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US and Mexican Cooperation: The Merida Initiative and Drug Trafficking

Yasemin Tekin

Introduction

In recent decades, Mexico has remained one of the world's key players in the global drug market. Mexico is the major supplier of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana in the Americas (Seelke et al. 2011). As a result, Mexico is one of the most problematic countries in the region regarding illegal drugs being exported into the US through the Central America-Mexico corridor. The illegal drug trade causes severe violence in the country and threatens US border security. According to the US National Drug Intelligence Center:

Violent infighting among rival Mexican gangs, at least partially attributable to competition over control of lucrative crossing points along the Southwest Border, is occurring mainly on the Mexico side of the border. Criminal activity such as kidnappings and home invasion robberies directed against individuals involved in drug trafficking has been reported in some U.S. border communities (National Drug Treatment Assessment, 2011).

Although the violence in Mexico has generally declined since late 2011, analysts estimate that it may have claimed more than 70,000 lives between December 2006 and December 2013 (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). Thus, an increase in crime and violence among these groups over the control of drug smuggling routes along the US- Mexico border has made the drug trafficking problem even more serious and requires a permanent solution. According to Seelke (2010), drug trafficking is viewed as a major problem that poses a serious threat to the security of citizens and the US interests in Latin America. Since the production and trafficking of popular illicit drugs generates billions of dollars in black market profits, Mexican criminal organizations have engaged in illegal drug trafficking and threatened US national security. According to a report by the Congressional Research Service (2011), Mexican drug trafficking organizations control of illicit drug markets in the US and cooperation with US gangs is the main reason for the spillover of the drug related violence in Mexico to the US. Indeed, the Department of Justice defines drug trafficking organizations as “the greatest organized crime threat to the US” (Seelke et al., 2011). Therefore, the US should come up with a specific policy to combat the illegal drug trade through the US-Mexico border to reduce drug – related violence in the country.

As a result of the increasing violence due to illegal drug trafficking along the US and Mexico border, U.S policymakers have created several counterdrug assistance programs for Mexico and Central America to combat drug trafficking and decrease drug related violence. However, these assistance programs did not stop either problem as they did not target the root of them. Therefore, the Mexican government under the former presidency of Felipe Calderon requested a higher level of cooperation and assistance from the US. In October 22, 2007, the US and Mexico announced the Merida Initiative.

The Merida Initiative was a multi-year plan for US assistance to Mexico and Central America to fight against drug trafficking and organized crime. Since December

2012, the Obama Administration and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto have continued US-Mexican security cooperation, which focuses on reducing violent crime in Mexico (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). From FY2008 to FY2014, Congress appropriated about \$2.4 billion in the Merida Initiative assistance for Mexico, including some \$194.2 million provided in the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). In March 2014, the US delivered more than \$1.2 billion of Merida Initiative assistance (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). For the fiscal year 2015, the Obama Administration asked for \$115 million for Merida Initiative assistance (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). The policy was an important step towards the solution of the drug related violence and instability in the region. However, today there is debate over the success of this policy and its uneven implementation.

US-Mexican security cooperation has increased as a result of the development and implementation of the Merida Initiative (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). Today, the Obama administration's assistance, known as “Beyond Merida,” focuses on training and equipping Mexican counterdrug forces emphasizing the weak institutions and social problems that have allowed the drug trade in Mexico to flourish (Seelke and Finklea, 2014). The current Merida approach focuses on the four pillars: disrupting organized criminal groups, institutionalizing the rule of law, creating a twenty-first century border, and building strong and resilient communities (Seelke and Finklea, 2014).

This paper examines the sustainability of the Merida Initiative as a counterdrug policy in Mexico. The paper begins with an overview of the arguments about the problem and the policy in the literature; then discusses three major policy options that could reduce organized crime and drug trafficking in Mexico and evaluate these possible options through the established criteria. Finally, it proposes the most practical policy option that addresses established criteria the best and would resolve Mexico's problem efficiently.

Literature Review

Maureen Meyer (2007) explains the tragedy in the country: “Since 2005, Mexico has been beset by an increase in drug-related violence. In that year over 1,500 people were killed in drug-related violence; in 2006, the number of victims climbed to more than 2,500.” She then explains that despite the military actions of the Mexican government as a response to increased violence, there were 2,113 casualties in 2007 (Meyer, Maureen, 2007). In addition, the *Los Angeles Times* (2014) claims that since 2008, there has been a savage struggle among Mexican drug cartels to control the drug trade across the US border. *Los Angeles Times* (2014) also states that the conflict has left thousands dead, paralyzed cities with fear, and spawned a culture of corruption reaching the upper levels of the Mexican State (*Los Angeles Times*, 2014).

The problem has also been examined by its negative effect on the society. Diana Villiers Negroponete (2009) argues that drug related violence creates an underlying insecurity within the society. She claims the conflict between organized criminal groups creates distrust in the police force and members of the judiciary, as well as corruption among government bureaucrats (Negroponete, 2009).

The Merida Initiative proposed by former US President George W. Bush and former Mexican President Felipe Calderon was designed to combat drug trafficking, transnational crime, and terrorism. At the meeting in March 2007, the presidents of the

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two countries agreed to expand bilateral and regional counternarcotic and security cooperation (Cook, 2008). According to the State Department (2010), there were four major goals of this policy:

- (1) Break the power and impunity of criminal organizations;
- (2) assist the Mexican and Central American governments in strengthening border, air, and maritime controls;
- (3) improve the capacity of justice systems in the region;
- and (4) curtail gang activity in Mexico and Central America and diminish the demand for drugs in the region (Seelke, 2010).

Congress approved an initial \$400 million for Mexico and \$65 million for Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti to assist these nations in their wars against drug cartels. Additionally, Congress approved \$300 million for Mexico and \$110 million for Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti for the fiscal year 2009 (Fact Sheet, 2009). The initial \$400 million of funding for Mexico was to provide helicopters and surveillance aircraft, non-intrusive inspection equipment, technologies and secure communications to improve data collection and storage, technical advice and training to strengthen the institutions of justice (Seelke, 2011).

The Department of State manages the Merida Initiative in cooperation with several other US agencies, and it is responsible for its implementation (US Government Accountability Office Report, 2010). According to the report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in July 2010, the US agencies have delivered the funds allocated in Mexico successfully. The report claims that:

As of March 31, 2010, 46 percent of Merida funds for fiscal years 2008 to 2010 had been obligated, and approximately 9 percent had been expended. In Mexico, US agencies have delivered major equipment including five Bell helicopters, several X-ray inspection devices, law enforcement canines and training for their handlers, and training for over 4,000 police officers (US Government Accountability Office Report, 2010).

Despite successful appropriation of the funds to Mexico under the Merida Initiative, there were some problems with the implementation of the initiative. Most of the funds were not delivered on time. The same report defines these challenges as “an insufficient number of staff to administer the program, negotiations on interagency and bilateral agreements, procurement processes, changes in government, and funding availability” (US Government Accountability Office Report, 2010). To address problems regarding timing of fund availability, agencies have employed alternative methods to expedite the implementation of certain programs in Mexico and some Central American countries. Therefore, the report is optimistic about the implementation timing as agencies improved efforts to expedite the process and claim that the pace of delivery has increased over time (US Government Accountability Office Report, 2010).

The same report by the GAO claims there are several gaps within the US Strategy for Merida Initiative that would improve management of the policy. The report

(2010) argues that strategic documents do not include performance measures to show progress in achieving the four strategic goals. They believe that these issues are important to consider because they help evaluate the success of the program and determine whether relevant adjustments are necessary. Therefore, the GAO suggests the outcome-based performance measurements should be involved in the policy strategy to facilitate assessment of progress and the policy itself (US Government Accountability Office Report, 2010).

Indeed, there has been a debate over the efficiency of the Merida Initiative as a counterdrug policy. A Witness for Peace Fact Sheet (2011) criticizes the policy by arguing that Merida Initiative ignores the two major root causes of drug trafficking: high US demand for illicit drugs and poverty in Mexico. The fact sheet argues that widespread drug use in the US makes drug trafficking a profitable initiative and reinforces such an environment. It criticizes the policy in terms of its lack of strategy about drug prevention and rehabilitation programs in the US to decrease the demand for drugs. They further claim that trade policies that US has adopted towards Mexico do not solve the problem of poverty in Mexico. The Witness for Peace Fact Sheet (2011) further claims that the impoverished and unemployed people in Mexico are left without many options to survive, except migration, dangerous work in the informal economy, and finally to engage in criminal activities. Finally, the Witness for Peace Fact Sheet (2011) argues that since a similar military policy has failed to combat drug cultivation and insurgent groups, it is likely the Merida Initiative will fail as well. They point out that although the US has spent millions of dollars on military aid to reduce the cocaine supply through Plan Colombia, farmers in the country are still planting cocaine at increasing levels (Witness for Peace Fact Sheet, 2011). Negroponete (2009) also argues that the initiative failed to promote strategies to deal with social problems caused by drug trafficking and increasing violence. She claims that an increased police and military presence may temporarily curtail violent crime and car theft, but their presence does little to combat the underlying insecurity within society: the lack of trust in the police force and members of the judiciary, as well as pervasive levels of corruption among government bureaucrats. Although she believes that the Merida Initiative was a beneficial approach because it initiated a comprehensive regional program, Negroponete argues that it was projected on a short time plan, which made it insufficient in containing the problems (2009).

Policy Analysis

Despite all the gaps within the policy proposal, the Merida initiative was an important step towards a common purpose: combating drug trafficking into the US and decreasing organized crime in Mexico (Negroponete, 2009). Throughout the negotiations and implementation process between the 2007 and 2010, the diplomatic relations between Mexico and the US have improved (Negroponete, 2009). US and Mexican policymakers have defined the problem as transnational organized crime and have collaborated on approaches to achieve their goal. (Negroponete, 2009) The US has supplied a large amount of money to assist several programs employed by the Mexican government to promote law enforcement, train and equip its agencies, promote justice reforms, and modernize Mexico's borders (Seelke & Finklea, 2014). Unfortunately, the current violence in Mexico indicates this policy will not achieve its purpose permanently.

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Policymakers should take further action beyond the Merida Initiative to minimize violence and drug-trafficking in Mexico because it presents a serious threat to the US border and public security.

There are several policy options that could solve the drug-related violence in Mexico. However, a practicable option would be the one that responds to the values of each society. The first policy approach is preserving the status-quo by continuing the Obama Administration's approach, also known as "Beyond Merida" policy, embraces the original purposes of Merida Initiative but focuses on "four pillars" and "institution building" rather than military assistance. The second option is to reduce the allocated funds to Mexico and minimize US involvement in Mexico's domestic affairs. This policy option projects minimal US involvement in the law enforcement process and intelligence operations of the Mexican government, and cuts some funds that will be allocated to Mexico under current Merida Initiative. Finally, the third option suggests a new approach where the US would take more aggressive action to minimize the violence in Mexico. This paper recommends the third option, where there is US-Mexican security cooperation beyond the Obama administration's current policy by employing more determined and aggressive policies regarding drug problems in Mexico.

The criteria that will determine the best plausible policy option among these three options will consist of three values that are significant to the US interests. The first objective for the US is creating stronger border security. The ongoing drug related violence among the criminal groups and illegal arms trade into Mexico threatens both the public security in Mexico and national security of the US. The second criterion for the US is to institutionalize law enforcement in Mexico, which would eventually establish a long-term order and judicial system in Mexico and reduce violence. Finally, it is crucial for the US to employ domestic policies decreasing the demand and illegal consumption for illicit drugs in its national borders. Since the US is the main consumer of the drugs produced in Mexico, decreasing demand for illegal drugs in the US is significant factor in reducing the drug related problems in Mexico. Without decreasing the demand for these illegal drugs in its borders, the US cannot achieve its goals because high demand in the US for these illicit drugs creates an incentive for organized criminal groups to engage in intense drug trafficking.

The first policy approach is the continuation of the Obama Administration's current Beyond Merida policy. The current policy that has been employed by the Obama Administration is based on "four pillars" and "institution building" which as Olson and Wilson describe it is: "a new framework for bilateral cooperation" (Olson, Eric L., and Wilson, Christopher E. 2010). This policy aims to focus more on institutional reforms in Mexico rather than military assistance. As Olson and Wilson (2010) explain: "The first two pillars represent a refinement of previous efforts, and the final two represent a new and expanded approach to anti-drug efforts" (Olson and Wilson, 2010). The first pillar of this current policy is disrupting and dismantling criminal organizations. This approach calls for viewing cartels as corporations and understanding their strategy to interrupt their business. It also suggests impeding the arms trade from the US to Mexico to prevent cartel activities (Olson and Wilson 2010). The second pillar of this policy is institutionalizing the rule of law, which suggests allocation of more money for civilian institutions that is responsible for promoting justice, and maintaining the rule of law (Olson and Wilson, 2010). The third pillar suggests building a twenty-first century

border. Olson and Wilson describe the approach as “changing the very concept of the border from simply being a geographic line to one of secure flows (2010).” By doing so, the officials working at the border will focus on preventing the entrance of illicit drugs into the USA. Finally, the fourth pillar of this option is to build strong and resilient communities which aim “to reduce the demand for drugs, create jobs, improve local infrastructure, and to build better public spaces (Olson and Wilson 2010).”

The “Beyond Merida” approach was designed as a refinement of the Merida Initiative to make that approach more efficient and successful. Although the “four pillars” point out very significant issues that must be considered to solve the problem, they do not make this approach sufficient. Taking this policy approach will be beneficial in terms of achieving one of the established criteria: institutionalization of law enforcement. The second pillar of the policy suggests that the US government will allocate more money to support development of powerful Mexican institutions. This pillar will succeed if these institutions serve honestly and are managed transparently. But in fact, it is very difficult to control what kind of institutions the Mexican government will establish, and how efficiently they will provide order and justice in the country. Therefore, there should be a strict supervision by the US over the Mexican government and those new institutions. This policy option focuses on disrupting criminal organizations and creating twenty-first century borders which is important for providing border and public security. However, these criminal organizations will invariably develop new strategies to get around the US counter drug and terrorism policies, and the violence will continue. Therefore, focusing on these groups does not guarantee the public and border security. In addition, the new understanding of border of being a place to “focus on preventing entrance of dangerous illicit flows” as Olson (2010) describes also does not secure the borders. Corruption is likely, as the officers at the border can be convinced by the organized criminal groups to cooperate with them in return to monetary benefits. Therefore, the unintended consequences of creating such a border approach will create more vulnerable borders and actually contribute to drug trafficking. Furthermore, this policy option does not address the root causes of the problem and fails to meet one of the established criteria: decreasing demand for illegal drugs in the US. In fact, none of the established pillars of the Beyond Merida approach addresses the high demand for illegal drugs in the US and poverty in Mexico. The Obama administration’s policy fails to meet one of the most important criteria; the problem requires a more comprehensive approach

The second policy option for the US is to minimize the funds that have been proposed under Merida Initiative and limit involvement in Mexico’s domestic affairs. Since the US's efforts to eliminate drug trafficking and drug-related violence in Mexico have not achieved its goals, it is important to revise the US intervention in Mexican domestic policies. As the GAO report (2010) asserts, despite addressing several steps to reduce violence, the Merida Initiative was problematic in terms of its implementation. In fact, the GAO report (2010) points out the large amount of money that was allocated for Mexico has not been spent and the pace of the implementation was slow. If we consider little improvements in the Mexican government's reforms during the policy timelines and increasing criminal activities after the implementation of the Merida Initiative, it is reasonable to argue that the US efforts were neither efficient nor sufficient. Therefore, it is among the plausible policy options for the US to minimize the monetary aid and not intervene in Mexico’s domestic issues.

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By taking this approach, the US would save millions of dollars that it has to spend for the security cooperation agreement under Merida Initiative. However, this policy does not meet any of the established criteria. Protection of the national security can only be achieved by eliminating drug related violence along the US-Mexico border. In fact, the increasing drug-related violence and drug trafficking into the US poses a great threat to US national security. Moreover, the Mexican government's efforts to combat illicit drugs have proved that the problem requires serious measures to solve it that may not be achieved domestically. The institutions in Mexico, such as the law enforcement and judiciary systems, need to be improved to be able to solve the drug problems in the country. Without strict law enforcement and a justice system, there is not much the Mexican government can do to solve the problems. Therefore, the US, a country with a better judicial and law enforcement mechanisms because of its efficient checks and balances system, might be very effective at leading the Mexican government in an initiative to restore peace and order in the country. The US has to collaborate with the Mexican government to solve these problems through fostering economic growth in Mexico and creating effective institutions in the country.

A third policy option should be considered as a further step to that addresses the problems of the current Obama Administration's approach. This new policy suggests advanced security cooperation between the US and Mexico beyond the current US policy. It requires the US to employ more aggressive policies to combat the drug trade and violence in Mexico because this will expedite the process and create a permanent solution. This new policy recommends much stronger US-Mexican security cooperation by employing more determined and active policies toward a mutual "collaborative action" of both countries against drug trafficking and violence in Mexico. The new approach will require both countries to take decisive actions to prevent illicit drug trafficking and the violence that comes from it. By having the two countries take responsibility to eradicate the problem in Mexico, the established criteria will be satisfied.

Border and public security are very important for the US; therefore, rather than having the police force at the border as proposed by the Obama administration, border control should be done through US military officers. The lack of a military presence at US-Mexico border leaves the border without an effective means to stop the violence. The criminal organizations, therefore, sustain their power in the region. By having US military at the border, the illegal entry of drugs and violence will be reduced since military support has worked in the past. Between the years 2006 and 2008, President G.W. Bush deployed 6,000 National Guard troops along the southern border to support the Border Patrol. The mission, "Operation Jump Start," was successful in terms of its influence on the reduction of illegal drug trafficking and drug related violence across the US-Mexican Border. During the operation the US troops seized more than 321,000 pounds of marijuana and cocaine, apprehended more than 176,000 undocumented aliens, built fences 38 miles long, and 96 miles of vehicle barriers (Mason, 2013).

In addition, the US can prevent illegal arms, received by the criminal groups, from flowing south into Mexico. The strict increase in the use of force at the border by US military officers will deter these groups and decrease their illegal weapons supply coming from the US. Thus, the violence and terror will decrease at the border in the long run. In addition to strengthening borders with the US military, the US should encourage

and lead the creation of a robust criminal justice system to enforce laws. Rather than just allocating more money to the Mexican government to encourage new institutions as it is suggested in Obama administration's policy, the US should have US government officers and legal experts work with the Mexican government to educate and lead Mexican officers in effective governance and legal issues. By receiving legal and legislative support from the US, the Mexican government would be better off with the decreasing crime and violence rate in the country. Furthermore, this approach will allow the US to control and observe the developments in the government and encourage a better enforcement of law. With strict law enforcement, criminal groups will be tried with rigorous sanctions, thereby weakening the power of the cartels. Furthermore, the US should consider the impact of high demand for illegal drugs on increase drug trafficking and violence. The high demand for illegal drugs generates a great incentive to produce these drugs in Mexico and illegally trade them into the US. It is, therefore, very crucial for the US policy-makers to generate specific policies that will aim to reduce demand for drugs in the US.

Finally, the US should take measures to improve economic growth in Mexico in order to eradicate one of the root causes of the problem, poverty. One approach to decrease poverty in the country might be US foreign direct investment. The federal government should incentivize US corporations and firms to invest in rural areas in Mexico to generate new job opportunities for the rural inhabitants. The US government can subsidize the companies who invest in these areas in Mexico. When companies establish new businesses in Mexico, they can offer higher salaries to their workers that are willing to relocate and work in Mexico. Therefore, both the US companies and their employees can be better off and motivated to run business in Mexico. Once the Mexican economy has become more stable through this strategy, it is likely that foreign investors from other countries will be attracted to investing in Mexico. In addition, the US investors can also use the crops in rural areas as a source of renewable energy through the construction of power plants, and create a comparative advantage for Mexico, which will in the long run enhance their economy. The Mexican and US governments can make an additional agreement upon the usage of the lands eligible for renewable development. Under this mutual agreement, the US government can rent these lands and hand them over to the American companies to establish renewable energy businesses. Thus, with greater economic development, Mexican people will have less incentive to engage in criminal behavior and violence, as their new jobs will pay more than the organized drug trade ever could.

Despite its benefits, there are several challenges for taking this approach. This new approach requires huge human and capital resources to adopt anti-drug policies, and employment of more government officials to assist Mexican government. Modification of Beyond Merida might also increase the risk of tension at the border following its implementation. However, the tension will be much less in the long run as the US military forces and sanctions under the robust law enforcement mechanisms deter the criminal groups. Moreover, temporary assistance may not guarantee a transformation of the Mexican judiciary system. Once the US officials leave, the Mexican government officers might cease following US instruction. Finally, modification of the current Beyond Merida policy requires a long time commitment for the US government to achieve the established goals. However, the benefits of this policy far outweigh its

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shortcomings because it is more comprehensive and determined than previous policies. If the US vigorously cooperates with the Mexican government and allocates its resources efficiently, drug-traffic and violence will decrease.

Conclusion

Drug trafficking problems in Mexico have been a serious concern over the past 20 years. The increased drug related violence has made the problem much more obvious and complex. Although Mexican policymakers have been working hard to solve the problem, the increasing violence is evidence that their efforts are insufficient to address the root causes of the problem. In fact, former Mexican President Calderón explained the difficulty of the problem when he said that “this is not an easy task, nor will it be fast... It will take a long time, requiring the use of enormous resources (Meyer, 2007).” It is obvious that policy makers have to work hard and decisively to solve the problem and provide security in the region. Despite all the challenges, Mexico and the US can solve it if they strongly collaborate with each other in the war against illicit drugs in Mexico. Indeed, The Merida Initiative has made progress towards a solving the problem by improving the relations between the two countries, but it was not successful in terms of its implementation.

Among the three practicable options discussed in this paper, the best course of action that meets the established criteria is the third option: modification of the Beyond Merida approach into a more comprehensive approach, which requires an aggressive US assistance and tight implementation. The US should act more decisively and ambitiously to stop drug trafficking and drug related violence in the region. The four pillars of the “Beyond Merida” policy should be transferred to more comprehensive pillars, which would enhance the physical US role in the process. For instance, the US should assign its military officers to secure the US- Mexican border rather than having Mexican or US police. Rather than just focusing on the entrance of dangerous illicit flows, the US should control the illicit gun trafficking from the south to Mexico to weaken the power of the cartels and criminal groups. In addition, the US should institutionalize law enforcement in Mexico rather than only allocating more money to Mexican government. The US judiciary and government officials should work temporarily with the Mexican government to educate and teach Mexican officials effective governance techniques and law enforcement. With a better judicial system, organized crime and violence will be reduced in Mexico. Furthermore, the US should promote economic development in Mexico aiming to diminish poverty in order to reduce drug-related violence in the country. Finally, the US should actively conduct specific counter-drug policies and rehabilitation programs to decrease the domestic demand for those illicit drugs. Without efficient policies to reduce US public demands for illegal drugs, the drug producers in Mexico will continue their production and sell drugs illegally to US consumers. However, reduction in demand for drugs will drop Mexican producers’ revenues and lead them to quit excess illicit drug production. Therefore, it is crucial for the US policy makers to develop such policies that will reduce the domestic drug demand and minimize the drug traffic into the country.

The current security cooperation between the US and Mexico shows that both countries are determined to bring peace into the region and in Mexico. If the US and Mexico continue their security cooperation towards a mutual responsibility idea with an

aggressive US role in policymaking and implementation, drug trafficking and drug related violence will be successfully diminished. When the drug trafficking is eradicated, the violence that threatens the public security of both countries will vanish as well and peace will be appear.

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