



Bloodbath in Mexico: Another gift of US drug and drone wars

Washington's failed approaches to foreign policy and counterinsurgency is playing out today in our own backyard.

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Washington's bankrupt drug-war and drone-war initiatives have both come home to roost on America's own southern border. Decades of U.S. policy ineptitude have empowered Mexico's drug cartels to the point that they now pose an alarming threat to the country's basic social order.

Now the violence in Mexico is beginning to exhibit a greater high-tech sophistication. In late April, the Jalisco cartel attacked police in the western state of Michoacan with explosive-laden drones, wounding two officers. It was merely the latest development in just one theater of the country's ongoing chaos.

In this case, two cartels, Jalisco New Generation and its principal rival, New Michoacan Family (or the Viagras), have been battling for control of El Aguaje, a key town in Michoacan. The Jalisco cartel recently staged new attacks in the area, and state police were sent in to restore order. Both cartels then parked hijacked trucks across roads and dug deep trenches across those roadways to keep police convoys out. When police cleared the barriers, the Jalisco cartel responded with the drone attacks.

That episode may be just a glimpse into the next stage of Mexico's drug wars. In exercises, the U.S. Air Force already has incorporated mini-drone technology and attacked targets using swarming techniques. Given their vast financial resources, it is a fairly safe bet that it won't be long before one or more of the drug cartels will be able to obtain the same technology on the black market. Indeed, the El Aguaje incident suggests that they may already have done so.

Mexico's drug violence is worrisome enough without this latest wrinkle. Seven of the ten most violent cities in the world (among those with at least 300,000 people) are in Mexico, including Tijuana (second) and Ciudad Juarez (third), according to an April 2021 report from Mexico's Citizens Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice. Indeed, 18 of the top 50 cities are Mexican.

Mexico's overall homicide numbers have been rising at an alarming rate since 2016, setting a new record of 34,648 deaths in 2019. Despite the government's lockdown policies to combat the Covid pandemic in 2020, the country's homicide toll barely budged — declining by a mere 133

victims to 34,515. That decrease was barely more than the carnage experienced in one typical day.

Neither the U.S. government nor a series of Mexican administrations seem to have a coherent strategy for dealing with this spiraling problem. Washington initially pressed the government of President Felipe Calderon (2006-2012) to make the army the lead agency for combating the illegal drug trade. Calderon responded favorably and launched a military offensive against the drug organizations. That strategy backfired badly, leading to a massive upsurge in violence, including pitched battles between the Mexican army and heavily armed cartel enforcers.

The outcome was an unprecedented rate of 24 homicides per 100,000 people in 2011, compared to 10 per 100,000 before Calderon's offensive began. However, even the extent of the bloodletting in 2011 now seems like the "good old days" compared to the recent levels of more than 29 homicides per 100,000.

Although Calderon's approach clearly did not work, the contrasting strategy that current president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has adopted seems to have been equally ineffectual. Lopez Obrador has tried to avoid armed confrontations with the cartels, in effect seeking a de facto truce with those organizations and adopting new social welfare spending programs to lure economically hard-pressed Mexicans away from cooperating with drug traffickers.

His strategy, which he labeled one of "hugs, not bullets," has drawn intense criticism from sources in both the United States and Mexico. The elevated homicide rates during Lopez-Obrador's first two years in office cast considerable doubt on the wisdom or effectiveness of his strategy. Indeed, matters seem to be growing worse. The cartels are stepping-up their attacks on targeted elected officials, apparently with the goal of intimidating candidates and affecting the outcome of the country's crucial June 6 legislative elections.

Washington seems equally adrift in trying to stem the drug-related violence afflicting its southern neighbor. Indeed, there are indications that the desperate desire to curtail the carnage may have led to an especially bizarre scheme. During the final months of Donald Trump's administration, U.S. Special Forces units reportedly were assigned to train vetted enforcers for certain cartels. The apparent underlying "logic" for that program was that such U.S. training and support would create de facto allies to challenge and weaken rival cartels that posed a greater threat to the authority of the Mexican government and overall public order.

The temptation might exist to dismiss such a report as unfounded — except that it bears a striking resemblance to a scheme that former CIA director David Petraeus openly advocated in another violent arena: Syria. Petraeus argued that at least some jihadists could be "peeled" away from Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Al Nusra, and become useful allies to fight both ISIS and Bashar al-Assad's regime. Although that was an extreme proposal that Washington did not embrace (at least not officially), U.S. officials did provide support for other, disturbingly extreme Islamist factions, frequently with unsavory results.

One hopes that more sensible calculations prevail with respect to U.S. policy in Mexico. However, it is clear that the United States is confronting a very troubling situation on its southern border. The bulk of attention has been focused on the surging refugee flows from Central America through Mexico, but the drug violence in Mexico itself and the instability that it generates should create even greater concern.

The reality is that the cartels are supplying a product that large numbers of consumers in the United States avidly seek. Washington's continuing commitment to a prohibitionist policy creates an enormously profitable black-market premium and guarantees that violent criminal gangs will dominate the trade. The belief that efforts to suppress the drug supply will be effective, despite the ongoing consumer demand, has been disproven over a period of decades. U.S. leaders need to face the unpleasant truth that one of the costs of their current drug policy is an alarming level of violence and instability in Mexico. Moreover, that situation is almost certain to get worse, not better.