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All In or Fold: Facing complex dilemmas of high-stakes decisions for large-scale infrastructure projects

Case Study:
The Mexico City New International Airport (NAIM)

Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of roughly 22.5 million people (WPR, 2024) with a high demand for transportation. Since 1970's, the region suffers a shortage in transportation infrastructure due to the continued growth of the city, and the increased need for mobility due to the lack of proper planning (Cronica, 2023).

The need to have a new airport in Mexico City has been discussed for several years, for which a detailed analysis of potential locations for the construction of a new airport was developed since 1997 by the Mexican Government (MITRE, 2000). By 2017, the Mexico City International Airport (AICM)[1] was operating over its capacity (41.5 million passengers per year), while its full capacity was 33 million annual passengers per year, approximately 8.5 million passengers over its capacity (GACM, 2018a).

Three main alternatives were explored by the Mexican Government: (i) build a new airport, which was 5 km apart from the existing airport; (ii) create a metropolitan system with the existing airport plus the Toluca airport (approximately 69 km apart from each other); and (iii) the construction of a new airport in Tizayuca, Hidalgo, plus the operation of the existing airport (approximately 80 km apart from each other).

The first option was deemed to be the most appropriate by the Mexican Government. In 2014, the Mexico City New International Airport (NAIM)[2] in Texcoco was announced and it was expected to be one of the largest airports in the world.

The Mexican Government justified the construction of the NAIM (GACM, 2016) by focusing on the principles of (i) Economic and social development, (ii) Mobility and connectivity, (iii) hydraulics improvements, (iv) Sustainability and environmental protection, and (v) Transparency and accountability.

(i) Economic and social development: the project was expected to generate positive in an area of influence of 300 square kilometres from the airport site. This estimated the direct

[1] AICM is Mexico City's International Airport. It is the current and busiest airport in Mexico and one of the most important in Latin America, serving as the main hub for Aeroméxico and other Mexican carriers.
[2] NAIM was the planned new hub for Mexico City. It intended to replace the existing AICM. It was planned to be one of the world's largest terminals at 743,000 m².

development of 11 municipalities in the State of Mexico, and 4 municipalities in Mexico City, which benefits up to 2.6 million people in in working age.

(ii) Mobility and connectivity: The NAIM was expected to become the first hub in Latin America, aiming to position itself as a regional icon that provides the possibility of traveling to multiple destinations, reducing costs of travel, and optimising travel times for passengers. The location of the NAIM also required and extensive reorganisation of the local transportation network, including the existing BRT[3], metro system, and buses within the city, national rail networks and connecting highways to the city, among other connecting infrastructure.

(iii) Hydraulics improvements: A major problem in Mexico City is the lack of proper water and wastewater treatment. The NAIM promised to detonate the biggest investment in hydraulic infrastructure in the region, equivalent to approximately USD 1 billion. This includes the expansion and construction of nine water bodies, the construction of 24 wastewater treatment plants, channel casing, and construction of tunnels and supporting infrastructure.

(iv) Sustainability and environmental protection: the project was expected to improve the ecological health of the region. The project was designed with the objective of becoming one of the most sustainable projects in the country and the region, using clean energy from renewable sources operate green technologies with efficient use of water and mixing ventilation and air conditioning to optimize energy use. Airport facilities, such as the Passenger Terminal Building (PTB), the Ground Transportation Centre (GTC), or the Air Traffic Control Tower (ATCT) were expected to obtain the LEED[4] Platinum certification.

Transparency and Accountability: According to Transparency International, Mexico´s Corruption Perception Index 2017 (TI, 2017), ranks 135/180, with an overall score of 29/100. With the objective of increasing the credibility of the country at international levels, attract international investment and minimise corruption practices, the Mexican Government implemented transparency and integrity practices to become a global reference in the construction of public infrastructure projects. This included accountability and total access to

[3] The Mexico City Metrobús is the city's Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. It operates on seven lines with over 280 stations, carrying around 1.8 million passengers daily.

[4] LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a green building certification system, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). It provides a framework for designing, constructing, operating, and maintaining environmentally responsible buildings, neighbourhoods, and cities. It is recognized globally as a symbol of sustainability leadership.

information, where the Open Contracting Data standard was adopted. Furthermore, adoption of social witness figures, accompaniment of the Mexican Internal Control Office, inclusion of the OECD[5] in an advisory role, and presence of Public Notaries and Live transmission in opening acts and awarding of public tenders.

NAIM Development Plan

The development of NAIM was planned into two phases. The first phase was expected to be finalized in 2020 aiming at serving expected to serve approximately 70 million passengers per year (GOBMX, 2018). It was expected to cost USD 13 billion, partly funded by the Mexican Government (60%) and the private sector (40%).

NAIM's second phase was planned for 2065 when it would reach its maximum development and capacity, serving 120 million passengers per year (GOBMX, 2015).

The construction of the NAIM was managed by Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de Mexico (Mexico City Airport Group - GACM[6]), (Appendix 1) a state-owned company wholly owned by the Mexican Ministry of Transportation (SCT). GACM holds a fifty-year concession to build, develop, operate, and manage the NAIM, and it is also the parent company of the AICM.

The first attempt to build a new airport was made by the Mexican Government on 22nd October 2001, when Vicente Fox[7] was elected for the 2000–2006 presidential period. The site of the project was Texcoco (where the NAIM was later announced by Enrique Peña Nieto[8]). The Government announced land expropriations from 3 municipalities by paying unfair prices (less than 1 USD per square metre). Such announcement derived into a series of protests and social discomfort towards the project that included several weeks of violent confrontation with those

[5] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental organization headquartered in Paris, France, that promotes policies aimed at improving economic and social well-being worldwide.

[6] Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México (GACM) is a state-majority-owned company, established to plan, build, manage, and operate Mexico's airport infrastructure, including the New International Airport of Mexico City (NAIM), originally at Texcoco, under a federal concession granted in 2015. GACM also oversees the current Mexico City International Airport (AICM) along with six regional airports.

[7] Vicente Fox is a Politician and Businessman who served as the President of Mexico from 2000 to 2006, representing the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). He was the first president in over 70 years not affiliated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), marking a historic political transition in Mexico.

[8] Enrique Peña Nieto is a Mexican lawyer and politician who served as the President of Mexico from 2012 to 2018, representing the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). He previously governed the State of Mexico.

who were to be displaced, which ultimately brought the project to a halt by executive order (Dewey & Davis, 2013).

The project was being developed on a site owned by the Mexican Government, with a surface of approximately 5,000 hectares, a passenger terminal building of approximately 743,000 square metres. It was designed to handle 70 million passengers per year with a maximum of 120 million in the second phase, and with 3 parallel runways with simultaneous operations (F+P, 2018). Furthermore, the NAIM considered Maintenance Buildings, Fire extinguishing services, Cargo Terminal, Logistics and Customs facilities, an Area Control Centre, General Aviation facilities, Heliports, Wastewater Treatment Plants for commercial, military and airport requirements, Military facilities, 26 hectares, Catering facilities, Electrical substation, and short and long stay parking.

Among the most relevant stakeholders involved in the NAIM project, there were multiple public and private companies involved. From the Mexican Government side, the entities that participated in the development of the project included the Ministry for Communications and Transportation (SCT); Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB); Ministry of Finance and Public Credit (SHCP); Ministry of Defence (SEDENA); Ministry of Economy (SE); Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL); National Water Commission (CONAGUA); Ministry for Labor and Social Protection (STPS); Ministry for Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food (SAGARPA); Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT); The Mexican Secretariat for the Civil Service (SFP); The Ministry for Agrarian, Land and Urban Development (SEDATU); the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR); and the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE). From the Private Sector, the Programme Manager included Parsons Corporation, FOA Consulting & Jacobs; the Master Architect was Foster + Partners (F+P) and Fernando Romero Enterprises (FREE); the Master Civil Engineers were Netherlands Airport Consultants (NACO), Grupo TADCO, and Grupo Sacmag; the Master Planner was Landrum & Brown (L&B); and the international aeronautical advisors were MITRE Corporation, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

The political framework – the election

President Peña Nieto began its presidential period on December 1st, 2012, succeeding former president Felipe Calderon[9], from the political party PAN (National Action Party). He represented the political party PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). In the second year of his mandate, President Peña Nieto announced the construction of the NAIM, which would not be completed during his presidential period. Peña Nieto stated "*The NAIM is the airport that our country deserves, and it is the firm intention of the government to execute the project*" (Proceso, 2014).

Peña Nieto justified the construction of the NAIM to solve the passenger saturation in the existing AICM. The existing AICM has been operating with improved facilities since 1990, and in 2006 Terminal 2 was inaugurated by Calderon. Because of the longstanding operation, it has outdated infrastructure that is incapable of satisfying user demands. Furthermore, there is a lack of space that makes it almost impossible to expand its runways, which currently do not have simultaneous operations, which drastically reducing its capabilities (AICM, 2023).

Throughout the presidential period of Peña Nieto, the construction of the NAIM progressed. The National Infrastructure Plan outlined the NAIM as a priority because of the necessity to have a new airport (DOF, 2013). Since 2013, the Master Planner, Master Architect, Master Civil Engineer, and Programme Managers were selected to develop the project, preliminary works such as access roads, site levelling and perimeter fence were initiated. Furthermore, detail design was completed for the runways, contracts for the foundation piles, PTB, ATCT and GTC were awarded, and the Construction Manager was selected (CICM, 2016).

Elections in Mexico are held the 1st of July, every 6 years, overseen by the Mexican Electoral Institute (INE)[10]. Further details on the Institutional Framework of Mexico are included in Appendix 2. Political parties usually begin campaigns 6 months before elections. As the conclusion of the mandate of Peña Nieto approached, three main candidates ran for election:

[9] Felipe Calderón Hinojosa is a Mexican politician and lawyer who served as the President of Mexico from 2006 to 2012, representing the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

[10] The Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE) is Mexico's autonomous public organization responsible for organizing federal elections and overseeing democratic processes.

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador[11] from the Political party MORENA, Jose Antonio Meade[12] from PRI and, Ricardo Anaya[13] from PAN. The country was facing a general discomfort with the government from PRI, and the idea of a different and alternative political party to take over the government was seen as the best alternative. Due to the magnitude and levels of investment that the NAIM had, it became the centre of polarised political discussions. Meade and Anaya were advocates for the project, but Lopez Obrador was firmly against it, declaring on several occasions that if elected as president, the NAIM project would be terminated, and a new airport would be built (Juarez Cornelio et al., 2021).

Following the results of the 1st of July 2018 election, Lopez Obrador became president elect. As he repeatedly mentioned that he believed that the project was a waste of taxpayer's money and mired in corruption, he would cancel the NAIM project if it was the desire of the population, despite any physical progress made (Bloomberg, 2018). With the objective of justifying the decision of termination, a public non-official referendum was made by Lopez Obrador to know the public opinion about the NAIM during the last days of October 2018. According to the official results, 1,067,859 people voted, and 70% voted against continuing the construction of the NAIM, and only 30% voted for continuing it. The public consultation involved roughly 1% of the Mexican population and was conducted under conditions that many critics described as partial, emotionally charged, and lacking institutional oversight. as not all electorate could vote, rather specific constituencies selected by the newly formed Government. The opposition also criticized this consultation as it excluded the INE. Following such controversies, Lopez Obrador stated that the consultation was "*a proof that no pressures from anyone will be accepted"* (Forbes, 2018). This derived in an announcement from the Mexican Government still lead by Peña Nieto mentioning that the Government in turn was not stopping the ongoing works and that if the desire to terminate the NAIM project persisted, it was the duty of the incoming government make such decision after 1st of December 2018, when Lopez Obrador begins his presidential period. GACM stated that they were continuing construction

[11] Andrés Manuel López Obrador is a Mexican politician and founder of the Morena party. He served as Head of Government of Mexico City (2000–2005) and was President of Mexico from December 2018 to September 2024. He was the first president in nearly a century not from PRI or PAN. Previously, he ran for president in 2006 and 2012 before winning in 2018.

[12] José Antonio Meade is a Mexican economist, lawyer, diplomat, and politician who served under Presidents Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto in various cabinet roles, including Secretary of Energy, Foreign Affairs, Social Development, and as Finance Secretary. He was the PRI's presidential candidate in 2018, placing third.

[13] Ricardo Anaya Cortés is a Mexican lawyer and politician, member of PAN, who led the National Action Party (2015–2017). He served as President of the Chamber of Deputies, and since September 2024, serves as a senator. He ran for president in 2018, placing second.

works until the current government concluded its mandate on November 30, 2018 (BBC, 2018). Since December 2018, GACM appointed Gerardo Ferrando as the new CEO, whose main task was to oversee the termination of the NAIM. On 27th December 2018, GACM issued a letter announcing the formal termination of the NAIM project (Obras Web, 2019).

The cancellation of the NAIM Airport

The termination of NAIM, was one of the most controversial decisions in recent Mexican history, with President Andrés Manuel López Obrador as the central protagonist and key decision-maker (Juarez Cornelio et al., 2021). The issue arose following the election of Lopez Obrador in 2018, when he decided to cancel the partially constructed airport, despite it being one of the most important IMs in Latin America at the time. The problem stemmed from Lopez Obrador's long-standing opposition to the project, citing environmental concerns, alleged corruption, and high costs as major reasons for its cancellation (El Sol de Mexico, 2019). The case was terminated in October 2018, when a public non-legally binding referendum organised by Lopez Obrador's administration supported the termination of the airport (BBC, 2018). The decision of termination caused multiple debates locally and internationally, as the project was already over 30% complete (Bloomberg, 2018) (see Figure 1 below), and its cancellation cost billions of dollars in sunk investment (Drummond, 2014).

Figure 1: NAIM Layout after termination (picture taken by the authors, November 2021)

Caption: The abandoned site of the cancelled Mexico City New International Airport (NAIM) stands as a stark reminder of the emotional and political complexities behind high-stakes leadership decisions. This image symbolizes Learning Objective 1, showing how choices made under intense time pressure and uncertainty, balancing personal ethics, professional loyalty, and political survival, can leave lasting physical and societal legacies. Decisions in such contexts are rarely 'clean' or purely rational.

Due to multiple views opposing the decision of termination, Lopez Obrador requested to the technical aggrupation and colleges of Engineering in Mexico to provide their opinion regarding the termination of the NAIM project and the possibility to continue with the construction of the Felipe Angeles airport. Unanimously, all the entities agreed that the most viable option was to continue the construction of the NAIM, as the project already had 32% of physical progress. Among further arguments, they mentioned that the land in which the NAIM was being developed was already government property, it was already studied and approved by international aeronautical entities due to its closeness to the current AICM and also, because it would represent a major expense for the government to terminate the existing contracts, many of them stating that it would be even more expensive to terminate the project and begin a new one, rather than finishing the existing one (El Financiero, 2019). Some organisations, like the Mexican Union of Engineering Associations (UMAI), led by Salvador Landeros stated that he was convinced that the termination of the NAIM was adequate from a technical, social, economic, environmental, financial, and legal terms (El Economista, 2019). Such declarations

derived in multiple positionings, statements and discomfort from technical organisations, manifesting that their opinions remain unchanged and that the positioning of the president from UMAI do not reflect the collective view of the other organisations, mainly because they believed that completing the NAIM was the most viable option, but also because there were no technical studies or information that supported the construction of any alternative airport. They all manifested their consideration, concluding that the most viable option was to continue with the construction of the NAIM, as there was no information that could support the construction of the Felipe Angeles alternative, reason why it was not viable to proceed with that option. Some other entities have requested the resignation or applicable sanctions to the president of UMAI for issuing a statement that they consider false and does not represent the general thinking of the members of the engineering sector (CICM, 2019).

The decision to terminate the NAIM project was highly controversial, mainly due to the high costs associated to the decision. According to the SCT during the Government from Lopez Obrador, the original estimation was that termination would cost roughly USD 6 billion (GDM, 2019). However, a report from the Superior Auditor of the Federation (ASF), the costs of termination by the end of 2021 were roughly USD 16 billion (Milenio, 2021). The amount considers the amounts already invested on the project of roughly USD 4 billion, USD 8 billion for the liquidation of contracts and bonds, USD 0.5 billion from early contract terminations, repurchase of FIBRA E certificates (real estate bonds) of roughly USD 2.5 billion, and USD 1 billion associated to legal costs and repurchase of green bonds issued by the government.

Derived from the official announcement of termination, the population, through collective social movements, initiated legal proceedings against the decision of the government. A high level of the population perceived that there were a significant number of resources invested in the construction of the NAIM, and halting construction while leaving the unfinished infrastructure on site without maintenance work or site remediation was a waste of taxpayer's resources, regardless of whether a new airport was being built or not. These legal proceedings were based on Article 134 of the Mexican Constitution states that "*The economic resources available to the Federation, the States, the Municipalities and the territorial demarcations of Mexico will be managed effectively, efficiently, economically, transparently and honestly in order to meet the objectives for which they are intended"* (CPM, 2021). Until august 2019, over 147 cases were reported against Lopez Obrador's government. Because of this, a judge in the State of Mexico ordered that the NAIM infrastructure should be maintained without being destroyed until they are thoroughly reviewed by a District Judge. Because of the legal

proceedings, Lopez Obrador stated that there were external economic and financial interests from rival organisations, and that the Government would investigate each legal proceeding, and announce the names of the organisations and individuals (El Sol de Mexico, 2019).

Declarations as such raised multiple concerns by legal entities, such as the Mexican Bar Lawyers College (BMA), which requested the president not to intervene in jurisdictional matters related to the legal proceedings, as they claim this is attempting against the Rule of Law. They argued that the exercise of the right to defence of people and the independence of the judiciary must be unrelated to the intervention of the executive and legislative branches, as this vulnerates the protection of personal data of the people, and it is their right to bring to legal actions whenever they consider that their rights are not being respected (Expansion, 2019).

The Felipe Angeles alternative

The Felipe Angeles International Airport (AIFA), was the proposed solution by Lopez Obrador, following the cancellation of the NAIM project (see Figure 2 below). The AIFA is in the former Military base of Santa Lucia, located in the municipality of Zumpango, approximately 45 kilometres (28 miles) north of Mexico City (Obras, 2022).

Construction works started on October 2019 and officially completed in March 2022 (Expansion, 2022b). All the project was executed entirely by the Ministry of Defence (SEDENA). Following the cancellation of the NAIM, AIFA was promoted as one of the most important projects from Lopez Obrador's infrastructure plan to address air travel congestion in Mexico City (GOB, 2019).

The AIFA was constructed within the premises of Santa Lucía Military Air Base, which makes it a civilian-military facility. It was originally estimated to cost of USD 3.5 billion and delivered in under 3 years (Expansion, 2022a). The AIFA is designed to handle a capacity of 19.5 million passengers annually in its first phase, and it includes two runways, a modern terminal, and cultural spaces like the Army and Air Force Museum (AIFA, 2024).

Despite its rapid development, the AIFA has not been exempted from criticism and controversies. The final constructions costs are estimated at USD 6 billion (El Universal, 2022). Furthermore, the integration of AIFA with the existing Mexico City Airport (45 km) has been problematic for passengers and airlines. For passengers, the lack of adequate public

transportation links (including rail connection under construction) and highways has been the main challenge, particularly for those needing to transfer between one airport to the other (Forbes, 2023). For airlines, initiating operations in the AIFA has been slow. Three main airlines, Aeromexico, Volaris, and Viva Aerobus agreed to move several routes following a near miss incident that almost led to two planes crashing (Heraldo, 2022). With a slow increase in flights and passenger numbers, the lack of accessibility and dual cost for airlines resulting from operating in both airports has made them cautious. Until 2024, it has been reported that since opening in 2022, AIFA has received 3.8 million passengers, which is the average number of passengers the existing AICM has in a month. See Table 1 below in Mexico City Airports: Key Comparisons for specific details on both projects.

This has resulted in operational losses of USD 19 million and the need to maintain government subsidies for over USD 75 million per year (El Financiero, 2024). Lastly, AIFA's military-civilian duality has raised operational concerns, as sharing airspace with the Santa Lucía Military Base has reportedly led to air traffic management complexities, sparking fears of potential interference with civilian flights. These issues have added to doubts about AIFA's ability to effectively serve as a long-term solution to Mexico City's air travel demand (El Universal, 2024).

Despite Lopez Obrador's claims that the NAIM was a monument to corruption (LDD, 2020), the AIFA has not been exempted from controversies. There have been multiple reports suggesting alleged conflicts of interest and irregularities during the bidding and construction phases (El Financiero, 2023), suggesting that contracts have been awarded to firms with close ties to government officials (Diario de Yucatan, 2022). Further controversies arise due to the multiple legal proceedings initiated by the social movement "No mas derroches – No more waste". Through his lawyer, Gerardo Carrasco Chávez, they have denounced that there has been a lack of public consultation with indigenous groups from the region, no master plan, Social and Environmental Impact Assessments, Aeronautical Safety studies, and financial viability studies (BBC, 2019). Controversies spiked further when SEDENA classified any type of information regarding the project for a period of 5 years (Vanguardia MX, 2022), citing that the project is of national strategic importance.

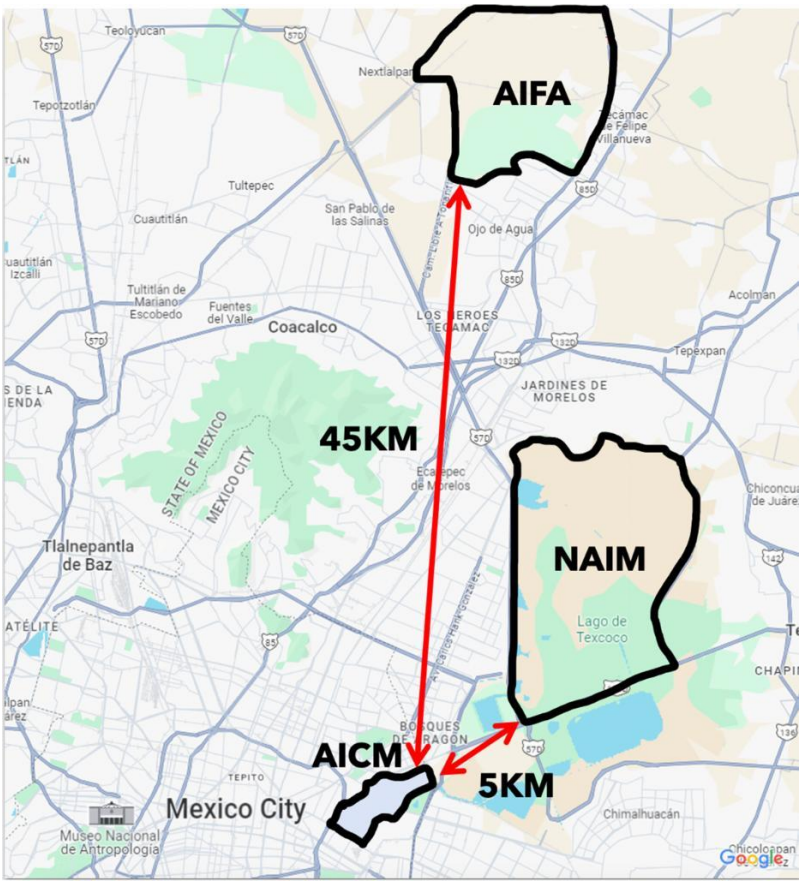

Figure 2: Distance between AICM, AIFA, and NAIM

Caption: This map shows the geographic distances between AICM, AIFA, and the cancelled NAIM site, yet these facts alone did not determine Mexico's airport decision. This image symbolizes Learning Objective 4, inviting to reflect on how narratives, more than technical evidence, shape what actions become possible or credible. Leaders must navigate symbolic language, moral storytelling, and public sentiment, which often outweigh purely rational considerations.

Mexico City Airports: Key Comparisons

Characteristics	AICM	NAIM	AIFA
Number of passengers (per year, in millions)	41.5	66	6.3
Number of runways	2 parallel runways, with no simultaneous operations	3 parallel runways, with simultaneous operations	2 parallel runways, with simultaneous operations
Number of gates (including remote gates)	97	164	35
Surface (in hectares)	770	5,000	2,331

Characteristics	AICM	NAIM	AIFA
Estimated Cost (USD)	450 million (due to renovations for 2026)	13 billion	5 billion
Timeline for completion	-	Completion by 2024 (if continued)	-
Risks and opportunities	-	High financial exposure, corruption allegations, environmental impact, solve congestion in existing AICM, opportunity to repurpose AICM, NAIM could become a hub for Latin America.	Low number of operations, poor connectivity, heavy subsidies from the government, Limited international connectivity, space to attract new airlines with competitive fees, potential for domestic route expansion, ideal for logistics and nearshoring.
Current Status	In operation since 1994	Site abandoned	In operation since March 2022

Table 1: Mexico City Airports Key Comparisons

The Dilemma of Rodrigo Montes de la Vega

The announcement of the cancellation of the New Mexico City International Airport (NAIM) thrust Rodrigo Montes de la Vega, Chair of the Board of Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México (GACM), into the centre of a national controversy. At 39, Rodrigo had become one of the youngest leaders to oversee a major infrastructure project in Mexico—an ambitious airport intended to transform the country's aviation capacity. But with the new administration opting to scrap NAIM in favour of converting the Santa Lucía military base into a commercial airport, his greatest professional achievement had suddenly turned into a defining crisis.

Rodrigo now faced a clear and consequential dilemma. One option was to support the government's cancellation, aligning himself with the administration's public narrative and safeguarding his position, influence, and future career prospects. The other option was to publicly defend the NAIM, drawing on technical evidence and economic analyses to challenge

the decision, but at the risk of political backlash, professional isolation, and long-term damage to his standing within government circles.

These competing paths raised fundamental questions about institutional legitimacy, professional integrity, and the role of technical experts in politically charged decision-making. For months, Rodrigo had worked tirelessly to keep the project on track, navigating contractors, environmental concerns, and public scrutiny. Now, with a single announcement, the new government planned to halt the project—a move that would render years of effort and billions of pesos obsolete. Supporting the government would preserve his political future but contradict his belief in long-term strategic planning; opposing it would defend the project's merits but jeopardize his career.

Standing in his office overlooking Mexico City, Rodrigo understood that his choice would shape not only the future of the airport project but also his identity as a leader. The alternatives before him were stark, and the consequences irreversible.

Box 1 – Understanding Institutional Pressures and Framing Effects

Institutional Pressures
Leaders operate within systems shaped by multiple types of pressure:

- **Coercive pressures** stem from formal authority (e.g., political superiors or legal frameworks).
- **Normative pressures** come from professional standards, ethics, or sectoral expectations.
- **Mimetic pressures** arise when individuals imitate how others behave under uncertainty, especially in ambiguous or high-risk situations.
  These pressures often shape behaviour even when not formally codified—and may push leaders in different directions.

Framing Effects
Framing refers to how people interpret and respond to a situation based on how it is presented. For instance, describing a cancelled project as a "corruption clean-up" vs. "waste of public investment" evokes very different reactions—even if the facts are the same. Leaders must be aware that how a choice is framed in public discourse can strongly influence legitimacy, support, and perceived meaning.

His advisors, friends, and mentors offered conflicting counsel. A senior colleague warned him, "Rodrigo, you're young. You have your entire career ahead of you. Don't throw it all away

over one project, no matter how big it is." On the other hand, a mentor from his university days reminded him, "Your name will be attached to this, whether you like it or not. People will remember what you stood for."

Rodrigo considered going public, presenting data that would challenge the government's rationale for cancellation. He could argue that the sunk costs of NAIM far outweighed the potential benefits of the Felipe Angeles airport alternative, citing reports from international consultants and economists. But doing so would put him in direct conflict with the president, a leader known for consolidating power and sidelining dissenters.

Alternatively, he could draft a carefully worded statement of support, focusing on how GACM would align with the administration's vision of austerity and decentralization. Privately, he could work to mitigate the impact of the decision and ensure the Felipe Angeles airport adhered to the highest standards. While this might preserve his standing, it would also require compromising his ethical standards.

The decision weighed heavily on Rodrigo. He stayed late at the office, pouring over spreadsheets, memos, and feasibility studies. Each option carried risks and rewards, and the consequences would shape not only his career but also the future of Mexico's infrastructure development.

As the night wore on, Rodrigo drafted two letters: one of resignation, to be delivered if he chose to go public, and one of support, should he decide to fall in line. He placed them side by side on his desk, knowing that the choice would define him—not just as a manager but as a leader. With dawn approaching, Rodrigo leaned back in his chair, his thoughts torn between ambition, principle, and the weight of responsibility. The city outside his window seemed endless, a reminder of the millions of lives impacted by his decision.

Box 2 – What happened after the NAIM's cancellation

When the New Mexico City Airport (NAIM) was cancelled in late 2018, the government promised that congestion at Benito Juárez International Airport (AICM) would be addressed through a dual-airport strategy: maintaining AICM while building Felipe Ángeles International Airport (AIFA) at Santa Lucía. The decision was framed as a triumph of austerity and sovereignty, but reality proved more complex.

AICM, already saturated, continued to struggle. By 2025, regulators had to reduce flight slots from 52 to 43 per hour to manage delays and safety risks. Meanwhile, AIFA opened in 2022 with ambitious expectations but faced slow adoption due to its remote location and poor connectivity. Despite these hurdles, AIFA has been able to handle over 5 million passengers by late 2024. Despite this, it is associated to a steep price tag, with construction costs totalling around USD 4.94 billion and cumulative operational losses (2022–23) of over $87 million USD. Furthermore, it still requires Federal subsidies, which have been over $136 million USD). Cargo operations were shifted from AICM to AIFA, boosting its logistics role, though passenger utilization remains modest. A setback arrived in late 2025, when the U.S. Department of Transportation banned all flights from AIFA to the United States, constraining it to regional and non-U.S. international routes. This curb significantly undermined its credibility as an international hub.

Today, Mexico City's air traffic remains a balancing act. AICM operates under tighter restrictions, while AIFA relieves some pressure but has not fully solved the congestion problem. The promised transformation is still "in progress," underscoring a key lesson: high-stakes infrastructure decisions leave legacies that are political, operational, and deeply human. Leaders act under uncertainty, and their choices ripple far beyond the moment of decision.

Discussion Questions

Given the difficult decision imposed on Rodrigo Montes de la Vega, consider the following questions:

1. How might Institutional Theory explain Rodrigo's reluctance to abandon the NAIM project, despite increasing political pressure? What institutional forces are likely shaping his decision?
2. If Rodrigo decides to resist the cancellation, how can he maintain legitimacy within a shifting institutional environment? What strategies could he use to balance professional identity with political adaptation?
3. Rodrigo is aware that supporting the NAIM may now conflict with dominant political narratives - but abandoning it could compromise professional values and sectoral legitimacy. How can leaders act when institutional logics are in conflict?

Box 3 – Key Concepts Glossary

Institutional Logics: Institutional logics are sets of rules, values, and expectations that guide behaviour within a social system. For example, political leaders may be guided by logics of electoral legitimacy, while engineers and planners follow professional standards and norms of long-term planning and technical excellence. These logics often coexist—but sometimes they come into conflict, as in Rodrigo's case.

Legitimacy: Legitimacy refers to being perceived as appropriate or credible within a given system. Leaders often seek legitimacy from multiple audiences—such as the government, professional peers, and the public—and may experience tension when these sources of legitimacy are misaligned.

Decision Space: This term refers to the range of actions realistically available to a decision-maker, given external constraints, internal norms, and how different options are perceived. While a leader may technically have multiple options, framing and institutional pressures can make some choices much harder to take without loss of credibility or trust.

Additional Discussion Questions (only if the teacher chooses to use the Framing Theory):

4. In what ways did the public framing of NAIM's cancellation shape Rodrigo's decision space? How can leaders challenge dominant narratives when those narratives conflict with technical or institutional values?

5. If Rodrigo chooses to support the government's position, how can he reframe the project shift in a way that maintains credibility and aligns with the new institutional logic?

6. How can understanding both Institutional Pressures and Framing Theories help leaders like Rodrigo navigate public decision - making? What safeguards could be implemented to promote better governance under conflicting institutional logics?

Legal Disclaimer

This case study is based on publicly available information regarding the cancellation of the New Mexico City International Airport (NAIM) project. While it incorporates accurate descriptions of the broader context and events, certain elements, such as names (e.g., Rodrigo Montes de la Vega) and specific scenarios, are entirely fictional. These fictional components are included solely for didactic purposes to foster discussion and critical thinking in an academic setting.

The case is not intended to represent factual events, reflect the views of any individuals or organisations involved, or convey any political stance. The author explicitly disclaims any responsibility for false representations, misinterpretations, or unintended inferences drawn from the use of this material.

This case study should be used exclusively as an educational tool in the context of classroom learning, workshops, or related activities. It is not designed for publication, dissemination, or application beyond these purposes without appropriate permissions and context.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or real-world organisations and decisions is purely coincidental. Users are encouraged to approach the material critically and responsibly, acknowledging its fictional and pedagogical nature.

Appendix 1 – The Governance of GACM

Airport Group of Mexico City (GACM) is a majority state-owned company responsible for building, managing, operating, and exploiting the Mexico City New International Airport (NAIM), in accordance with the concession title granted by the Federal Government and published in the Official Gazette on January 26, 2015 (GACM, 2018b). The Board of Directors was integrated by representatives from the Ministry of Communications and Transports; The Ministry of the Interior; The Ministry of Finance and Public Credit; The Ministry for Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development; The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources; Ministry for Tourism; Ministry of Economy; The National Water Commission; Airport and Auxiliary Services; and the Ministry of Civil Services (see Figure 3 below). The exact information on how long their mandates last is not explicitly stated in public information, but it is often tied to administrative decisions of the Federal Government. The terms usually coincide with changes in Government administration (6 years after presidential elections).

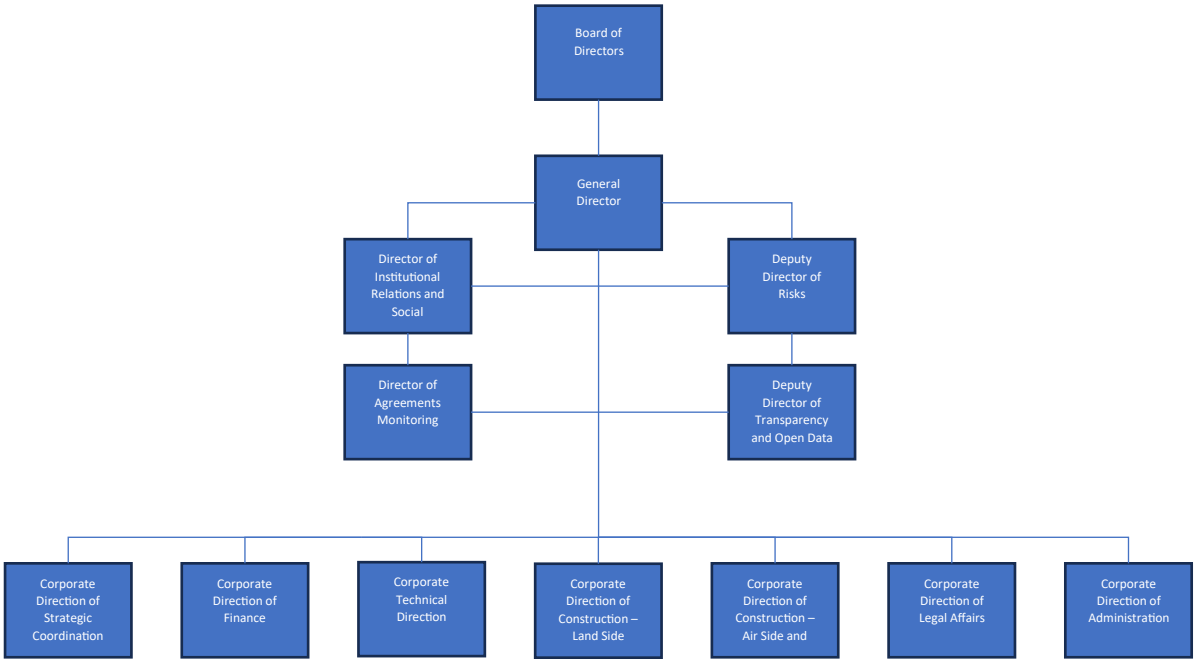

Figure 3: GACM Organisational Structure

Caption: The figure shows the Organizational chart of GACM (Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México), the entity responsible for NAIM. This structure illustrates the challenge of preserving integrity when legitimacy is fragmented across audiences (Directly related to Learning Objective 2). Leaders within GACM faced conflicting expectations from government authorities, technical experts, and the public, making it difficult to 'do the right thing' when accountability and legitimacy were not unified.

Appendix 2 – The Institutional Framework in Mexico

The United States of Mexico (Mexico) operates as a federal presidential representative republic, characterised by a division of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches (see Figure 4 below). The country is governed by the Constitution of 1917, which provides the legal framework for its federal structure, comprising 31 states and Mexico City. Each state enjoys a degree of autonomy, having its own constitution and government, but must conform to national guidelines (SEP, 2022).

The executive branch is headed by the President of Mexico, who serves as both the head of state and government. The president is elected for a single six-year term, with no possibility of re-election. The role involves substantial authority, including the power to appoint cabinet members, propose laws, oversee national administration, and act as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. From 2012 to 2018, Peña Nieto was the president of Mexico, who initiated the construction of the NAIM project (Proceso, 2014).

The legislative branch is comprised of the Congress of the Union, a bicameral legislature that includes the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. These legislative bodies are responsible for passing laws, approving budgets, and overseeing the president's actions. Deputies and senators are elected through a combination of direct election and proportional representation. The structure of the legislature ensures a balance of power and represents the interests of various political parties and regions. The judicial branch is led by the Supreme Court of Justice, which consists of ministers appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The ministers are tasked with interpreting the constitution and federal laws, ensuring justice across the nation. In addition to the Supreme Court, Mexico has a robust judicial system, including the Electoral Tribunal, which resolves electoral disputes, and the Council of the Federal Judiciary, which oversees the administration of the judicial system (INE, 2024).

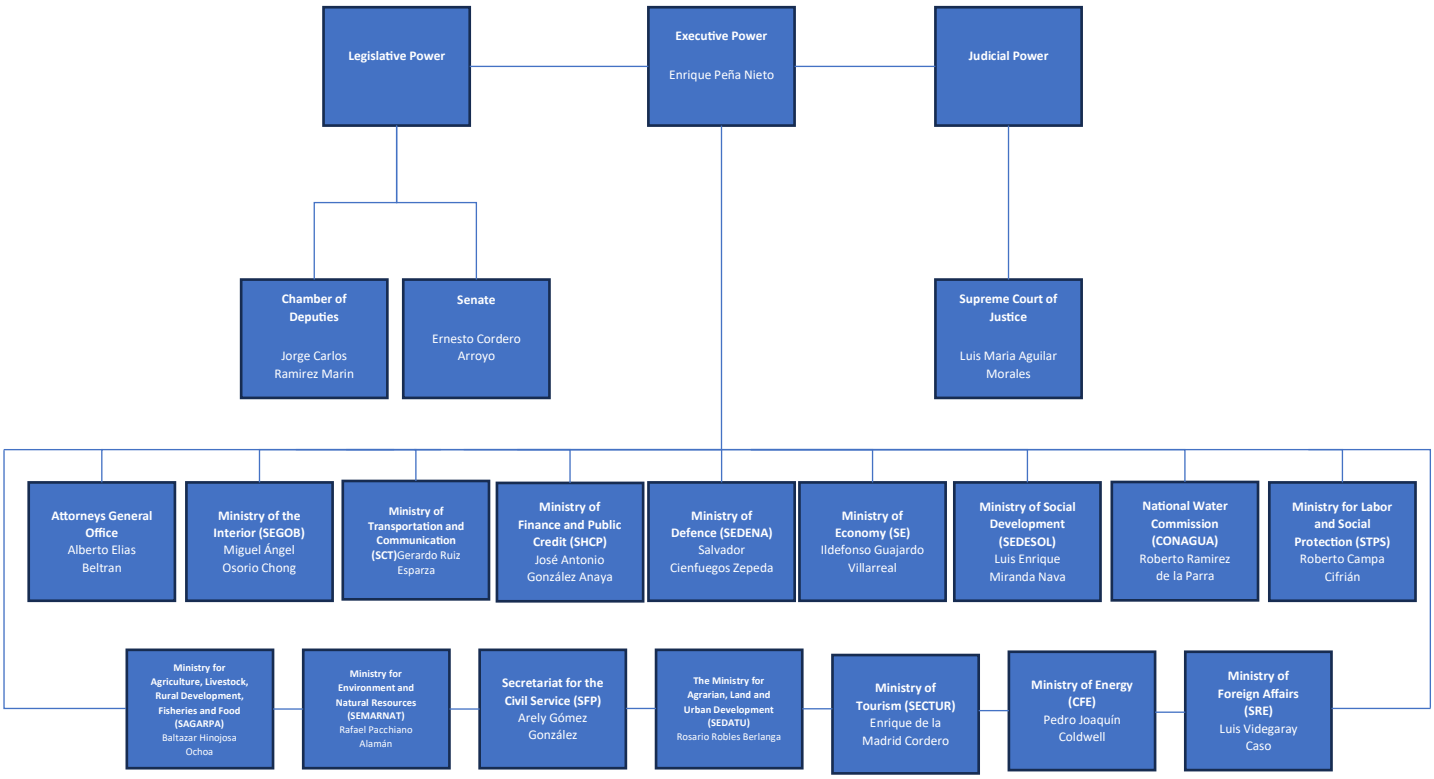

Figure 4: Organigramme of Government Entities in Mexico in 2018

Caption: The figure shows the Organigramme of Mexico's government entities involved in NAIM's decision-making during 2018. This figure illustrates the institutional ambiguity leaders faced (directly related to Learning Objective 3), overlapping authorities and fragmented responsibilities created uncertainty, requiring not just analysis but the ability to take and defend a position amid complex governance structures.

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Further readings

The core readings are intentionally limited and are primarily intended to support students' preparation for in-class discussion rather than exhaustive theoretical coverage. The goal of the pre-reading is to equip students with shared conceptual vocabulary that enables meaningful debate, interpretation, and decision-making during the class session. The optional readings are provided for instructors or advanced students who wish to deepen the theoretical discussion. They are not required for case preparation.

Institutional Theory:

Core Readings (required for classroom discussion):

1. DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American sociological review*, *48*(2), 147-160.
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Optional Further Readings (for instructors or advanced courses):

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3. Sekasi, J., Harrod, S., & Andrade, V. (2025). Managing Institutional Complexity in Megaprojects: A Comparative Framework for Improving Project Performance. *Available at SSRN 5354955*.
4. Zhang, H., Cong, C., & Chakraborty, A. (2022). Exploring the institutional dilemma and governance transformation in China's urban regeneration: Based on the case of Shanghai Old Town. *Cities*, *131*, 103915.

The Framing Effect:

Core Readings (required for classroom discussion):

1. Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). *The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice*. Science, 211(4481), 453–458.

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3. De Martino, B., Kumaran, D., Seymour, B., & Dolan, R. J. (2006). Frames, biases, and rational decision-making in the human brain. *science*, *313*(5787), 684-687.

Optional Further Readings (for instructors or advanced courses):

1. Sanz-Llopis, J., & Ostermann, M. (2020). Innovation in project management through framing and challenge redefinition. *International journal of managing projects in business*, *13*(4), 745-766.

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