from a total of 30 in 2016, to 60 in 2017, 74 in 2021, 76 in 2022, 2023. The vast majority of these homicides have been firearm-related and have involved young people both as victims and perpetrators.'[98]

Andrew Holness, prime minister of Jamaica, echoed these concerns. 'Our children are being killed; our young males are being killed with guns exchanged for drugs which head to North America … Our children are just as valuable as the children in North America.'[99] This use of moral suasion is accompanied by Holness's appeal to the US for 'equal energy, effort and attention' to be given to the illegal transfer of guns. Given the asymmetrical power relations between the US and CARICOM countries, moral suasion is a common tool of foreign policy. It is however not an effective strategy for achieving major shifts in security cooperation. Neither are strategies that focus solely on CARICOM, which lacks the capabilities to shape US security priorities within the region. As the hegemon, the US is able to dictate what the regional security priorities within CARICOM are. The 'regional approach to prevent a dangerous substance from leaving our shores to get to the streets of a North America', Jamaica's prime minister Andrew Holness argued 'is taken in the war on drugs; that's what it is. 'We spend effort, we spend time preventing an illegal substance getting to the shores of another country … A similar effort must be placed on ensuring that illegal guns don't leave their shores to come to our countries.'[100] This, however, cannot be achieved without

[95]The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) notes in its 2023 report on Global Homicide that the Americas region has the globe's highest murder rates and that firearms are the main mechanisms used to commit deadly violence. See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*.

[96]Mary Alice Young and Michael Woodiwiss, 'Organised crime and security threats in Caribbean small island developing states: A critical analysis of US assumptions and policies', *The European Review of Organised Crime*, 5:1 (2019), pp. 85–117.

[97]Trinidadian prime minister Keith Rowley in response to opposition member of parliament Roodal Moonilal about the costs of participation in the lawsuit. Quoted in The Caribbean Council, 'CARICOM States Join Mexico's Anti-Gun Lawsuit in the US'.

[98]Philip J. Pierre (Prime Minister, Saint Lucia), 'Speech at the Regional Symposium: Violence as a Public Health Issue—The Crime Challenge', Port of Spain, 17 April 2023.

[99]Andrew Holness (Prime Minister, Jamaica), 'Speech at the Regional Symposium: Violence as a Public Health Issue. The Crime Challenge', Port of Spain, 17 April 2023.

[100]Holness, 'Speech at the Regional Symposium'.

more assertive (SSSC) models of security cooperation and coalitions with more powerful actors in the global South. CARICOM leaders are aware of this.

> The Bahamas with the support of my colleagues, we have been putting more pressure on the US to do more with respect to the proliferation of weapons coming into our country … In recent time they passed an Act that speaks to straw purchasers but I don't think they have gone far enough in that regard and so we will continue our collective voices to prevent the trafficking of arms in our county and we have joined the Mexico case to see how we can shake up the manufacturers in the US who by some Act have immunity from prosecution.[101]

The speeches therefore reveal an understanding that the Mexico case puts CARICOM countries in a more advantageous position as they coalesce in litigation with Mexico around this issue area. They also highlight the differences in approaches to guns between CARICOM and the US. In some ways, this is an example of soft balancing, because 'international institutions, economic statecraft and diplomatic arrangements' are being used by Mexico to frustrate and undermine the United States. While this action does not 'directly challenge [the] U.S' military preponderance' as hard balancing would,[102] it fits into CARICOM's third model of cooperation around this issue area, where combative, assertive means are used because previous, pacifist attempts have not produced the desired outcomes.

By seeking recourse through American courts rather than international courts such as the International Court of Justice, or even through regional bodies such as the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), and through a South–South coalition, a new precedent is being set for a more assertive model of security cooperation. Mexico's lawsuit is still in its early stages, so we do not yet know how it may influence other states as they police the influx of illegal guns within their territories. The coalition of states and NGOs that has joined the lawsuit shows that the issue is being mutually constituted by different actors and is gaining traction across the LAC region and in South–South dialogue and practice. We also see that affected states have already been changing strategies by reframing their policies to focus on the 'war on guns'. We see this, for example, in Prime Minister Andrew Holness's speech at the 77th United Nations General Assembly in September 2022. Here, Prime Minister Holness remarked:

> In the same way that a war on drugs is being prosecuted, in which we have been faithful partners in policing what comes through our waters or leaves our shores, there now needs to be a 'war on guns'. Jamaica does not manufacture guns, but our population suffers from the effects of widely available guns. The countries that manufacture weapons that are available to the public must implement stronger measures to ensure that those weapons do not end up on streets and in the hands of people for whom they were not intended.
>
> In the same way there is concern about illegal drugs on the streets of the rich countries there must be concern about guns on the streets of developing countries like Jamaica.[103]

The language used by Prime Minister Holness as well as the forum of choice are very strategic. This speech before the United Nations, where 193 countries are Members, is a way of saying to the world that this is how Jamaica and other Caribbean countries see the issue, and this is how they are promoting it.

We note here too that the early victory in the US Court of Appeals that Mexico properly brought the case has given legitimacy to the issue. An ultimate ruling in Mexico's favour would help to

[101] Philip Davis (Prime Minister, Bahamas), 'Speech at the Regional Symposium: Violence as a Public Health Issue. The Crime Challenge', Port of Spain, 17 April 2023.

[102] Robert A. Pape, 'Soft balancing against the United States'. *International Security*, 30:1 (2005), pp. 7–45 (p. 10).

[103] Andrew Holness (Prime Minister, Jamaica), 'Speech at the 77th United Nations General Assembly', New York, 22 September 2022.

solidify the framing of the issue as an international concern and promote even more lawsuits, judicial relief, and policy change. Mexico and Caribbean states would therefore help to push for the transcendence of power in the international system while encouraging new modes of cooperation. Even if Mexico does not prevail in the courts, the fact that the Court of Appeals has already held that this is a valid issue – morally, socially, and politically – the United States will have to pay attention to what happens. Other LAC countries can therefore use the outcome to push for changes in US policy in the region.

Making the 'war on guns' a success

In this article, we have examined how Mexico and the Caribbean have utilised South–South security cooperation to respond to a common set of security challenges relating to trafficking of firearms from the US to the LAC region. This response engages a strategy aimed at shifting from the United States' focus on the war on drugs to a war on guns – the region's priority. This signals a more assertive model of South–South security cooperation. While CARICOM lacks the capability to singlehandedly influence US priorities within the region, engaging in a South–South coalition with Mexico, a border state with more significant political and economic ties to the US, provides greater strategic leverage. Mexico's historic tortious lawsuit against US gun manufacturers, and a CARICOM alliance, is not just symbolic but has important implications for countries also affected by the influx of guns from the United States, leading to spikes in violent crimes and homicides. Achieving not just US cooperation on gun trafficking but a war on guns, as CARICOM leaders have declared, could prove challenging. We therefore close with some thoughts on what would be required to realise a shift from the war on drugs to the war on guns.

Making a shift from a war on drugs to a war on guns may be made meaningful by transposing some, not all, of the elements from one to the other. This project would then involve several components. First, a shift in national and regional policy-directed priorities from the targeting of one set of illicit commodities to another; from a set produced in the South to a set produced in the main power centre of the North; one harming mainly the populations of the North to one harming the peoples of the South. The sites of supply and demand would be reversed, and supply policies may thus be appropriately transposed. Developing the institutional capabilities to control supply would be another element. A successful war on guns would also require tight border control (use of high integrity units); full scanning of goods; 'crop eradication', better regulated manufacture of guns; a ban on the sale of military-grade weapons to civilians; punitive measures against legitimate carriers that convey illegal weapons across national borders as well as monitoring and performance reviews. Success will also be dependent on managing risks through operational mechanisms that allow equal representation and similar levels of authority; effective monitoring and coordination; and investments in capacity development, to include technical transfers, over which CARICOM should have primary responsibility. Accepting this responsibility is a key component. Another important condition for success is building a long-term multiple-issue South–South security cooperation framework with Mexico and other countries in the global South.

Acknowledgements. We thank the editors of the special issue, Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller, for their useful comments on the first draft of this article as well as the anonymous reviewers.

Dr Yonique Campbell holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford and is currently Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies, Mona. She has written extensively on the relations between security and citizenship as well as on public policy challenges in small states.

Professor Anthony Harriott is a Professor of Political Sociology who taught at the University of the West Indies, Mona. He is now an independent scholar, whose research interests include violence, organised crime, and police reform.

Dr Felicia Grey is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Detroit Mercy in Michigan, USA. She is Fulbright alumna who has a PhD in International Studies from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. She teaches courses in Legal Research, Criminal Law and Procedure, Introduction to Law and the Judiciary, Political Science, Comparative Politics, and International Relations.

Dr Damion Blake is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Policy at Elon University. He holds a PhD in Political Theory and Governance Studies from Virginia Tech. Dr Blake is the author of *Don Dada: Assessing the Socio-economic and Political Power of Jamaica's Mafia Bosses*, which explores the intersections of politics, violence, and governance in Jamaica.

Cite this article: Yonique Campbell, Anthony Harriott, Felicia A. Grey and Damion Blake, 'From the 'war on drugs' to the 'war on guns': South–South cooperation between Mexico and the Caribbean', *European Journal of International Security* (2025), pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.6