



Republicans' Dangerous Plans to Turn the War on Drugs into a Real War by Attacking Mexico

This awful idea is increasingly popular on the right, and has been embraced by several GOP presidential candidates.

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Over the last few months, leading Republicans—including most of the party's presidential candidates—have converged on the idea that we should turn the War on Drugs into a real war by attacking Mexico. Donald Trump and others have long said the US should wage war against drug cartels in much the same way as we have against the ISIS terrorist group—a campaign that included large-scale use of both air strikes and ground forces. And similar ideas were reiterated by several participants in the recent GOP presidential debate.

The rise of this idea is one of the most dangerous trends in recent GOP/right-wing politics. It would make the already horrific War on Drugs still worse, and also threatens armed conflict with Mexico—destroying our relationship with a crucial neighbor and our largest trading partner. It is simultaneously cruel, unjust, and stupid.

If, like most libertarians, you oppose the War on Drugs as a whole, you obviously have reason to oppose this massive potential escalation. But even if you take a more favorable view of drug prohibition, you would do well to draw the line at turning the metaphorical war into a real one.

The present decades-long War on Drugs is already a horrific disaster. It kills and imprisons large numbers of people in both the US and abroad, while stimulating organized crime, and doing little to curb harmful addiction. It's a massive infringement on liberty and bodily autonomy. The "war" has also severely undermined both individual constitutional rights and structural constitutional limits on federal power. The current fentanyl crisis—used as a justification for attacking Mexico and other drastic measures—is itself largely a result of the War on Drugs, a predictable consequence of the "Iron Law" of prohibition, under which banning markets incentivizes dealers and users to turn to harder, more potent drugs.

It's unlikely that attacking Mexico will do much to curb drug addiction in the US. Most fentanyl smuggling is conducted by US citizens crossing legal ports of entry, not undocumented immigrants or Mexican cartel operatives. If military intervention succeeds in killing or disrupting some Mexican suppliers, others (including others from other countries) are likely to take their place, so long as there is still a demand for the product. That has been the result of past attempts

to interdict drug supplies from Colombia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. At most, we might get a modest temporary reduction in drug use.

While the benefits of attacking Mexico are likely to be minimal, doing so could easily have huge costs. Obviously, it is almost unavoidable that innocent civilians will be killed or injured in the fighting, especially since drug traffickers are hard to distinguish from the rest of the population. There are likely to be casualties among US troops, as well.

The 1.6 million Americans living in Mexico could potentially become targets for terrorism or retaliation by drug cartels. Here in the US, we could see racist and vigilante violence against Mexican-Americans. At the very least, a conflict with Mexico would predictably inflame racial and ethnic tensions.

Mexico recently became America's largest trading partner. A military intervention would likely disrupt that relationship, seriously damaging both nations' economies.

Attacking Mexico would also destroy America's moral authority in the world. We cannot credibly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine or a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan if we are simultaneously invading our own neighbor merely to reduce drug smuggling. Such an action would predictably alienate many of our liberal-democratic allies in Europe and Asia, to say nothing of Latin America.

Perhaps worst of all, an invasion of Mexico would permanently damage our relationship with one of our two most important neighbors (along with Canada). Over the last century, the US has greatly benefited from having generally friendly and cooperative relations with the two nations with which we have long borders. Undermining that is sure to cause all sorts of problems and seriously weaken the overall US position in the world. Among other things, we are likely to have far more cross-border violence. And the Mexican government will have incentives to ally with China and other US adversaries.

Turning Mexico and its people into our enemies won't "make American great again." It would predictably weaken us and strengthen our adversaries elsewhere.

In fairness, Republicans are far from the only ones who deserve blame for the evils of the War on Drugs. That ill-advised conflict has a long bipartisan history, one to which President Biden, among other Democrats, has made plenty of contributions. But attacking Mexico would go well beyond even the worst previous drug war policies.

The best that can be said for Republican enthusiasm for attacking Mexico is that some of the GOP politicians who promote it may be just posturing or would content themselves with a symbolic show of force. Alternatively, they might limit themselves to only the kind of small-scale operations that may be approved by the Mexican government.

But I would not put too many eggs in that basket. If the symbolic show of force or small-scale operation fails (as it likely would), there would be pressure to go further. If invading Mexico becomes a major priority of the Republican base, a GOP president might find it hard to resist that pressure.

At the very least, the increasing acceptance of this idea in GOP circles has moved the Overton Window in the wrong direction. A terrible, previously fringe policy has become the mainstream

position of one of our two major political parties. That greatly increases the likelihood it will actually be attempted should that party retake control of the White House in the near future.

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