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## Troubled neighbor: Washington's emerging security problem in Mexico

Ted Galen Carpenter - U.S. and the World - 14/7/2011

The principal focus of US foreign policy since World War II has been on Europe, with East Asia being a close second in terms of priorities. One reason why it was possible for US leaders to devote an inordinate amount of attention and resources to two distant regions was that Washington's own neighborhood was generally quiescent. (Even the emergence of a communist regime in Cuba was only a minor exception.) In particular, the United States had the luxury of having friendly, stable neighbors on both of its land borders. The notion of a major security problem emerging in either Canada or Mexico was utterly fanciful.

That situation is changing - and changing rapidly - with respect to Mexico, and the deteriorating security environment there is a major reason why Washington will be compelled to shift its attention away from Europe. The United States faces a troubling and worsening problem much closer to home.

Mexico has long been a source country or transit country for illegal drugs coming into the United States, but Mexico's prominence in the drug trade soared during the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century. Despite periodic gestures to stem the flow and contain the increasing powerful drug cartels, Mexican governments generally looked the other way - doing just enough to placate Washington. But that all changed in 2006 with the election of President Felipe Calderón.

The new president decided to confront the cartels, launching a military-led offensive to break their power. That strategy has backfired badly. More than 40,000 people have died in the fighting since December 2006. And the trend is perhaps even more worrisome than the overall extent of the carnage. 2010 set a new annual record for drug war deaths, eclipsing the record set just the previous year.

Despite the military offensive, the cartels seem more powerful than ever before. The always turbulent cities along Mexico's border with the United States, such as Tijuana, Nuevo Laredo and Ciudad Juárez, have become substantially more violent during the Calderón years. Indeed, government police - and even military units - will venture into major portions of those cities only in large numbers as an occasional show of force. The Mexican government's authority in the border cities, as well as at least two states, Tamaulipas in the northeast and Michoacán in the west, is shaky at best.

Worse still, the power of the cartels - and the accompanying violence - has spread to previously quiet portions of the country. The popular resort city of Acapulco has experienced shootouts in broad daylight, sending tourists scrambling for cover. The cartel presence has become so

pervasive that weary residents now often refer to the city as “Narcopolco.” Monterrey, Mexico’s leading industrial center, has experienced even worse convulsions over the past two years. In 2005, an international trade group proclaimed Monterrey the most peaceful city, not just in Mexico, but in all of Latin America. That status is nothing more than a quaint memory.

Violence has even come to the capital city, which until the past few months seemed insulated from the growing turmoil elsewhere in the country. During the weekend of July 9-10, police discovered 11 bodies in a Mexico City suburb, the latest incident in the inter-cartel conflicts that began late last year.

There are signs that cartel assassins are targeting US government personnel working in Mexico. In early 2010, two employees of the US consulate in Juárez were gunned down in separate incidents. Early this year, two agents with the US Department of Homeland Security, assigned to the embassy in Mexico City, were ambushed while traveling in northern Mexico. One agent was killed and the other wounded.

Ordinary Americans are becoming more cautious about going to portions of Mexico. Tourism in the border cities has plunged in recent years, and the State Department issues frequent warnings about the dangers associated with traveling in Mexico.

Some experts in both Mexico and the United States have even begun to speak of the nightmare scenario - that Mexico could become a “failed state.” Although that outcome is still just a remote possibility, Washington is increasingly worried about the security situation in its southern neighbor. Last year, the Obama administration responded to growing pressure from officials in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico by deploying additional border patrol agents as well as National Guard troops to bolster security on the border.

Worries about the seepage of corruption and violence from Mexico into the United States are mounting. As yet, there are only a few worrisome episodes, but authorities note that the Mexican cartels have now established ties with violent gangs in some 250 US cities, including all 50 of the largest cities. It may be just a matter of time before the violence that is convulsing Mexico begins to plague US communities as well.

Even if Mexico does not descend into complete chaos, the security situation there is troubling enough to require substantially increased attention from US officials. And American leaders already have a full plate dealing with strategic priorities in both the Muslim world and East Asia. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, concerns about Pakistan’s stability, the worrisome al Qaeda presence in such places as Yemen and Somalia, and the nuclear proliferation crises involving Iran and North Korea are ample testimony to America’s position as the overloaded superpower.

Something has to give, especially if Washington no longer enjoys the luxury of stable neighbors on both of its land borders. And given the deteriorating security environment in Mexico, that factor clearly does not exist any more on the southern frontier. The most likely scenario is that US leaders will decrease their attention to the region that appears to have few, if any, significant security problems. Europe fits that description more than any other portion of the world in which the United States has meaningful interests. That does not mean that Washington will ignore Europe in the future, but it does mean that the continent will no longer be America’s top priority. The need to address the troubles in Mexico is not the only reason for that probable shift, but it is certainly a major factor.

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