

Los Carteles de la Droga: Mexican Drug Cartels and the U.S.-Mexico Security Relationship

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Abstract

America in 2014 and beyond faces a serious security threat with both the potential and ability to damage fundamental U.S. values and interests. This paper addresses the state of affairs of Mexican drug cartels as they relate to structural violence, economic impact, and law enforcement failure. Violent cartels undermine Mexico as a nation by corrupting law enforcement, disrupting free commerce, and performing terroristic violence that hold back and threaten the country's ability to prosper, protect citizen rights, and remain a viable international player. This paper seeks to place correctly the activities of Mexican drug cartels into U.S. interests and prescribe a proper American response that fits well into the larger context and priorities of U.S. national security objectives.

Key Words: Drug Cartel, Mexico, United States, Drug Trafficking, Violence, Corruption, Security Threat, Narcotics

Introduction

When one considers issues pursuant to U.S. national security in 2014, immediately they think of Syria, North Korea, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Israel/Palestine. However critical those issues are, Americans in 2014 and beyond must be careful not to overlook an issue with huge potential in the south: Mexico and its violent drug cartels. These cartels, the largest and most powerful of which are responsible for government corruption, kidnappings, and violent killings, have dominated the landscape of structural violence in Mexico and Latin America for the past 20 years. In this paper, I seek to examine the history and current situation with Mexican Drug Cartels, their implication for U.S. National Security, and how they fit into the larger U.S. strategic national interest. I will use the above to formulate a policy recommendation worthy of consideration by the United States.

Mexican cartels have been ravaging the United States-Mexico border since the days of Prohibition when they ran alcohol across the border to the United States. Today, the cartels are in a more lucrative business with drugs, an illegal industry of cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamines and heroin that accounted from somewhere between \$17 and \$38 billion in proceeds from sales in the United States alone in 2009. Drug earnings and cartel violence are positively correlated. As earnings rise, violence increases, as there is more business to fight over between the cartels and against law enforcement (Kellner and Pipitone, 29-37).

The correlation is evident in data gathered since the turn of the millennium. Simply put, earnings have risen in recent years. According to Barry R. McCaffrey, drug consumption in the United States doubled from 2002 to 2009 and is expected to keep growing. McCaffrey also points out that 8.3% of Americans use illegal drugs (McCaffrey, 5). With consumption

Mexican Drug Cartels

continuing to rise, the problem of the drug cartels and violence is expected to worsen in the twenty-first century before improving. However dire the situation today, examples in history can inform and teach about how the cartels behave and how they both act in differing situations and respond to attempted enforcement.

Historical Background & U.S. Involvement

The major entrance of the U.S. into the conflict came in 1984, when Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) Agent Enrique Camarena was taken, tortured, and killed by the Tijuana cartel after being involved in an investigation against them. This event served to make the drug cartels an issue of national security for the United States. Camarena's death highlights the effects of corruption within the drug cartels and the government. The reason that Tijuana was able to find Camarena is because the Mexican government gave away his location to the cartel leadership as part of a corrupt deal. This is a trend that has only continued within Mexican law enforcement, and continues to have dangerous implications for U.S. law enforcement officials and citizens near the U.S.–Mexican border.

Prior to the entrance of Felipe Calderón in late 2006, the Mexican government was in the wake of a decade-long drug war between drug lords. The previous leader, President Vicente Fox, took what Kellner and Pipitone call, a “relatively soft approach” to stopping the violence. However, when Calderón entered, the game changed when the then new president sent in 6,500 troops to stop the violence. Many of the troops were killed but the rest were largely being bought off with cartel drug money (Deal, 1).

In short, Calderon's harsh approach in 2006-2007 was to little, if not any, avail (McCaffrey, 31). Since 2006, the cartels have been responsible for over 60,000 deaths, including law enforcement, civilians, journalists, and politicians, only to become more outward and confident in their violence (Morris, 30). For example, in 2009, 40 gunmen with grenades and automatic rifles attacked a police station in San Francisco de los Romo. The attackers killed two officers and wounded three, while the mayor was inside at a security meeting (Kellner and Pipitone, 34). These attacks often happen in broad daylight, as the cartels have become increasingly emboldened over the years with their newfound political and military clout.

The problem of the drug cartels must be examined within the context of the economic relationship between the United States and Mexico. Security of resources, both natural and manufactured, is critical to the interest of U.S. national security for domestic and international operations. The United States must maintain access. McCaffrey points out that Mexico is the twelfth largest economy in the world and is responsible for one-third of the U.S. imported oil. In addition, 18,000 companies have direct investment in the United States and are responsible for 47% of Mexico's direct investment. Finally, Mexico is the source providing half of our 12 million undocumented illegal immigrants that cross the border to work agricultural jobs and other low-income employment. Over 1 million people cross the border into the United States daily (McCaffrey, 4). Therefore, it is obvious that the U.S. has a vested interest in maintaining productive economic ties and seeking to keep Mexico as a viable and stable state with their government in control.

The alternative would be catastrophic. If drug cartel violence were to grow to such a level that middle class workers seek refuge and abandon their jobs across the border or in Mexico's domestic sector, the U.S. could lose a critical part of its industry, leading to decreasing imports, less temporary employment, and foreign divestment out of their fear of violence. To a

certain degree, this process has already begun. Because of the violence, in 2006, many middle-class working professionals began to leave behind their jobs and find refuge in either the U.S. or Canada for fear of the cartels. For example, 200,000 people left the city of Juarez that year, fearing for their lives amidst conflict between the cartels and Mexican law enforcement (McCaffrey, 4). There are serious economic considerations to be analyzed when evaluating the implications of Mexican drug cartels in the context of the U.S.-Mexico security relationship due to America's vested interests in a stable and productive Mexico.

The above historical examples highlight that the core mechanisms used by the drug cartels are corruption and terrorism/violence. Mexican cartels will stop at nothing to ensure that their drug running corridors remain intact. Their primary mechanism is paying off the law enforcement, and alternatively, dismantling police enforcement by violence. Jessica Keralis asserts that in doing this, cartels can effectively challenge the authority of the Mexican government and keep their drug running business afloat (Keralis, 31).

Current State of Affairs

Here we will examine the situation as it stands today in 2014. The issue of the drug trade is one that has not gotten any better, but has only continued to worsen in Mexico. The cartels are expanding both north and south, leaving the U.S. and countries in Central America to feel threatened by the possibility of spillover violence (Keralis, 31). The current situation with Mexican drug cartels is that of a domestic war of 45,000 Mexican troops engaging with the cartels. The violence centers on the five main Cartels, with two fueling the majority of crime. These two are Sinaloa and Los Zetas' Gulf Cartel. Of particular interest to the United States currently is Los Zetas. The cartel has linked up with numerous American and foreign criminal paramilitary groups. They are connected with U.S. gangs in major cities, including many in Houston and Dallas, Texas (Kellner and Pipitone, 32). This should be of interest to the U.S., as the same degree of violence must be put down if the spillover begins to take more serious shape than just connection.

Today, the cartels are very well equipped militarily. According to Barry R. McCaffrey, the Mexican authorities are getting "outgunned" because the cartels have:

Platoon-sized units employing night vision goggles, electronic intercept collection, encrypted communications, fairly sophisticated information operations, sea-going submersibles, helicopters and modern transport aviation, automatic weapons, RPG's, anti-tank 66 mm rockets, mines and booby traps, heavy machine guns, 50 cal sniper rifles, massive use of military hand grenades, and the most modern models of 40mm grenade machine guns (McCaffrey, 5).

Without the ability to outgun them, the Mexican government has to find creative solutions to solve the problem.

The amount of violence that the Mexican cartels inflict is staggering. According to the Mexican newspaper *Reforma*, drug-related murders numbered 6587 in 2009, which is an increase in over 1300 from 2008 and 2275 in 2007 (Kellner and Pipitone, 32). More recently, the cartels have taken over entire towns, driving people out of their home and community with violence. We see this phenomenon in the case of the city, Aguascalientes. For many years, the town was seen as a beacon of prosperity with much foreign investment and a great law enforcement

Mexican Drug Cartels

system. However, Los Zetas arrived in August 2007 and began to murder police officers, thereby undercutting the law enforcement mechanism and taking over the town. Specifically, Los Zetas is also famous for their kidnapping. They will take children and get ransom money from the parents to raise easy money (Kellner and Pipitone, 33-34). Mexico is on the brink of becoming what is known as a narco-state, or a state that is run by the drug trade.

Threatening American Values and Interests

Clearly, the drug cartels are having an enormous impact on Mexico, and have begun to seep across the border. If America does nothing about the rising situation in Mexico, the implications could be that Mexico's drug cartels begin to create refugees in each town they enter, as has been seen in Aguascalientes. Losing more of the middle working class could displace the current and/or future workforce in the oil industry or any other industry. The violence is more horrific than ever. The city of Juarez has a death rate of 165/100k, which is 4 times higher than Baghdad (Kellner and Pipitone, 37). The United States has too much to lose with the economic co-dependency and the proximity for conflict and terrorism.

When one places Mexico into the grand strategy of the United States' National Security, the situation in Mexico has to be put on the list of U.S. world priorities. In a comparison with the situations in the Middle East of Iraq and Afghanistan, Mexico appears more important, given the potential for economic disaster noted above. In addition, one factor to consider is the opportunity cost of intervening in Mexico versus intervening somewhere else, for example Syria. The United States has more at stake to lose in Mexico than it does in Afghanistan, but not in Syria. The Syrian refugee problem should take priority over Mexico because large amounts of people are dying due to the civil war taking place. The situation in Mexico, pursuant to U.S. national security, should assume a position between that of Afghanistan and Syria in terms of importance due to the great economic impact, and more importantly, the proximity it has to the United States.

Finally, the best course of action to pursue in Mexico would be a three-pronged, multi-year approach that would seek to tackle Mexican drug Cartels from three angles: economic growth, law enforcement, and political centralization/prioritization. First, attacking the supply of young people to be recruited into drug cartels is a good start. Advertising campaigns against it, as well as reforming the public school system to include a higher quality education that is mandatory for all students, would ensure proper exposure to a life away from drugs and the cartels, showing each student how they can succeed in a wholesome way with less risk of being killed in a drive-by shooting or kidnapping. This, coupled with an employment initiative would strengthen the economy. A new workforce has to be coupled with new jobs. Providing tax incentives for small business and foreign direct investment would encourage employment.

Secondly, law enforcement needs to be strengthened with a new strategy that has not been tried before. A renewed integrity of law enforcement is vital to preventing the corruption of military and police who are going after the cartels. Traditionally, the strategy has been either to go from the bottom-up or from the top-down. The bottom-up strategy is that police will start with the small grunt cartel workers and work their way up as they extract information. This undercuts the cartels by not being able to distribute their product as effectively and causes them to seek out recruits, where police and military meet them. The top-down strategy seeks to go after the leadership, causing the entire chain to fall apart from the top, as those at the bottom have no guidance. However, perhaps the middle of the cartel is the best place to attack because

they are easier to find than the top leaders, yet more difficult to replace compared to the low level followers because they are needed for operations. The United States should lead Mexico in strategies to professionalize the police and attack the middle level operations to slow down the cartels.

Thirdly, Nieto's government needs to have greater political centralization and prioritization in attacking the problem. There should be a single point of contact in his government to manage the ongoing U.S. Merida Initiative, the security cooperation to stop narco-trafficking, in which the U.S. provides monetary aid and guidance. Furthermore, the point person on the operations needs to centralize local leaders and train them all in accordance with the law enforcement recommendations above, while catering each slightly to the locality to account for situational variance. With prioritization, more resources should go to attack the cartel groups that are the most violent, Sinaloa and Juarez, first. Resources cannot be thrown at the problem, but must be placed strategically to stop the most violent crime first.

Finally, the success in Colombia provides a good model to follow and a good way to measure effectiveness. The United States and Mexico should seek to "Colombianize" their programs and have a plan to gradually allow the Mexican Government, after a 5 year guidance with a contingency plan for 3 more, to take over completely their own enforcement. This, according to State Department officials, means that the programs should be run almost exclusively by Mexico's own resources and employ a focus on institutionalizing local leadership. Furthermore, there are 6 lessons to be learned from the Columbian success (*Security Cooperation in Mexico: Examining the Next Steps in the U.S.-Mexico Security Relationship*, Brownfield). In measuring the success of this new initiative, State Department officials testifying before the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs in June 2013 suggested that the United States can measure success by observing Mexican public confidence in government institutions, the degree to which law enforcement personnel are doing their jobs, employment statistics, number of judicial cases resolved, and finally the number of pretrial sentences, a figure that suggests corrupt deals made in court (*Security Cooperation in Mexico: Examining the Next Steps in the U.S.-Mexico Security Relationship*, Chairman). However, 2-3 years is required with inputs like these before any conclusions can be made about their effectiveness. The public and government will need time to catch on, which is why the U.S. will stay for five years with a plan for an additional three. Employing the three-prong strategy will enable the Mexican government, through U.S. guidance, to begin to change the culture of how they fight the drug cartels by defeating them structurally with incentives and stricter enforcement that will slow down cartel activities and make those thinking of joining a cartel think twice due to the high opportunity cost.

Conclusion

In closing, the history and the current situation of the drug cartels in Mexico show that the two main problems to tackle are corruption and violence, however, the traditional approaches of outgunning them in conflict, as former president Felipe Calderon attempted, or trying to undercut them from the top or bottom will not work to dismantle them. A fresh and thought-out approach, made from examining closely how the cartels operate and responding at the most vulnerable point, is necessary. The U.S has a highly vested interest in maintaining stability in Mexico from an economic standpoint. The implications for the situation going sour are disastrous. A former drug czar named McCaffrey said it best when he told Congress, "The stakes in Mexico are enormous. We cannot afford to have a narco-state as our neighbor"

Mexican Drug Cartels

(McCaffrey, 3). Mexico has proved over time that it cannot handle the situation alone and it will require more than just pumping money in. Structural change and law enforcement training is necessary. Because the cartels regularly overpower the law enforcement in personnel and weaponry, a one-dimensional strategy will be ineffective. The plan above to attack it from economic, political, and law enforcement angles will work together in order to increase the opportunity cost of being involved in one of the drug cartels with harsh consequences and other attractive employment available. The biggest overall problem that is holding back law enforcement progress is two-fold: corruption and motivation. In corruption, the government must have confidence in its ability to enforce its laws and not permit anyone to slip through the cracks of the justice system by bribes and threats. The drug problem is powerful enough to affect the viability of the state government in years to come. Mexico must begin a strategy like Columbia, fusing U.S. involvement with initiatives that have proven to be effective. The U.S. must serve as the motivation for Mexico by employing the comprehensive plan, effectively communicating that cartels will not become the status quota, and gradually giving full responsibility to the Mexican government in the next five to eight years with planned check-ups.

Solving this two-fold problem with a new and fresh three-pronged approach fits well within the context of U.S. security policy. The repercussions of ignoring the problem are presently underestimated. It is critical to U.S. national security for the government to act on dismantling the drug cartels in Mexico, in order to protect civilians from structural violence spilling over the border and ensure prosperous and mutually beneficial commerce between the two countries for years to come.

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