

Tentative Steps in the Mexican Drug War

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“If the car in front of you stops, do not use the horn, do not attempt to drive past, do not shout out of your window, [a pause] if you do, the man inside might shoot you” a young woman matter-of-factly told me in 2011, in northern Zacatecas, Mexico.

Since a 2006 crackdown by the Calderon government against drug cartels operating within Mexico, some estimates put the death toll as high as 120,000.¹ Despite staggering statistics such as these and multiple acts of public brutality, the conflict - and its severity - remains a relative unknown in the West.

It is therefore encouraging to hear President Nieto state that this year that homicide levels have fallen 25% from 2012-levels. However, declarations such as these are being met with scepticism. It is argued these claims do not correspond with official statistics,² atrocities continue to be committed,³ the state of Michoacan is in a state of anarchy, filled with vigilante groups who have attempted to fill the security void left by the state.⁴

This is another example of the Nieto administration's understandable campaign to project an image of a more secure and (most

¹ Le Monde, August 23, 2012, [Link](#)

² In Sight Crime, April 11, 2014, [Link](#)

³ The New York Times, June 30, 2014, [Link](#)

⁴ BBC, May 10, 2014, [Link](#)

importantly) investment-friendly Mexico. However, despite some successes under the current administration, the conflict remains intense and ongoing.

This is not time for the already limited international attention and action on the crisis to drift, but for international community to seize upon these limited gains and push for more.

I. Background

In 2006, the Calderon government launched an aggressive crackdown against the multiple drug cartels operating in Mexico. The escalation of the conflict against these groups, whose trade is often supplemented with extortion, kidnapping, prostitution and murder, led to a dramatic increase in deaths and violence. The number of people defined as 'missing' is a staggering 26,000.⁵ The state also remains one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist.⁶

The Calderon strategy was a dramatic response to a drug trade flourishing amidst weak and/or corrupt state institutions, including the police and judicial services. This strategy focused on a significant increase in the use of the military to directly combat cartel operations, and in some cases completely replace ineffectual local authorities.

This strategy had some successes in symbolic

⁵ The Economist, June 14, 2014, [Link](#)

⁶ For an excellent background on the conflict, please see: Council on Foreign Relations, March 5, 2014, [Link](#)

seizures of drug and weapon stockpiles, and a series of high-profile arrests of cartel leaders. However, it had the disastrous effect of splintering the cartels into multiple warring groups, leading to a virulent increase in violence.⁷ Hundreds of politicians have been killed for not cooperating with local gangs. Secretary of the Interior, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong demonstrated that despite doubling the resources dedicated to security, levels of crime, homicides and operating cartels have wildly increased.

In one particularly poignant example of this escalation, the city of Ciudad Juarez on the US-border has been labelled as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, where morgues ran out of space for the mounting number of dead.⁸ The military and federal police dispatched to stabilise the situation have had many of their senior commanders arrested for direct collusion with cartels. In one case, the federal police arrested their own commander at gunpoint.⁹

Worryingly, the elevated role of security forces has seen a commensurate increase in corruption levels. In one case, the entire police force in the troubled city of Veracruz was disbanded and replaced by Marines to take over policing operations.¹⁰ Furthermore, the increased use of the Marines is a response to the rising corruption levels in the Army, previously viewed as less

corruptible than police forces.¹¹

This has had a knock on effect for broader human rights protections in Mexico. Military and police forces often carry out operations with impunity, and Human Rights Watch claim they have been responsible for torture, intimidation, murder and contribute to the dangers facing journalists and human rights activists.¹² Situations where all suspects are indiscriminately killed – often along with civilians – without any further investigation, are common.¹³

II. Policies Under the Nieto Administration

In the face of the abject failure of the campaign waged under the Calderon administration, the Pena Nieto government, which came to power in 2012, has attempted to alter this national drug crime strategy. The administration has refocused military and police action from direct targeting of cartels to protecting civilians from their operations, and the associated kidnapping, extortion and murders.

Despite this shift in focus, there have also been some very notable successes in arresting high profile cartel chiefs. This notably includes the most wanted leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán of the Sinaloa Cartel (arrested February 2014), Los Zetas leader Heriberto "El Lazca" Lazcano (killed October 2012) and his replacement,

⁷ The Guardian, December 19, 2012, [Link](#)

⁸ NBC News, March 8, 2009, [Link](#)

⁹ BBC, August 9, 2010, [Link](#)

¹⁰ The Guardian, December 22, 2011, [Link](#)

¹¹ The New York Times, May 29, 2012, [Link](#)

¹² Human Rights Watch, World Report 2013, [Link](#)

¹³ CBS News, July 8, 2014, [Link](#)

Miguel Angel Trevino (arrested July 2013).¹⁴ These successes are attributed to a centralisation of security operations under the interior ministry and judicial reform.¹⁵

Indeed, on the ground one can identify a significant difference between the Mexico of 2011 and 2014. Whereas Federal Police and Army would usually be witnessed only in heavily armed convoys patrolling through cities and towns, they now form a ubiquitous presence on the streets. Across all branches, the numbers of Municipal, State and Federal Police seem significantly higher in populated areas.

In one instance, after seeing a significant number of elite marines grouped in Zacatecas, North-Central Mexico, one soldier informed me they were, “here to protect someone important, I think, or maybe just watch the streets, I do not really know.” Either way, the unit was stationed down-town for several weeks.

For many Mexicans, perceptions of these change are positive, and welcomed. Reports of mass-killings seem less common and the elevated presence of security forces in civilian areas is encouraging. This said, these positive developments should be seen steps towards better control of the violence, opposed to furthering a resolution to the conflict, which remains as vicious as it was a few years ago.

¹⁴ BBC, February 10, 2014, [Link](#)
BBC, February 24, 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁵ Shirk, David A., '2013: The State of Security in Mexico', Wilson Center, [Link](#)

III. Dangers of resting on laurels

Indeed, most commentators argue the most notable feature of the Nieto government's attitude to security is a reluctance to discuss it. David Shirk shows that, in contrast to the Calderon administration, President Nieto's government is “obsessed with not being obsessed with security”.¹⁶ This policy is understandable, with reference to the deleterious effect the drug war has had on Mexico's economy, particularly in deterring investment.¹⁷

Despite some improvements in the perception of security on the ground, many issue areas remain unchanged from the Calderon administration, such as kidnapping and extortion, which may have even increased as a result of gangs diversifying their criminal activities.¹⁸ Worries regarding declining human rights standards remain prevalent.¹⁹ Mass graves continue to be found.²⁰ Mass killings continue to be reported.²¹

Indeed, despite some shift in focus, observers argue the federal government increasingly takes actions reminiscent of the Calderon strategy, particularly in the use of the military. In many areas Military forces continue to be sent to engage cartels, or to replace ineffective local authorities despite the supposed shift in the security strategy.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Businessweek, June 19, 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁸ In Sight Crime, September 16, 2013, [Link](#)

¹⁹ CBS News, July 8, 2014, [Link](#)

²⁰ BBC, June 19, 2014, [Link](#)

²¹ Vice News, July 2, 2014, [Link](#)

Alejandro Hope, security analyst and former Mexican Intelligence official, believes the government's policy, like that of the Calderon administration, is one which will continue to produce armed confrontations.²² Hope's comments came in reference to a particularly bloody confrontation which left at least 22 dead only a few months ago, but which the Mexican government is reluctant to discuss.²³

In a particularly poignant example in November 2013, the government ordered the military to replace police and customs authorities in the port of Lazaro Cardenas. This is after levels of corruption in regional government institutions had led to what José De Córdoba and Santiago Perez describe as “deepening anarchy” in the state of Michoacán.²⁴ This was an embarrassing case after the governments assurances that they are regaining control of the security situation.

It is argued that actions such as these, in addition to the high profile arrests made under this government, are indicative of a lack of a coherent strategy.²⁵ Indeed, despite the good publicity, the arrests are unlikely to have a wider effect on the conflict, with others in the cartel ready to take control as they have in the past. The risk of splintering a cartel such as the viscous Los Zetas risk an extreme outbreak of intra-gang violence.

IV. 'Deepening Anarchy'

²² The New York Times, July 30, 2014, [Link](#)

²³ Vice News, July 2, 2014, [Link](#)

²⁴ The Wall Street Journal, November 4, 2013, [Link](#)

²⁵ BBC, February 24, 2014, [Link](#)

Multiple developments have demonstrated the fragility of any gains made in the conflict. In the aforementioned state of Michoacán, growing 'anarchy' shows no sign of subsiding, as vigilante groups have risen in significant numbers to combat the cartels, claiming the government had done nothing to prevent extortion, robbery, intimidation and murder from the Knights Templar.²⁶ These vigilante actions have left the cartel a shadow of its former self, but the federal government faces the difficult question of how to control these armed groups.²⁷

After flooding the region with government forces in an attempt to take control of the situation, the government has tried to 'legalise' these groups by inducting them into a newly created 'rural' police force.²⁸ However, many groups refuse to disband, arguing the cartel will simply recover and deliver harsh retribution. This situation is particularly delicate, after one of the vigilante leaders was arrested in March, and there have been some clashes with government forces.²⁹

Fears the state cannot guarantee security appear justified, particularly following a cartel strategy of extensive infiltration of police and political institutions. In June, the state governor resigned after photographs of his son with the leader of the cartel were widely publicised.³⁰ These developments come after claims earlier this year

²⁶ CNN, January 17, 2014, [Link](#)

²⁷ BBC, April 29, 2014, [Link](#)

²⁸ BBC, May 10, 2014, [Link](#)

²⁹ BBC, March 12, 2014, [Link](#)

³⁰ Los Angeles Times, June 18, 2014, [Link](#)

from the government that the situation in Michoacán was “under control”³¹ The situation in Michoacán may be pronounced, but it is by no means unique. Since 2006, major security problems have not been limited to only the most violent regions.

Lack of an effective state monopoly on violence is widely demonstrated. In discussions with a number of people regarding the Northern city of Fresnillo – victim to a battle for control between the Los Zetas and the large Sinaloa cartel – many informed me they did not believe the state would be able to restore order. Instead, they wished for the Sinaloa cartel to assume control, in hoping the less aggressive of the two organisations prevails.³²

The cartels have recognised the benefits of public relations. In Fresnillo, the Sinaloa cartel have taken to assuring the local population they would not target civilians, putting up large posters over highway bridges. The Zetas in return, have openly called for current or former military personnel, promising good wages, protection for their families and food.

Of significant importance, maintaining the vast security apparatus is also of an eye-watering cost to the state. The cost of peacekeeping this year is estimated at 172 billion US dollars (around over

³¹ The Wall Street Journal, November 4, 2013, [Link](#)

³² Of note, there are murmurs that state security forces, on a national level, have been quietly colluding with the Sinaloa cartel, whilst targeting the Zetas particularly stringently. See: National Public Radio, May 19, 2010, [Link](#)

100 billion pounds), which is twice Mexico's foreign debt, and just under 10% of its GDP.³³ Combined with the threat to foreign investment the conflict represents, this is unsustainable.

V. An International Response?

These developments make the emphasis that the Mexican government is placing on recent statistics seem rather two dimensional. Indeed, commentators are very critical of some of the bolder claims of success made by the government.³⁴ There are very good reasons for the government to wish to alter outside perceptions of Mexico. President Nieto has undertaken a series of economic reforms regarded as long-overdue, and generally viewed as positive. A shift in emphasis from the government is reasonable, but de-prioritising the conflict is impossible.

The international community should not see positive developments as a renewed opportunity to push for policies which can support the government's efforts against the Cartels, and in the long-term, policies aimed at significantly de-escalating the drug war.

There has at this point, been little international action – nor attention – on the conflict in Mexico. This is partly due to the notable and historical attachment Mexico places on sovereignty, making it highly unlikely the government would ask for,

³³ Forbes, June 19, 2014, [Link](#)

³⁴ In Sight Crime, April 11, 2014, [Link](#)

or accept, direct assistance.³⁵ However, that is certainly not the limit of assistance the US and EU states can provide.

The US already cooperates with Mexico on security issues, particularly in shared intelligence and operational assistance in targeting senior Cartel members. Despite this, there has been little success in addressing the broader socio-economic problems or weaknesses in state institutions. Furthermore, weapons continue to be transferred from the US to Mexico in large numbers, a significant problem for Mexican security forces.³⁶

This issue was raised during the 2012 US elections, over a disastrous strategy of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) to sell firearms to known cartel members and track their use to then arrest senior-level gang members. The operation ended with 1,400 of 2,000 weapons missing, only to turn up in subsequent crime scenes.³⁷

Support for the Mexican government should not be solely the responsibility of the United States. As the Cartel's internationalise their operations, they are increasingly demonstrated to be growing their operations in Europe. UK police have undergone training in the US following evidence that the Sinaloa has established drug distribution networks in the UK, France and the Netherlands.³⁸

³⁵ CFR Documentary

³⁶ The Guardian, December 8, 2011, [Link](#)

³⁷ CNN, October 14, 2014, [Link](#)

³⁸ The Telegraph, March 9, 2012, [Link](#)

Bargent demonstrates some risk of increased violence and severe difficulties for local law enforcement at this development.³⁹ A number of high-profile cartel leaders have been arrested in Europe in the last few years.⁴⁰

The drug war is not a local, or even regional problem. There is both an interest and an ethical responsibility incumbent upon the West to offer deeper assistance to the Mexican government. This could include assistance in strengthening judicial and security institutions, as well as development programmes aimed at reducing the poverty in a country suffering from substantial inequality.⁴¹ Commentators note vast inequality fuels Cartel activities, as gangs commonly recruit from poverty-stricken communities. With the few opportunities available to many young men, the wealth and power associated with a Cartel is viewed as desirable.

VI. 'Paradigm Shift' in Drug Policy

Many commentators argue a far more important long-term step for the West, and particularly the US, is a frank discussion of how to approach drug policy.

Advocates point to multiple reports demonstrating that a focus on reducing demand, opposed to supply, is far more effective.⁴² Indeed, the Latin American Commission on Drugs and

³⁹ In Sight Crime, February 1, 2013, [Link](#)

⁴⁰ BBC, August 10, 2012, [Link](#)

Forbes, January 10, 2014, [Link](#)

⁴¹ Council On Foreign Relations, March 2011, [Link](#)

⁴² Global Commission Report, June 2011, [Link](#)

Democracy, which included 3 former Latin-American Presidents, has called for a 'paradigm shift' in drug policies away from repressive strategies, towards a health-based approach in combination with some level of decriminalisation.⁴³ Indeed, the World Health Organisation recently released a report which makes a "discreet but clear call" in support of such measures, the first time a UN organ has rejected traditional approaches.⁴⁴

There indeed needs to be deeper thought on how to proceed with regard to both legality, regulation and health provision. Indeed, as a statement 'The war on drugs' is a meaningless phrase which has produced incredibly meaningful consequences, consequences which deserve further introspection from regional governments - and again - especially the US.

With regards to the ongoing debate surrounding legalisation, proponents argue this (and to a limited extent decriminalisation) takes the monopoly on supply away from criminal elements, reducing the violent effects of the drug trade, allowing authorities to focus more on health issues surrounding drug use. Regionally, Uruguay legalised marijuana in late 2013, the first in the world;⁴⁵ and in the United States, Colorado and Washington have voted to legalise, regulate and tax marijuana.⁴⁶ A former Mexican

President, Vicente Fox, has publicly backed drug legalisation.⁴⁷

Whilst this does not necessarily make following this course an immediately applicable solution, President Nieto has declared himself open to debating legalisation, even if he is personally opposed, but any decision would have to be in parallel with US policy to be effective. Indeed, recognising the developments within US states, he has stated "Once California has permitted recreational marijuana, maintaining the ban in Mexico won't be sustainable,"⁴⁸

However, at the US national level, drug policy remains a taboo topic, with no serious debate, despite the federal government being undermined by the aforementioned states on this issue. To not seriously approach such a crucial problem, which has directly contributed to the staggering crisis and atrocities in its neighbour, is damning. The available evidence does not present a simple choice of legality, but that of shifting drug solutions from a supply-based paradigm to a demand-based one, the core focus on which would likely be on public health policy.

The international community should no longer remain oblivious to the staggering human costs incurred by the Mexican drug war. Recent Mexican policy has been a positive step, the conflict remains intense, and leaves a culturally rich, vibrant democracy to suffer in human rights

⁴³ Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, [Link](#)

⁴⁴ The Economist, August 2014, [Link](#)

⁴⁵ BBC, December 11, 2013, [Link](#)

⁴⁶ BBC, November 20, 2012, [Link](#)

⁴⁷ BBC, August 10, 2010, [Link](#)

⁴⁸ In Sight Crime, 2014, [Link](#)

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standards, development and repeated atrocities.

A conflict in the Western world which has incurred a death toll equitable to widely-discussed conflicts like the one in Syria should be a priority on the international community's agenda. Not only is it long-overdue for the US and EU to provide deeper assistance to Mexico, it is shameful that drug policies in the United States, with such wide-ranging implications, are off the political stage.

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