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Dangerous: Why Did Donald Trump Want To Attack Drug Labs In Mexico?

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More Evidence that Donald Trump Was Dangerously Impulsive on Foreign Policy

– President Donald Trump’s last Senate-confirmed secretary of defense, Mike Esper, has made a shocking charge about the conduct of his boss toward Mexico. In his forthcoming memoir, Esper contends that in 2020, the president asked him at least twice about the possibility of launching missiles into Mexico to “destroy the drug labs” and wipe out the cartels. Trump considered such a drastic step to be justified because Mexican leaders “are not in charge of their own country.”

Trump also allegedly claimed that U.S. involvement in the strikes could be kept secret, stating confidently that “no one would know it was us.” If confronted, the president assured Esper, he said he would just say that the United States had not conducted the attacks. The improbability of being able to conceal U.S. responsibility for multiple strikes by sophisticated missiles possessed by very few other countries was so obvious, Esper stated, that he would have thought it was a joke, if he hadn’t been staring Trump in the face at the time.

Some skeptics might be tempted to dismiss Esper’s allegation as just another attempt by a disgruntled former appointee and prominent member of the foreign policy establishment to discredit Trump’s presidency, especially its “America first” approach to foreign affairs. In this case, though, there are multiple reasons to think that the account probably is accurate. Indeed, on several previous occasions during his presidency, Trump explicitly flirted with the idea of a U.S. military role in curbing Mexico’s drug cartels.

After a 2019 incident in which cartel gunmen massacred a family of American Mormon ex-pats in northwest Mexico, Trump reacted with a tweet contending that “this is the time for Mexico, with the help of the United States, to wage WAR (sic) on the drug cartels and wipe them off the face of the earth. We merely await a call from your great new president!” He added: “If Mexico needs or requests help in cleaning out these monsters, the United States stands ready, willing & able to get involved and do the job quickly and effectively.”

Some of Trump's closest supporters in Congress were openly calling on the White House to adopt a tougher policy, including a military component, against the cartels. In two interviews on *Fox News*, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) warned ominously: "If the Mexican government cannot protect American citizens in Mexico, then the United States may have to take matters into our own hands." Cotton emphasized that "our special operations forces were able to take down [ISIS leader Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi in Syria a couple weeks ago," and they did the same "to Osama bin Laden in Pakistan eight years ago." He added, "I have every confidence that if the president directed them to do so, that they could impose a world of hurt on these cartels."

Trump's 2019 offer of U.S. military assistance to Mexico's president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador was not the first time that he raised the possibility of direct U.S. military involvement in the country's drug wars. Just weeks after entering the White House, Trump adopted a similar stance in a session with then-president Enrique Pena Nieto—and did so in even less cordial terms. "We are willing to help you," Trump stated. "But they [the cartels] have to be knocked out, and you have not done a good job of knocking them out." Trump affirmed that he knew "how tough these guys are—[but] our military will knock them out like you never thought of." The U.S. president assured Pena Nieto that he preferred to assist the Mexican military rather than take direct action, but it was clear that the more menacing alternative existed.

His approach highlighted a tendency for dangerous, impulsive behavior and an attitude of contempt for even friendly governments. That flaw was not confined to policy toward Mexico. The Trump administration's January 2020 drone strike on Iranian General Qassem Soleimani outside Baghdad was a brazen violation of Iraq's sovereignty. The killing of Soleimani (and two influential Iraqi militia leaders) led Iraq's government to pass a resolution calling on the prime minister to expel U.S. forces stationed in the country.

Trump's reaction to the prospect that Baghdad might order U.S. troops to leave was akin to a foreign policy temper tantrum. Even though Iraq was supposedly a democratic partner of the United States, he threatened the country with harsh economic sanctions if it dared to take that step. As Trump put it, "we will charge them sanctions like they've never seen before, ever. It'll make Iranian sanctions look somewhat tame."

Using U.S. military force on the territory of a friendly country against the wishes of that country's leaders was bad enough, even in a distant region. To consider engaging in such reckless arrogance against America's next-door neighbor was highly alarming. Not only Esper's latest allegation, but the earlier documented cases of Trump's flirtation with using U.S. military power in Mexico, confirms that he was a dangerous foreign policy loose cannon during his tenure as president.

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