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President of Guatemala Calls for Drug Legalization

February 13, 2012 [Brad R. Schlesinger](#)

Back in November I [wrote](#) about what appeared to be the support of Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina for Mexican President Felipe Calderón's military offensive against drug cartels. Now however, Pérez Molina has [called](#) for the legalization of all drugs throughout Central America:

Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina said Saturday he will propose legalizing drugs in Central America in an upcoming meeting with the region's leaders.

Perez Molina said in a radio interview that his proposal would include decriminalizing the transportation of drugs through the area.

"I want to bring this discussion to the table," he said. "It wouldn't be a crime to transport, to move drugs. It would all have to be regulated."

[...]

The Guatemalan president said the war on drugs and all the money and technology received from the U.S. has not diminished drug trafficking in the area.

"There was talk of the success of Plan Colombia but all it did was neutralize big cartels," Perez Molina said of a U.S. initiative supporting Colombia's fight against leftist rebels and far-right militias involved in the drug trade.

Perez Molina also blamed drug cartels for rampant violence in Guatemala, which has a homicide rate of 41 murders per 100,000 people.

Over at the Cato Institute, Juan Carlos Hidalgo [analyzes](#) the effects this proposal could have on the global War on Drugs:

Central America is one of the hottest battlegrounds in Washington's hemispheric war on drugs. Guatemala, along with neighboring Honduras, El Salvador and Belize, are among the most violent countries in the world. Most of the violence stems from turf wars between juvenile gangs, but Mexican drug cartels are increasingly escalating it as they extend their influence and operations in the region.

As Pérez Molina said, Central America's biggest liability in its fight against organized crime is its institutional weakness. Judges, policemen, politicians, and soldiers are easily corrupted by cartels. Despite increasing their security budgets by 60% in the last five years, Central American countries spent approximately \$4 billion in 2010 on security and justice. This amount dwarfs with the estimated \$25-35 billion that Mexican cartels—who run the drug business in Central America—pocket every year.

The problem with Pérez Molina's proposal is, of course, Washington. Central America is merely a transportation hub of cocaine from the Andean region to Mexico and then to the U.S. It is estimated that 90% of the cocaine consumed in the U.S. goes through Central America. Methamphetamine labs have been discovered in Guatemala in recent months, which might signal a displacement of production of synthetic drugs from Mexico to Central America.

Though a step forward, the proposal for one or all Central American countries to legalize drugs will hardly solve all or even the majority of problems associated with drug trafficking, especially if the rest of the Hemisphere sticks to prohibition.

Still, this doesn't take away from the remarkable significance of having a sitting president arguing in favor drug legalization. Maybe president Pérez Molina should have a chat soon with Colombia's Juan Manuel Santos on this issue. Both could provide much needed leadership in an area where Latin America desperately needs it.

Image via The Telegraph