

Curbing the Drug Trade: A Demand-Oriented Approach

Over the past decade the Mexican drug trade and associated violence has intensified, becoming a pressing national security issue, not just for Mexico, but for the United States as well. While the United States is perhaps justified in devoting manpower and resources to various counterterrorism operations overseas—Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen—it is now time for the United States to address the mammoth drug war being waged in its own backyard. Mexican drug cartels continue to grow in power and influence, yet Mexico's military and police forces are still unable to disrupt their operations to any significant degree. Meanwhile the United States looks on with growing apprehension but without any real solution to this perplexing dilemma.

In order to combat the flow of drugs and arms across the U.S.-Mexico border, the United States needs to adopt a different approach. U.S. policy continues to focus on restricting the drug supply. Although this policy sounds appealing, it is not entirely adequate. Cartels cannot operate without demand from American consumers, and it is precisely this demand for illegal drugs that has been fueling the expansion of Mexican drug cartels in recent years. If the United States does not develop innovative policies to curb demand for illegal drugs within its own borders Mexico's cartels will continue to flourish, and if the cartels continue to grow in size and strength they will eventually pose a grave threat to American national security.

Arresting drug offenders and seizing drug shipments addresses the symptoms of the drug trade, but not the causes. Realistically, the United States will never be able to eradicate every drug production center, interdict every drug shipment, or catch and prosecute every drug trafficker. And even if the number of arrests and seizures increase significantly, the cartels will adapt and find ways to continue their operations while avoiding detection. Trafficking routes can be adjusted and shipping methods can be modified. The lucrative nature of the drug trade ensures that for every trafficker this is arrested there is another willing to take his place.

Whereas the United States has ample money and resources to throw at the drug issue, Mexico does not. Mexico's counternarcotics capabilities are nowhere near what they need to be, in terms of funding and personnel, to mount a serious attack on the cartels. Mexico's underpaid, underequipped, and undertrained police forces are also subject to corruption at every level. As Mexico approaches the status of a failed state, the responsibility for clamping down on the drug trade increasingly lies with the United States.

Addressing the symptoms of the drug trade is merely a stop-gap measure and a temporary fix. A permanent solution must address the root causes of the drug trade. Like any business, the cartels will suffer if their consumer base weakens or if consumer demand shifts. Policymakers can start to curb demand by developing and implementing drug prevention and treatment programs. These programs should target at-risk drug users and convicted drug offenders alike. Ideally, such programs would prevent at-risk populations from entering the drug market altogether. For those Americans who are already struggling with drug addiction, such programs would offer counseling and incentives to quit. Rather than simply punish offenders, America should provide opportunities for them to overcome their self-destructive behaviors. Without proper treatment drug offenders will return to their former lifestyle when their prison sentence is over. However, with proper treatment drug offenders will not be inclined to repeat their earlier mistakes and law enforcement will not have to deal with the same criminals all over again.

Drug prevention and treatment programs have the potential to suppress the drug trade over time, but it will not be easy to sell the American people on the effectiveness of such programs. Programs that target demand will not produce immediate results simply because human behavior is slow to change. Demand for illegal drugs in America will not decrease overnight, and even when it does it will be hard to detect. Americans prefer a counternarcotics strategy that produces instant,

quantifiable results. Americans feel more secure when they read that "x" number of traffickers were arrested or that "x" pounds of contraband were confiscated. Even though America's current counternarcotics strategy produces headlines, it does not represent a death blow for the cartels. Eliminating the drug supply is only one piece to the puzzle. It is time for America to rethink its approach to the War on Drugs. A demand-oriented strategy will require patience and persistence, but ultimately it is the only suitable strategy for defeating the Mexican cartels.

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