

McKenzie: How to wage a successful war on drugs

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As he demonstrated when he visited Austin recently, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico has a deft understanding of Mexico's complicated challenges but he continues to overlook what would be a killer blow to the wrenching violence in the country.

In a recent speech at the LBJ Library, Carlos Pascual identified drug cartels as Mexico's chief source of insecurity. While presenting suggestions for limiting their power — including a reduction in U.S. demand for illegal drugs — he failed to mention the best way of combating the cartels: take their business away.

After his speech, I asked Pascual a question: How seriously are the Obama administration and the Calderón administration in Mexico taking former Mexican President Vicente Fox's idea for more discussion of drug legalization? Legalization would take the massive drug industry out of the hands of the cartels and allow governments to control, regulate and tax the production, distribution and use of drugs.

Pascual's response was simultaneously weak-willed and encouraging. There are some important advocates in both countries for legalization, he said, but Presidents Barack Obama and Felipe Calderón have voiced opposition. Nonetheless, Pascual urged debate. Let's get serious policy discussion on the table and explore possible consequences, he said.

However, the issue at hand is the violence in Mexico, which threatens to spill across U.S. borders and is fueled by drug consumption here.

Mexico, as Pascual noted, is experiencing a surge of violence perpetrated by the cartels and Calderón's crackdown against drug criminals. In the last four years, more than 28,000 people have lost their lives. Some commentators have compared the unrest to an insurgency, but that's not correct — it is, Pascual rightly pointed out, more akin to the violence seen in the U.S. in the 1920s.

Though he didn't elaborate, he was presumably referring to the days of Prohibition when organized gangsters fought to control trafficking in alcohol. As a Cato Institute paper put it, "Alcohol became more dangerous to consume; crime increased and became 'organized'; the court and prison systems were stretched to the breaking point; and corruption of public officials was rampant." The murder rate also spiked. Sound familiar?

In his presentation, Pascual listed three drivers of violence. The first was youth — cartels in Mexico recruit a lot of young drug addicts, who can be paid in drugs. Sadly, many have proven willing to kill to protect these businesses.

A second driver, Pascual said, was a change in the routes and control for drug trafficking. While many Colombian drug kingpins languish in U.S. jails, Mexican drug lords have stepped into the vacuum. To assert their authority in various regions, they kill.

Third, drug violence is escalating because of increasing pressures on the drug market. For various reasons, there is reduced demand for cocaine in the U.S.; Calderón has confronted the cartels with force; and there has been an increased crackdown on cartels as a result of U.S. interdiction and the Merida Initiative. None of this, so far, has done anything except increase conflict, especially on the U.S.-Mexico border, where Mexican media face cartel threats to censor their reporting on drug violence. The cost of disobedience? You already know.

The Obama and Calderón administrations can choose to continue their militaristic approach against the cartels, but it will only mean more deaths, more insecurity and more immigration and economic problems. At the same time, their goal to reduce demand for drugs is laudable but futile. As with alcohol, tobacco and sex, there will

always be a market for drugs. The only way to neuter the cartels and mitigate Mexico's security troubles is to hit them where it really hurts: the wallet. Without the highly profitable black market for drugs, the cartels have no power. They can't recruit the young; they can't finance their wars; and they can't hold two entire nations to ransom.

Pascual is right: Mexico is not experiencing an insurgency; it is merely experiencing the predictable effects of prohibition. Now is the time to end that folly.

McKenzie is an Austin-based journalist from New Zealand with an interest in drug policy and border issues.

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