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Don't Blame American Guns for Mexico's Drug War

By Ted Galen Carpenter , Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

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Mexico's illegal-drug trade and the accompanying violence there and in neighboring Central American countries is again a hot topic for members of the foreign-policy community in the United States. The latest catalyst is a new study from the Council on Foreign Relations arguing that the "flow of high-powered weaponry from the United States exacerbates the soaring rates of gun-related violence in the region."

It is hardly a new argument. Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton repeatedly embraced the Mexican government's view that permissive gun laws in the United States were a major contributor to the drug-related violence that has now claimed an estimated eighty thousand in Mexico over the past six-and-a-half years. In summit meetings with both the current Mexican president and his predecessor, President Obama has adopted a similar position. But such arguments misconstrue the symptoms of the problem for the cause. The underlying reason for Mexico's agony is not the easy availability of guns, but the enormous profitability of the illegal-drug trade and the various pathologies that it spawns, including violence and pervasive corruption.

The CFR study's author, Julia Sweig, Nelson and David Rockefeller Senior Fellow for Latin American Studies at the Council, is unsparing in her criticism of U.S. policy. With the launch of the 2007 Mérida Initiative to combat drug trafficking, Sweig contends, "the U.S. and Mexican governments agreed to a regional security framework guided by the principle of shared responsibility. Among its domestic obligations, the United States committed to intensify its efforts to combat the illegal trafficking of weapons and ammunition into Mexico." Six years later, she charges, "little has changed: the U.S. civilian firearms market continues to supply the region's transnational criminal networks with high-powered weaponry that is purchased with limited oversight."

In contrast, she praises Latin American governments for having "moved to disarm criminal networks by tightening their own gun law codes. Mexico prohibits the sale of handguns with calibers greater than .38," and Mexico, along with several other countries, "have implemented gun buyback programs." Given the drug-related carnage in Mexico and its Central American neighbors in recent years, it would appear that the strategy Sweig cites hasn't worked very well. To be blunt, the Sinaloa cartel, the Zetas, and other trafficking organizations are not going to be stopped, or even seriously inconvenienced, by tougher gun-control measures in the United States.

Indeed, the argument that supposedly lax U.S. gun laws are a major reason for Mexico's drug violence is a bit of a red herring. It's not to say that the cartels don't get some of their weaponry from gun shops, flea markets, pawn shops, and gun shows in the United States, as Sweig charges. They do, but they also get them from numerous other sources. As I note in chapter nine of my latest book on the international drug war, the cartels obtain weapons from the international black market, the armories of Central American countries the U.S. helped fill during the fight against communist infiltration of the region in the 1980s, and even Mexico's own military depots.

The principal reason that the drug gangs can obtain all the firepower they want from multiple sources is that they have vast financial resources at their disposal. Mexico's share of the \$300 billion to \$350 billion global illegal-drug trade is estimated to be at least \$35 billion, and according to the former DEA liaison at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City, perhaps as much as \$60 billion, per year. That sum is in a country that the CIA estimates has a modest legal gross domestic product of \$1.18 trillion. In other words, the drug trade is equal to at least 3 percent and perhaps nearly 6 percent of Mexico's entire economy.

That enormous wealth gives the cartels the power to corrupt, intimidate, or eliminate law-enforcement personnel, media figures, elected officials, and business leaders nearly at will. They even have the financial clout to tempt large, respected financial institutions in the United States and other countries into laundering their profits.

As long as the traffickers possess such funds, trying to halt their turf fights over the valuable trafficking routes into the United States by restricting access to guns is as futile as the reputed attempt of King Canute to hold back the tides. A far more effective solution would be to greatly reduce the profits available from the drug trade. Nearly 90 percent of the retail price of illegal drugs is simply the result of their illegality. Ending the failed prohibition strategy, both domestically and internationally, would drastically slow the flow of profits. Mexico's former president, Vicente Fox, Brazil's former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and a growing roster of past and present Latin American leaders seem to be reaching that conclusion. A Mexican drug industry of \$4 billion or \$5 billion a year would pose considerably less danger to Mexico's government and society than one nine or ten times that size. That's true even if the trade remained exclusively in the hands of criminal elements—which, absent prohibition, it probably would not.

It is time for a strategy that gets to the root cause of Mexico's drug-related corruption and violence, not merely attempts to treat the symptoms with the legislative equivalent of patent medicine. The only way to significantly reduce the violence is to defund the cartels. And that requires rethinking the entire prohibition strategy.