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### **Calderon's dead-end war**

Mexican President Felipe Calderon's militarized, politicized fight against Mexico's drug cartels has been ineffective

In Ciudad Juarez this month, Mexican President Felipe Calderon insisted that appearances notwithstanding, drug violence had begun to recede thanks to the yearlong presence of 10,000 Mexican troops in the border city.

Yet according to his own government's figures, there have been 536 executions in Juarez since Jan. 1, which is 100 more than during the same period last year.

And the violence is not localized to a few border towns like Juarez. Over a holiday weekend in Acapulco this month, 34 people were assassinated in drug-related incidents; nearly 20 suffered the same fate in the drug-producing state of Sinaloa; and perhaps most poignant, two graduate students from Mexico's premier private university, Monterrey Tech, lost their lives March 19, victims of crossfire as the Mexican military pursued drug cartel members at the entrance to the campus.

All in all, Calderon's war on drugs -- unleashed in December 2006, barely 10 days after he took office -- has been not only ineffective but damaging to Mexico.

Since Calderon took office, overall levels of violence have increased, and the state's territorial control is, at best, about what it was in 2006.

No area of the country has been truly recovered by the state, and those few examples of partial success (Tijuana is perhaps the most notable one) last only as long as federal troops remain.

But the Mexican army is clearly overextended: Of its 100,000 combat and patrol troops, 96,000 are on constant duty, and desertions are increasing.

So what else can Mexico do? And, because this is increasingly as much President Obama's war as Calderon's, what can Washington do?

There are at least three options, none of which is perfect but all of which are certainly preferable to a deplorable and unsustainable status quo.

The first, and most minimalist, would be to continue employing the same strategy and policy, but more quietly.

Calderon on occasion gives the impression that he is as interested in trumpeting the war as in waging or winning it (remember President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished"?). Simply by toning down the rhetoric, lowering the priority assigned to the war and emphasizing other pressing issues such as economic growth, political reform and social policy, he might reassure the country and lessen the politicization of his confrontation with the cartels.

A second option would be to reset the entire affair and start over.

This would require creating a single national police force, a longtime goal on which scant progress has been made during this administration or the two previous ones. Creating such a force would allow the military to be brought back to the barracks where it belongs.

Such an overhaul also would facilitate a greater emphasis on intelligence and a greater focus on individual communities, along with a shift away from focusing primarily on the most high-profile targets. All of this might not make that much of a difference, but it would be a start.

A third, much more ambitious alternative would involve Mexico lobbying for decriminalization of at least marijuana in the United States.

There is a certain urgency to this. If, come November, California were to vote on -- and pass -- a popular initiative on cannabis legalization (and polls show this is possible), this could leave Mexico in an untenable and absurd situation in which troops and civilians were dying in Tijuana to stop Mexican marijuana from entering the U.S. -- where, once it entered, it could be consumed, transported and sold legally.

On Mexico's part, this would imply an about-face -- pulling the army out of the towns and off the highways and, up to a point, letting the cartels bleed themselves to death, while over a couple of years the above-mentioned national police force would be created and deployed.

It would, most controversially, require some sort of a tacit deal with some cartels, and "the full force of the law" against others. This is less scandalous than it may appear. It would be similar to the approach the Obama administration is taking with poppy growers and heroin producers in Afghanistan.

Most important, though, it would demand a totally different, "de-narcotized" U.S.-Mexican agenda. This would mean placing Mexican development at the top of the agenda, along with immigration, energy and infrastructure and social cohesion funds.

This last approach would make drug policy for both nations once again a law enforcement issue rather than one of national security.

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