

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 28, 2011*): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/ugly-american-strategy-the-growing-us-security-presence-mexi-5080>

Ugly American Strategy: The Growing U.S. Security Presence in Mexico

| [More](#)^[1]

|
March 28, 2011

[Ted Galen Carpenter](#)^[2]

There have been numerous media accounts about the use of Predator drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan—and occasionally in such places as Yemen. But we now find that those deadly unmanned aerial vehicles have also been present in the skies over Mexico for the past two years. It is bad enough that the American people were unaware of that fact, but much worse is that the Mexican people and the Mexican Congress were not told. Washington's insensitive strategy could easily create a surge of ill-will toward the United States south of the border.

Taking such a risk suggests just how worried the Obama administration is that the Mexican government is losing its war against the drug cartels. Such worries may be causing the United States to pressure the government of President Felipe Calderon to accept more direct U.S. involvement in that conflict. Some of the measures are so intrusive that they create considerable controversy inside Mexico and even raise questions about Washington's respect for Mexico's sovereignty.

When the story broke earlier this month that the Predator drones were flying over Mexican territory in an effort to locate suspected drug traffickers and track their movements, the reaction in Mexico was swift and largely unfavorable. What upset critics in Mexico's legislature and much of the news media was that those drones had been operating without anyone outside the Calderon administration being informed. Senator Ricardo Monreal, one of the more left-wing members of the legislature, blasted administration officials as being "timid, weak, servile, and subordinate" in dealing with Washington.

Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa [rushed to quiet the brewing storm](#)^[3], insisting in a hastily called meeting with senators that Mexico's sovereignty had not been compromised. The drone flights, she said, "do not violate [our] sovereignty because they are controlled by the government of Mexico and contribute to its capacity to fight organized crime."

There wasn't much evidence of Mexican government control or even influence regarding the use of the drones, however. It appeared to be a totally U.S.-directed operation. Furthermore, the

Predators seemed to be merely one component of a rapidly increasing U.S. presence in Mexico to wage the drug war. Brad Barker, president of HALO Corporation, a private security firm that was involved in the drone program, may have inadvertently revealed just how extensive Washington's involvement has become. Noting that his firm and others were tracking both vehicles and people in drug-infested areas of Mexico, Barker stated [4]: "There's been a huge spike in agents down there."

Both the U.S. and Mexican governments refuse to divulge just how many U.S. agents are in Mexico to conduct anti-drug activities. But using the Freedom of Information Act, government audits, congressional testimony, and other indicators, the *Associated Press* was able to determine that there were at least "several hundred" operating in that country. And most of that information had been gathered before the February murder of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent Jaime Zapata in northern Mexico, an incident that led to a new surge of U.S. personnel south of the border.

Washington is pursuing a risky strategy, given the renowned nationalist sensitivities of the Mexican public about the "Colossus of the North"—sensitivities that date all the way back to the Mexican War in the 1840s. Political opponents and much of the Mexican public already regard Calderon as a U.S. stooge, and the new revelations about the extent of U.S. security activities in their country are not going to help his reputation.

One just hopes that Washington does not escalate matters by having the deadly Predators launch missiles to take out a reputed drug lord—as has been done routinely regarding suspected terrorists in parts of the Muslim world. The extent of the uproar that such an incident would cause in Mexico, even if there were no collateral casualties among innocent civilians, can scarcely be imagined.

More by

Source URL (retrieved on Mar 28, 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/ugly-american-strategy-the-growing-us-security-presence-mexi-5080>

Links:

[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/ted-galen-carpenter>

[3] <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article>

</ALeqM5gX1khSx96UdEsXVgckoGTrSUUIHA?docId=a3f4761b570447f483b8037d43b07613>

[4] http://articles.sfgate.com/2011-03-19/world/29147751_1_arturo-beltran-leyva-cartel-agents