

Aiding Insecurity: Four Years of Mexico's Drug War

By Tom Barry

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Mexico's drug-trafficking organizations constitute a threat to regional security and to US national security, says the US government. Yet the region is becoming less secure and less safe as the result of the security emphasis of US counternarcotics initiatives.

The Merida Initiative, signed by President George W. Bush and Felipe Calderon in October 2007, officially launched new US efforts to improve "regional security" through counternarcotics aid programs in Mexico, and, to a lesser degree, in Central America and the Caribbean. [\[1\]](#)

Administered by the State Department, since 2008, the Merida Initiative has allocated US military and criminal-justice assistance to take out the drug- trafficking organizations (DTOs) in the region.

Paralleling this State Department program, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) have launched their own security initiatives along the southwestern border. These border security programs - including the Secure Border Initiative, Southwest Border Initiative, Project Gunrunner and the Alliance to Combat Transnational Crime - complement regional security initiatives by targeting drug flows and DTO smuggling operations at the border.

The accomplishments of these various security initiatives, both at home and across the border, are mixed at best.

Has the Merida Initiative improved regional security?

Certainly not, if measured by levels of drug-related violence, which keep escalating in Mexico, and at an even greater pace in Central America.

Certainly not, if measured by the extent of territory where the governments exercise effective control.

Certainly not, if measured by the quantity of illegal drugs being moved through the region or by the rates of drug consumption.

Spreading Insecurity

In formulating the Merida Initiative, Mexico and the United States [didn't establish any specific benchmarks to measure performance](#) in improving regional security.

But the two governments did agree on a four-pillar strategy to address the perceived security threats to both nations: dismantle criminal organizations, strengthen law enforcement institutions, build a "21st-century border," and build strong and resilient communities - with US funding channeled primarily to support the first two "pillars" in both Mexico and Central America.

In Mexico, the US-assisted war to dismantle the drug cartels has led to increased violence, as the drug-trafficking organizations have escalated campaigns of violence to displace competing groups, at a time when cartel members and associated criminal networks have turned to other violent criminal operations and military and police abuses and killings have surged.

The areas of Mexico effectively controlled by the main DTOs and splinter criminal elements have expanded since Calderon kicked off the drug war in late 2006, despite the unprecedented levels of military deployments in counternarcotics operations.

Central America is considerably less secure and more violent than it was four years ago.

As the result of Mexico's war against the cartels and increased DTO competition for market share, Mexican DTOs have substantially increased their presence in Central America, leaving a wake of horrific violence and eroding the governance capabilities of the Honduran, Guatemalan and Salvadoran governments.

Regional security was the declared goal of the Merida Initiative. Yet, in 2007, there was little discussion within policy circles and among political analysts about the probability that Mexico and the Central American nations might deteriorate into narco-states, failing or failed states. Today, the waves of violence and the DTOs' increased territorial reach have sparked serious discussion about the prospect of failing governments.

Mexico and Central American nations don't face traditional security threats in the form of foreign aggressor nations or internal insurgencies seeking to seize state power. Instead, the ability of governments to project authority - through legitimate force or taxation, for example - is threatened by non-state actors without a political or ideological agenda. Through violence and widespread extortion, DTOs significantly threaten the power of the state as they seek to control territory, or *plazas*, in an effort to maintain or increase their profit levels from drug production and trafficking.

The security threat, therefore, is nontraditional and indirect. It is an organized crime and public safety threat, which has become so grave and widespread as to threaten the very security of the state.

US Security Threatened

Long before it began categorizing drug trafficking as a security threat to the region, the US government had declared that illegal drugs and foreign DTOs constituted a threat to US national security. President Nixon launched the drug war in 1971, and in 1986, President Reagan signed a national security decision directive that formalized the war by declaring that international drug smuggling constituted a national security threat.

With the end of the cold war, the Pentagon and the State Department expanded the then-prevailing framework of national security to include a wide range of nontraditional "transnational threats," including drug trafficking and non-state terrorist organizations. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the institutionalization of the concept of homeland further expanded the notion of transnational threats.

It wasn't, therefore, a major leap in US foreign and military policy for the Bush administration to argue - in the name of national and regional security - that the United States should support the drug war in Mexico through the Merida Initiative.

After nearly four years of this collaboration with Mexico and three years of aid, is the US more secure?

If measured by the security of our southern neighbors, then certainly not. If measured by levels of illegal drug consumption in the United States or in neighboring nations, certainly not.

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The more relevant question, however, is whether US national security was ever threatened by illegal drug consumption and illegal drug flows. The answer is certainly not.

America's national security has never been threatened in any fundamental way by the illegal drug trade. Undoubtedly, the drug trade has resulted in associated violence and crime, as well as in high levels of imprisonment and an array of social ills. But these are better characterized as public safety and public health issues rather than as national security threats.

Unlike in Mexico and Central America (or in South America) - where the drugs are produced,

processed and transited - the DTOs have only a minimal presence in the United States, where the drugs are mainly marketed.

If one accepts the official assessments, dating back to the late 1960's, that the state of US national security can be evaluated to some degree by the volume of illegal drug flows into the country, then US counternarcotics operations have had mixed results.

Virtually all the drugs produced and trafficked in the region flow to networks of criminal groups and gangs in the United States, with varying degrees of direct ties to the Mexican cartels. In response to Mexico's drug war and increased US border control, the Mexican DTOs have increasingly sought drug markets in Europe and diverted drugs into a rapidly growing, albeit comparatively small, domestic market.

Increased border control staffing and infrastructure have resulted in dramatically higher seizures of illegal drugs, mostly marijuana. The DHS and DOJ agencies involved in counternarcotics operations along the border assert that they are targeting transnational criminal organizations and transnational threats, yet they offer little evidence to demonstrate that border security operations have resulted in the apprehension of key DTO figures, or do more than temporarily slow the flow of drugs into the US market.

Although recent figures on drug consumption aren't available, trends through 2008 show marijuana consumption steadily increasing, while US consumer interest in other illegal drugs, particularly cocaine and methamphetamines, has declined.

Crime Rises South of Border, Crime Falls to the North

Fear of cartel-driven violence at home, and especially along the border - in the form of "spillover violence" - has bolstered US public and policymaker support of the Merida Initiative, Mexico's drug war, and increased border security - also for immigration enforcement.

There is little question that increased drug trafficking in Mexico has been associated with a dramatic rise in violent crime, especially since 2006. But there is little evidence showing that increases of Mexico-sourced or Mexico-transited drugs into the United States have led to an increase in violent or felony crime in this country.

Since 1992, serious crime in the United States [has steadily declined](#), even as US population has increased and levels of drug consumption have remained steady or increased. [Murder rates are at an all-time low](#) - lower today than they were in the 1960's, when crime rates began to soar.

Neither the Merida Initiative nor measures taken over the past five years to "secure" the southwestern border can explain this decline in crime rates, since the trend began early in the previous decade.

Spillover violence as a threat to US security and public safety is a myth. Crime rates along the border are among the lowest in the nation - illustrated by the status of El Paso as the country's safest city, even though it sits directly across the Rio Grande from Juarez, the so-called murder capital of the world.

It is, however, likely that the pervasive presence of federal law enforcement along the border contributes to the US border region's low crime rate.

There is no evidence that intensifying inter-cartel violence in Mexico has spilled over the border in the form of increased drug-related violence, whether among the US drug networks or into the general community.

This casts doubts on assertions by some US politicians, state government officials, and other border security hawks, as well as by border security organizations such as the Alliance to Combat Transnational Crime, that the Mexican DTOs are transnational organizations the command structure

and enforcers of which pervade US drug distribution networks.

In summary, there is little doubt that, in the past four years, the Merida Initiative and the Mexico drug war have resulted in dramatically diminished security and public safety in Mexico and Central America.

At the same time, there is little reason to believe that the Mexican DTOs threaten US national security, just as there is every reason to question the 1986 directive stating that foreign counternarcotics operations are necessary to protect US security.

Too Soon to Criticize Merida Initiative and Drug War

Advocates for continuing Mexico's military-led drug war, the Merida Initiative, and associated border security programs could conceivably accept the conclusion that, despite these associated efforts, there is less security and safety in the region. At the same time, they would argue (as Obama and Calderon do) that important progress is being made and that there is no alternative but to continue the drug war.

It's still too soon - after four and a half years of the new military deployments of Mexico's declared drug war, a year or two of restructuring in Mexico's judicial and federal police systems, and a few years of enhanced US-Mexico cooperation and aid through the Merida Initiative - to determine success or failure, they assert.

Moreover, drug war proponents point to indisputable progress toward the primary goal of dismantling the cartels. With the assistance of US intelligence, [21 of the 37 cartel capos](#) on Mexico's most-wanted list are in prison or have been killed by security forces. What's more, several of the cartels are now badly fractured and fragmented.

Another notable hallmark of the Merida Initiative is the closer binational cooperation between the United States and Mexico - a relationship that has historically been characterized by tension and distrust.

As the DHS routinely boasts, the seizures along the southwestern border of weapons, drugs and drug-related cash are at record levels. Both the US and Mexican governments can rightfully argue that the levels and scope of violence in Mexico and in Central America are evidence that drug cartels are under siege and increasingly warring among themselves and turning to other criminal activities as drug trafficking in Mexico becomes difficult and costly.

Within the United States, there is broad bipartisan support for the Merida Initiative, Mexico's drug war and border security buildups.

On the right, especially, there are calls for more border security, and even for reclassifying the DTOs as foreign terrorist organizations, thereby setting the foundation for more aggressive US responses and intervention. Centrist and liberal organizations that do support the Merida Initiative and Mexico's drug war generally call for more US aid for judicial and police reform.

There is growing anxiety, however, among US supporters of the Merida Initiative, as well as among Mexicans who support the initiative and Calderon's drug war, that these efforts will be cut short after Calderon leaves office at the end of next year.

Shannon O'Neil, Latin American affairs expert at the Council for Foreign Relations, argues that the US government must continue its support of the Mexico drug war, and that Calderon's initiatives deserve broad Mexican support. "President Calderon's war must become Mexico's, shouldered by all its citizens and led by its elite," concluded O'Neil in a June 17 [Bloomberg op-ed](#).

Addressing "US-Mexico security cooperation," O'Neil told Congress last year that both countries should muster, "the patience to see this strategy through. If they do, there is a chance ten years from

now that things will be better in Mexico. If they don't, both countries will be facing the same challenges in a decade."

In Mexico, however, there is rising criticism of the US-Mexico drug war strategy, among both the elite and popular sectors.

In the cover article of the June issue of *Nexos*, a traditionally conservative Mexico City magazine, political [analyst Eduardo Guerrero calls for](#) the government to end the "punitive" drug war that targets the cartels and instead begin a "dissuasive" campaign against the crime that has spread across the country as the cartels fragment and its members disperse. Such a campaign, along with civic reforms, would win broad support, he argues.

New Foundation for Regional Cooperation

Although Calderon still enjoys a broad base of popular support, there is rising criticism of the drug war, as seen in the citizens' movement led by the highly regarded poet Javier Sicilia. Marchers in "Caravans of Solace" led by Sicilia chant: "No more blood. We have had enough. This is a country of the dead and disappeared."

Regional cooperation and common strategies are certainly needed to address the scourge of the drug-trafficking organizations, yet many question the wisdom of military-led campaigns against DTOs and the security framework for counternarcotics operations in both Mexico and the United States.

In the two countries, a chorus of drug war critics says that the security paradigm for counternarcotics has repeatedly failed and is tragically failing again in Mexico. A more constructive approach would, they say, focus on public safety and public health, rather than national security.

The challenge is much greater in Mexico. Having decriminalized personal drug possession, Mexico has already turned against the kind of drug prohibition policies advocated by the US federal government.

Whatever Mexico does with respect to drug treatment or legalization, the market for illegal drugs in the United States will continue to bolster organized crime in Mexico with billions of dollars in drug trafficking profits.

The Obama administration would prove a better friend to Mexico if it acknowledged that the Merida Initiative is, at its heart, just another losing battle in the failed 40-year drug war. It needs to end drug prohibition policies and enforcement practices that engender violence and crime both at home and abroad, and at the same time overhaul the failed security framework for its aid and regional cooperation.

By underscoring the "shared responsibility" for Mexico's drug violence, the Obama administration expanded the base for regional cooperation. However, instead of getting to the root of the problem - namely, its own policies - the administration has unconstructively cast the central blame on US drug consumers.

If the federal government began a process of legalization and decriminalization of illegal drugs, along with a new emphasis on treatment and health, the source of DTO profits and the incentives to enter the drug-trafficking business would soon diminish along with the associated violence - even if the level of US drug consumption remained the same or increased.

The Mexican DTOs don't represent the main transnational threat to national security. Instead, the United States faces a transnational threat of its own making - the drug prohibition policies that gave rise to these DTOs in Mexico and elsewhere.

1. The Merida Initiative, signed by Presidents Bush and Calderon, is the State Department's umbrella security program for the region, although the Central American portion of the initiative has its own

name, the Central American Security Initiative, while the involved Caribbean countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic receive US aid under the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative.

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