

How to End Mexico's Drug War

Written by Mabel González Bustelo

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Policy Recommendations:

To find a peaceful conclusion to its bloody drug war, Mexico should:

- 1) Focus on long-term state-building efforts, rather than short-term military actions against drug trafficking organisations (DTO).
- 2) Create a coherent strategy to deal with DTO and self-defence organizations and, as an absolute priority, restore law and order and provide citizen security.
- 3) Prioritise security sector reform, as well as addressing failures of the justice system, to reduce corruption, improve governance and accountability and restore citizens' trust in all arms of government.
- 4) Contribute to ongoing international debates about drug policies in the Organization of American States, and in the 2016 Special Drug Policy Session of the UN General Assembly.

Analysis:

One year after Enrique Peña Nieto took office as the new President of Mexico, violence and insecurity are still rampant in the country. The promised changes in the security strategy and new approaches to fight organized crime have been little more than rhetoric and results remain limited. The 'war on drugs' continues amidst widespread human rights abuses and little accountability; security sector reform is stagnated, and new self-defence armed groups have emerged in areas where the rule of law is weak or absent. Mexico will need more than promises to change the course.

One of the first measures of the new Administration was the 'Pact for Mexico', an agreement among the three main political parties with important provisions for security sector reform. An old aspiration to improve coordination among multiple, disperse and in some cases corrupt police forces was agreed upon, as well as a vetting system to reduce levels of corruption. The Pact also encompassed the creation of a new civilian Gendarmerie and resources to address inefficiencies in the justice system. Another element was a \$9 billion commitment for a plan of violence prevention centred in education, poverty reduction and community development.

However, the government has mostly relied on the same security strategies of the past. Military forces still play the key role in the fight against organized crime and abuses remain. The Gendarmerie has been limited to a civilian special force within the Federal Police. By mid-October, the National Public Security Council extended by one year (more) the deadline for purging and certifying local and federal police officers.

Mexico is another collateral victim of the drug war 'balloon effect'. The effort to weaken the Colombian drug cartels included the creation of the South Florida Task Force in 1982 and improvement of aerial surveillance of drug trafficking routes. When the Caribbean routes were effectively closed down, transportation shifted to the Pacific and land routes, and Mexican drug traffickers gained pre-eminence due to their control of the US border. The defeat of Cali and Medellín and decentralization of the drug business in Colombia led to a transformation of the cocaine

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economy with the epicentre and bulk of the business moving to Mexico.

The drug war scaled up in this country under President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) but especially with Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who transformed this policy in the driving force of his Presidency. Corruption and lack of coordination among multiple police forces was resolved by resorting to a militarized approach to fight the drug trafficking organizations (DTO). Thousands of soldiers were deployed to seize drugs, target drug 'kingpins', and take over and secure areas under DTO control.

What resulted was a war against the cartels, and wars among and within them. Destabilization of the market led to fierce competition over routes, territories and local markets, while the detention and sometimes extradition of high profile drug traffickers led to violent struggles for power. The Army, a respected institution though not prepared for internal security missions, became involved in gross violations of human rights. In six years, around 70,000 people died and 25,000 more disappeared amidst soaring levels of violence.

The drug market managed to survive under pressure. Some DTO regained foot while others fragmented, the market became more decentralized and violence spread as a result. They also diversified their range of criminal activities (and sources of profit) to include migrant smuggling, extortion, kidnapping and traffic in arms and chemical precursors, among others. The main groups are heavily armed, have international alliances and ties, and spread their operations and presence in Central American countries. Currently the Sinaloa Federation reigns amidst a decentralized market composed by smaller –but very violent– organizations.

Under Peña Nieto, there have been limited reductions of the murder rates while kidnapping and extortion have soared. Violence and insecurity remain unabated.

An aggravating phenomenon illustrates the failure to regain state power and enforce the rule of law. Self-defence (*vigilante*) groups have arisen in a number of states, although the epicentre seems to be in Michoacán and Guerrero. Thousands of civilians have armed themselves to form self-defence organizations. In October 2013, 1,000 soldiers were deployed to Michoacán when self-defence groups clashed with members of the Knights Templar drug ring (born in 2011 as a break-up of La Familia Michoacana).

In Michoacán, vibrant economic sectors such as agribusiness and cattle owners were subject to extortion, racketeering and kidnapping, as were small businesses and ordinary citizens. The self-defence groups aim to put an end to those practices and recover security. Currently they have taken over 54 municipalities, often with local police evacuated or detained (sometimes amidst accusations of collusion with organized crime).

The citizen response may be understandable in the current circumstances but also illuminates the limits of state power. The expansion of self-defence groups adds a new layer of complexity to an already intractable conflict scene. Some analysts have warned that this movement could anticipate an evolving new dimension, towards a political-military conflict. There is no doubt that territories held by those groups are, such as others under control of organized crime, beyond any state authority.

The federal government has attempted both dialogue with and de-legitimization. But state reliance on self-defence groups is an expression of its inability to guarantee citizen security. Some of them are born of the best intentions, while others may be vulnerable to infiltration by spurious interests. The line that separates self-defence from paramilitary forces is frequently very thin, as Colombian history teaches. The more armed non state groups are at stake, the more possibilities that violence runs out of control.

Mexico cannot afford to address old problems with already failed strategies. Neither to support well-intentioned short-term solutions that may worsen things at later stages. There is no alternative to state building in the long term. The government needs a coherent strategy to deal with DTO and self-defence organizations and, as an absolute priority, restore law and order and provide citizen security. This is a daunting and long term challenge that requires resources and high levels of political will. Security sector reform is urgent, as well as address failures of the justice system and improve governance and accountability.

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But Mexico can do something else. The experience of this country both with the drug trade and the war on drugs makes it a more than legitimate voice to join ongoing international debates about drug policies. Due to the high market value of cocaine (produced only in the Andean region) and the proximity of the main market in the US, Latin American countries have suffered a great range of consequences of the US-led drug war. It has caused militarization, violence, human rights violations, and in some places aggravated state fragility. Now, a number of these countries are ready to take the lead in debates about international drug policies. There are opportunities at the Organization of American States, and in the 2016 Special Drug Policy Session of the UN General Assembly. Mexico has a good option in joining them.

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