



Why a Military Incursion Into Mexico Targeting Drug Labs Would Do More Harm than Good

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As early as 2020, then-President Donald Trump was keen on the idea of launching missiles aimed at cartel drug labs into Mexico. On the 2024 campaign trail, he told supporters he wanted to send Special Operations forces into Mexico to attack cartel operations. All of his past and present GOP primary opponents have made similar promises, as have many GOP leaders in Congress.

Sending special forces into Mexico would do nothing but kill innocent people, stimulate a flood of refugees across our southern border and maybe even promote the smuggling of new and more dangerous drugs into our country. That's because it is no longer accurate to describe these organizations as "Mexican drug cartels" or to even think of them as being rooted in Mexico.

Our 50-plus-year war on drugs has elevated these groups into transnational drug trafficking organizations. These criminal organizations infiltrate governments, from local police and municipal officials to national executive departments. Think of them as being like legal giant multinational corporations such as Exxon Mobile or Microsoft, except they are underground, have armies, and are ruthless killers. And because antitrust laws don't apply to them, they cooperate and merge with other transnational drug traffickers as situations warrant.

In fact, Mexico's current drug cartels arose only because of the cocaine trade's transnational nature. As any Netflix-watcher will tell you, Colombian Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel became the world's most powerful criminal organization in the 1980s, although this resulted, in part, from Gen. Augusto Pinochet's early war on drug traffickers in Chile.

And yet, as Steven Cohen wrote for The New Republic, Pinochet "was no exception" since cocaine "first arrived in Colombia from Bolivia—where the military partnered with the drug mafia to overthrow the government in the Cocaine Coup of 1980—and Peru—where the military ran and still runs, protection for coca shipments."

Within Colombia, Medellín became the cocaine industry's emporium due to the Antioquia region's strategic access to the Urabá Gulf. As historian Muriel Laurent wrote, Antioquia's proximity to Panama made it a key smuggling route, having replaced Jamaica in the mid-19th century as the main export center of tobacco, liquor and other illegal goods that entered

Colombia's mainland through its Caribbean and Pacific coasts. Given Antioquia's good infrastructure, local smugglers smoothly transitioned from cigarettes to cocaine. As historian Malcom Deas wrote of Escobar's initial steps in the criminal world: "He is said to have been prominent in a conflict known as the 'Marlboro Wars,' fought to control the supply of Colombia's most smuggled cigarette."

Escobar built his cocaine empire by gaining control over Norman's Cay in the Bahamas, another outpost that, like Jamaica, had a history of smuggling dating back to the colonial era. Once the Bahamian and U.S. governments moved against the cartel's easy route between Norman's Cay and South Florida, Escobar adapted by establishing outposts in Haiti and Panama. The overland cocaine route from Panama across Central America and Mexico and into the United States is at the root of the current fentanyl crisis. As journalist Peter S. Green wrote, the Medellín Cartel's alliance with Mexican smugglers "helped launch the Sinaloa, Juárez and Tampico cartels that have since turned Mexico into a virtual narco-state."

While Colombian cartels penetrated Mexico decades ago, in more recent years Mexican cartels have established footholds in Colombia. According to a 2021 report by the Colombian police seen by Reuters, the representatives of Mexican cartels were present "in 11 of Colombia's 32 provinces." Nonetheless, their reach extends far beyond South America and even beyond the Western Hemisphere.

Mexican and Colombian cartels not only supply the Italian mafia with cocaine; the former is also increasingly "smuggling in unfinished produce, coca base, and then processing it into cocaine in Europe," a method that allows them to cut off the middlemen in the world's most lucrative market.

Now we see evidence that the Mexican cartels, along with drug trafficking organizations from the Balkans—most notably the Albanian mafia, the principal smuggler of drugs in Europe—have moved into Ecuador to take advantage of its geographic location and convenient ports for shipping.

As these organizations have matured, they have also diversified. They traffic in everything from human smuggling to pirated DVDs.

Like other organized crime syndicates, Mexican cartels are also in the extortion business, extracting a percentage of local business profits in exchange for their protection from theft and assault. They even extort large multinational corporations in return for protection. Thus, they compete against and destabilize legitimate governments that also demand money (taxes) in return for protection. The cartels have become bigger and more powerful than many of the governments trying to fight them.

America's war on drugs has helped to strengthen and globalize the cartels. It has incentivized them to develop more potent synthetic forms of drugs, which can be made more efficiently and are easier to smuggle, like fentanyl and nitazene. Military incursions will not only be futile but will make the crime organizations and the drugs they peddle grow ever stronger.

So, what should America's policymakers do? In the short term, they can remove government obstacles to harm reduction strategies, such as syringe services programs and overdose prevention centers. They can reform the dehumanizing and feckless methadone policy to allow primary care clinicians to treat people with addiction, as they do in the UK, Canada and Australia.

In the long term, ending drug prohibition would do more harm to these transnational crime organizations than launching missiles or sending in special ops forces could ever do.

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