

The Second Image Sometimes Reversed: Competing Interests in Drug Policy

Written by Barnett S. Koven

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In his seminal work, “The Second Image Reversed,” Peter Gourevitch (1978) rhetorically asked “is the traditional distinction between international relations and domestic politics dead?” While both scholars and foreign policy makers are likely to recognize that the two are closely linked, practitioners involved in crafting U.S. counternarcotics policy have restricted their focus to the effect of foreign policy on domestic politics (“the second image reversed”) of partner countries, while largely ignoring how domestic politics in these countries shape their international policies (“the second image”). This oversight is especially concerning in the wake of the 2012 Summit of the Americas, where the presidents of Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, and Costa Rica responded to growing domestic pressures and emphasized the need to consider drastic changes to the U.S.’ preferred counternarcotics strategy. Only by understanding how competing domestic and international influences shape counternarcotics (and more contentious) policy, will U.S. officials be able to cooperate with partner nations in order to devise policies that are consistent and mutually beneficial. In an attempt to enhance understanding, this article offers a detailed analysis of U.S.-Peru counternarcotics cooperation over the last four and a half years. In doing so, it clearly explicates how competing foreign and domestic interests undermined effective policy.

The Peruvian Case

The inauguration of Ollanta Humala as the president of Peru at the end of July 2011 roughly coincided with Peru overtaking Colombia as the world’s largest producer of coca in 2012. While counternarcotics has remained a policy priority for the current administration, a review of its policies over the last four and a half years reveals a seemingly irrational approach to counternarcotics strategy. In 2011, the government initially suspended forced eradication (the cornerstone of previous Peruvian and regional counternarcotics strategies) and adopted a lenient policy on drugs. However, by early January 2012, Humala had completely reversed course, taking a hardline stance against drugs replete with record-setting eradication goals. The tides changed again in late May 2014. Peru’s highly successful Drug Czar was dismissed and plans to pursue forced eradication in the country’s largest coca-producing area were scrapped. What explains the administration’s inconsistent counternarcotics policies and what are the implications for U.S. anti-drug policies in Peru and the region?

Humala has been widely criticized for being weak on security policy, and it would be easy to write-off his disjointed drug policy accordingly. However, doing so would be a mistake that would rob policy-makers and analysts of critical insights into the complexities of counternarcotics policy in Peru and in the region. A closer look reveals that the radical policy shifts correspond to the changing salience of domestic political considerations versus competing foreign pressures.

The Campaign Trail and First Six Month in Office

As indicated, on the campaign trail and during his first six months in office, Humala departed from longstanding Peruvian policy. While campaigning in Tingo María (Huánuco region), Humala promised that if elected, he would immediately prohibit the forced eradication of coca (Info Región 2011). Upon taking office Humala appointed Ricardo Soberón as head of DEVIDA (the National Commission for Drug-Free Life). Peru’s new Drug Czar described

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U.S.-Peruvian collaboration on drugs as “a failure from every point of view” (Gómez 2008). To further signal the ushering in of a new strategy, the government changed the head of the Anti-Drug Directorate of the National Police (DIRANDRO); replacing the highly-experienced General Carlos Morán with General Francisco Pasco, who was considered to be substantially less experienced with counternarcotics. Consequently, within weeks of his inauguration, forced eradication was suspended.

The logic behind this policy becomes apparent when one examines first and second round electoral results. Humala won by the widest margins in the provinces comprising the Valley of the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro Rivers (VRAEM). In 2011, more than 40% of Peruvian coca was cultivated in the VRAEM (ConsultAndes 2014, 2). Moreover, pushing back against the U.S.’ preferred drug strategy likely carried favor with a significant Humala campaign supporter: Venezuela.

2012 to Early-2014

In early January 2012, Humala replaced Soberón with Carmen Masías. Whereas Soberón was vehemently opposed to the U.S.’ preferred strategy, Masías, who had a long history of collaborating with USAID on counternarcotics and was highly regarded by U.S. officials, favored the U.S.’ approach (McClintock 2012). Her plan called for a record-breaking eradication goal of 110,000 hectares of coca between 2012 and 2016. In 2012, the government exceeded its eradication target and the goals were increased for subsequent years. In both 2013 and 2014 the new, increased targets were also surpassed (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas 2012; Stone 2012; The U.S. Department of State; Wells 2012). What explains Humala’s radical policy shift?

Despite the domestic political climate favoring his initial strategy, Humala received pressure to change course from then U.S. Ambassador to Peru, Rose Likins. In particular Humala was likely swayed by U.S. support in targeting the remnants of Peru’s Shining Path guerrillas and stymieing the threat they posed to the Camisea natural gas pipeline, which currently supplies roughly 40% of Peru’s electricity and in excess of US\$1 billion in tax revenues and royalties annually. The Camisea pipeline is slated for expansion (ConsultAndes 2012, 3). Additionally, the U.S. was Peru’s largest economic partner at the time and as such maintaining strong bilateral relations was also important (McClintock 2014; McClintock 2012; Office of the U.S. Trade Representative 2014).

Mid-2014 to the Present

On May 27, 2014 Masías was replaced as Drug Czar by Luis Alberto Otárola, a former Minister of Defense. Despite her impressive track record she was asked to resign following a debate with senior military officers over forced eradication in the VRAEM. Otárola quickly made clear that forced eradication would not take place there. The fact that he was a former defense official also placated military officers. In addition to appeasing the military, avoiding forced eradication in the VRAEM forestalled the potential for massive social unrest. Social unrest in Peru has been on the rise and is closely linked with deteriorating public approval for Humala and his wife, Nadine Heredia. Approval ratings were particularly important to the pair as presidential elections approached as, it originally appeared that Heredia would run for president this year. As such, domestic political consideration once again became paramount and drug policy changed accordingly.

Implications for U.S. Counternarcotics Policy

The 2012 Summit of the Americas coupled with Peruvian tribulations over drug policy under Humala, clearly indicates that the U.S. should not continue to expect steadfast support for its preferred policies in the region. Instead, the U.S. needs to adopt flexible policies that are tailored to the domestic political requirements of partner nations. If it fails to do so, long-term allies will consider alternatives to collaborating with the U.S. on narcotics or alternatively, frequent rapid changes in policy – like those that occurred in Peru – will become more prevalent in other nations. The latter result is equally concerning as it is evident that radical changes in Peruvian counternarcotics strategy have undercut previous gains, predominantly financed by Peruvian and U.S. tax payer dollars and enforced with the lives of military and law enforcement personnel.

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