

A War on Mexican Drug Cartels or a War on Surplus Humanity?

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, JAN 4 2024

The New War on Drugs – Attacking Mexico

Over the last year, there has been a cascade of foreign policy proposals for the United States to brand Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations and, with this pretext, stage military attacks against them. Republican leaders in the U.S. (Pompeo 2022, Cuccinelli 2022, Barr 2023) have authored these proposals and all of the 2024 Republican presidential hopefuls have emphatically endorsed them. The idea is the U.S. would use its military assets – in conjunction with the Mexican military but unilaterally if need be – to interdict the flow of fentanyl to the United States. Policy analysts have doubted that such policies could be successful given the decentralized character of fentanyl production in Mexico (Larison, 2023; Carpenter and Singer, 2023).

The typical pattern in the war on drugs is that intensifications in drug enforcement lead to a geographical redistribution of production. In Colombia, for example, coca eradication efforts taken in the context of the U.S. Plan Colombia failed to diminish overall the flow of cocaine from Latin America to the United States. Production in other Andean countries picked up the slack. As Plan Colombia wound down, coca production in Colombia rose to historical highs. In Colombia, though, U.S. objectives were never just focused on drug interdiction. The U.S. was more concerned with achieving counterinsurgency objectives that would strengthen the Colombian state and provide security conditions for a vast expansion of U.S. and foreign investment in Colombia. Sankey (2018) highlights, in this regard, the exponential explosion in Colombia's mining sector. Land under mining concessions grew from 221,000 hectares in 1998 to 7.4 million in 2011. It was hardly a coincidence that the number of internally displaced people climbed to 5.9 million in 2012 – the highest in the world.

Certainly, the Colombian experience has been relevant to U.S. policy foreign policy in Mexico. In 2007, the U.S. and Mexico undertook the Merida Initiative, which transferred \$1.6 billion in military equipment, technical advice, training, and surveillance technology to Mexico. A year earlier, Mexico, under President Felipe Calderon, deployed the army to attack drug cartels in Northern and Central Mexico. The United States praised the courage of both Calderon and the Mexican people in fighting the war on drugs (Obama 2011). But similar to Colombia, the issue here was not just drugs, but strengthening the Mexican state against increasingly well-armed drug cartels while increasing its capacity to manage territorial flows of goods, people, and money associated with the U.S. project of neoliberal economic integration. Thomas Shannon, Under Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs (2005-9) underscored these concerns by noting in 2008 that the U.S. had achieved economic integration with Mexico and now its objective was to defend that accomplishment by “armoring NAFTA” (Carlsen 2008).

What did it mean to “armor NAFTA”? And what did this mean in terms of fighting the war on drugs? To address the second question, consider the National Security Directive, “Narcotics and National Security” produced by the Reagan administration in 1986, as the Cold War was winding down. The memo announced that narcotics trafficking was now a threat to U.S. national security because narco-trafficking generates violence and political disorder in U.S. client states while introducing narcotics and all of its attendant problems into the U.S.

The memo was a sea change. Previously, the CIA had operated with organized crime groups because these groups

A War on Mexican Drug Cartels or a War on Surplus Humanity?

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were linked to the military and police forces of client states. Quite suddenly narco-trafficking security allies of the United States turned into adversaries. Security forces had historically extorted criminal networks in exchange for the establishment of protection rackets while also mobilizing organized crime groups to carry out repressive actions against protest movements (Lerch 2022). The same year the Reagan administration circulated its Narcotics and National Security, it was also engaged in constructing cocaine trafficking networks that linked Colombian and Mexican traffickers, greatly augmenting cocaine flows into the United States, where U.S. officials were busy fighting a domestic war on drugs. The point of this policy was to support the Contra war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua by illicit means because of a Congressional ban on licit funding.

Drug War Security Structures

What this episode made clear was the lowly place of drug interdiction within the pecking order of the U.S. foreign policy priorities. This continued to be the case during the NAFTA era. The incorporation of Mexico into NAFTA greatly expanded the volume of commercial flows between Mexico and the United States, enabling drug trafficking groups to incorporate drugs into transborder commercial flows. Thorough inspections of all commercial traffic at U.S. ports of entry ran headlong into the economic objectives of NAFTA: these were to facilitate the operation of just-in-time logistical systems of U.S. corporations upon which corporate profitability depended. Just as national security concerns trumped drug interdiction, so too did the prioritization of corporate profits (Andreas 2000).

For a more recent example of drug interdiction taking a backseat to U.S. foreign policy priorities, consider the arrest and subsequent release of the former head of the Mexican Ministry of National Defense Salvador Cienfuegos on drug trafficking charges in 2019. The indictment against Cienfuegos was dropped because his prosecution would have ruptured intelligence-sharing relationships between the Mexican military and the CIA (Estevez 2023).

And yet, as the U.S. experiences in Colombia and Mexico illustrate, drug interdiction policy played an important role in funneling resources to U.S. client states. These governments opaquely dispensed their roles in the war on drugs. In Colombia, AUC paramilitaries linked to the Colombian military engaged in narco-trafficking even as they attacked rural communities that were allegedly aligned with the FARC and engaged in narco-trafficking (Paley 2014). As subsequent court proceedings in the U.S. demonstrated, the paramilitary forces also acted as agents of U.S. extractive corporations (Del Monte and Chiquita) by using violence to facilitate land transfers to these corporations on extremely favorable terms (Bartilow 2019).

In Mexico, narco-trafficking groups have diversified their portfolio of criminal activities to include extortion of businesses and communities, control of human trafficking networks, as well as operation of mines and plantations as components of Mexico's export-oriented economy. The term "narco-cartel" often used to characterize these groups is misleading because these groups are neither cartels – in the sense of being autonomous, vertical organizations capable of orchestrating the transnational drug trafficking networks – nor are they narco-cartels in the sense of being focused on narco-trafficking as their *raison d'être* (Correa-Cabrera 2023).

In the case of Colombia, paramilitary forces were unequivocally aligned with the state, even as they engaged in trafficking activities. This is a point that can be made in terms of Strange's (2015) notion of IPE (international political economy) structures. These structures are different institutional arrangements created and maintained by states that enable the international political economy to function. Among them are trade, monetary, finance, technology, and security structures. These structures exist at international and national levels of the analysis. Internationally, security structures include arms transfers, alliances, and military training programs between states. At the national level, paramilitaries and criminal organizations are embedded within security structures that facilitate deepening patterns of extractive development in countries like Colombia and Mexico.

In the Mexican case, these security structures are more variable. Security forces engage in selective enforcement, attacking some drug trafficking groups while engaging in minimal enforcement actions against others. During the Calderon government (2006-12), deployments of the military were also geared to the requisites of political competition between opposed parties. The main political conflict was between the PAN (*Partido de Accion Nacional*) and the PRD (*Partido Revolucionario Democrática*). Trejo and Ley (2016) show that Calderon's deployment of

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military forces to different Mexican states followed a partisan logic of supporting PAN governors and undermining and criminalizing PRD governors and other officeholders to advance the political fortunes of the PAN. The imperative of states to assert control over their national territories, they argue, often takes a backseat to the partisan calculations of incumbent governments for whom lawlessness within territories of their political adversaries can operate to their advantage.

Military interventions in the war on drugs have often not been about drug enforcement, but rather the expansion of extractive development. This pattern was abundantly clear in the case of Colombia, but also evident in Mexico. Consider several examples. In the state of Sonora in 2019, nine members of the LeBaron family were killed in a shootout between rival cartel factions. The killings drew widespread media attention because the LeBarons were white Christians who held American citizenship. The lands occupied by this family were adjacent to contested narco-trafficking routes into the U.S., but it is also the case that this region is rich in lithium deposits (Jalife-Rahme 2019). The attacks on the LeBarons resulted in an exodus of 100 members of the family from the region – one example of how narco-violence has the effect of depopulating resource-rich regions of Mexico (Zavala 2022, 384).

In oil-rich Northeastern Mexico, similar processes of de-population have occurred. Drug violence in Tamaulipas – again linked to access to drug transit routes into the U.S. – has likewise resulted in the depopulation of *ejidos* (community-owned lands) in oil-rich regions. One particular case of interest occurred when the Zeta paramilitaries attacked residents of the town of Allende, killing 300 citizens over several days. Mexican military forces deployed close to the town did not respond to the attacks. Allende is situated near springs, water resources that can be used for fracking as the region becomes progressively more de-populated (Osorno 2014). Narco-violence cleared the way for extractive development.

But it is not just narco-violence that secures this objective. Consider the following example:

In the municipality [county] of Guadalupe Victoria, Puebla, where Goldcorp [an important Canadian gold mining corporation] exploits the Preciosa mine, the phenomenon of social harassment has intensified. In this region, groups identified with the Zetas [a powerful criminal organization in Mexico] have made their presence known among the population through practices of extortion: they demand a quota of five pesos per day to respect property and lives. The object of the extortion is not the money, but the terror it sows among the inhabitants, who have begun a silent exodus that obliges them to discount the prices of their lands, which Goldcorp wants to acquire (Lemus 2017, 75)

What these examples suggest are the *symbiotic* relationships that exist in Mexico between organized crime and extractive development. This can be related to a larger pattern of privatized security structures enabling extractive development throughout Latin America (Bartilow 2019). Provision security might comprise police or paramilitary forces selling special protection services to extractive corporations. The role of the military is to act as a kind of security superstructure, establishing a militarized occupation of the national territory in which the repression of protest and resistance to extractive development can unfold while existing structures of political and economic privilege remain intact. Organized crime groups and the Mexican military are not opposed to one another in a mythical war on drugs *but are rather components within the same security structure* (Zavala 2022). That security structure is, to be sure, loosely configured rather than hierarchically ordered. It consists of shifting alliances between the Mexican and foreign corporations, Mexican security forces, including the military, political elites, and organized crime groups (Correa-Cabrera 2017).

One of the core arguments for U.S. military intervention in Mexico is that drug cartels have weakened the state and diminished its capacity to maintain order within its national territory. It is the case, however, that the Mexican military has surged under the current President, Lopez Obrador, expanding by 20% per year during the first three years of his administration. Since 2004, Mexican military spending has tripled (Centeno 2022). Central to all of this has been the role that successive Mexican presidents have given to the military for the provision of public security. This role, however, did not arise in response to increasing levels of violent conflict in Mexican society. Indeed, from 1992 to 2008 Mexico's murder rate declined from 19.54 to 8.9 per 100,000 and subsequently tripled in the years after 2008 (Macrotrends).

A War on Mexican Drug Cartels or a War on Surplus Humanity?

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War on Surplus Humanity

At the same time, concerted efforts at drug interdiction have failed miserably, a conclusion that can be drawn based on the declining price and growing availability of drugs in the U.S. For example, the price of a kilo of methamphetamine dropped from \$17,000 in 2016 to \$3,500 in 2022 (Dudley 2023, 26). The price for a pill of fentanyl in the state of Washington has dropped to a mere 50 cents (Ovalle and Miroff 2023). The U.S. has sought to step up interdiction of fentanyl at Mexican ports of entry into the United States, investing \$800 million in new detection technology. This has led to record levels of the seizures of fentanyl by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, but also to the redistribution of fentanyl production to Canada where Canadian rather than Mexican trafficking groups receive fentanyl precursors and pre-precursors from China and then manufacture fentanyl in what Canadian law enforcement personnel characterize as super labs.

Based on these trends, achieving fentanyl interdiction through military intervention against Mexican drug trafficking organizations is an absurd proposition. But, as we have already seen, fighting the war on drugs has never counted for much as a U.S. foreign policy proposal. Building a wall along the Southern border between the U.S. and Mexico also had little utility in terms of stopping unauthorized immigration to the United States. The point of these policies is to mobilize the power of the state to delineate boundaries between inside and outside, where inside is the exceptional space of American identity, which seeks to constitute itself by containing, surveilling, and incarcerating targeted populations of minorities and immigrants.

Such a disposition draws upon the pervasive power of the settler mindset in the United States (Singh 2019). At the heart of this orientation was the coercive exclusion of the non-whites from the settler self-rule as a condition of American freedom, abundance, and security. In recent decades, these practices of exclusion have been carried forward using the policies of racially targeted mass incarceration combined with an increasingly virulent nativism directed toward immigrants. Right-wing political and economic elites are intensifying friend/enemy distinctions because they see in them a means to legitimate political rule under an increasingly exclusionary pattern of capitalist development. The neoliberal narrative of free markets generating economic growth that “trickles down” to benefit working people is no longer credible (Patnaik 2021).

However, an alternative strategy of legitimation was immanent to the various forms of insecurity that the neoliberal order amplified. Enveloped within the maelstrom of capitalist restructuring and cultural transformation – associated with various liberation movements asserting the rights and dignity of subaltern subjects – patriotic Americans set off on a quest for ontological security (Agius, Bergman, and Kimball, 2020). This was found in various mythologies of a stable past, which could be restored under the auspices of the populist leader who both embodies this mythology and can speak for the “real” people. Here is the threshold where neo-fascism eclipses the neoliberal narrative of progress. Neofascism is authoritarian governance justified on the grounds of national resentment, but constrained by capitalist globalization. Its utility, for elites, is to generate legitimacy for a fundamentally unchanged economic status quo that can no longer be justified on neoliberal grounds.

This shift is not only political; neofascism, as William Robinson (2019) explains, also opens new pathways of accumulation. In this sense, Robinson focuses on the expansion of militarization from militarized Keynesianism, where military spending absorbed surplus capital into the production of military power to the more generalized form of militarization connected to order maintenance policing, mass incarceration, border security, drone warfare, Special Operations Forces, and the war on drugs – as well as conventional modes of U.S. military power projection. These emerging security practices circulate transnationally through training programs and the diffusion of new security technologies (Miller, 2019). Geographer Stephen Graham notes that “just as ideas of international security are coming home to organize domestic political life [in the form of militarized policing], so efforts to classify risky vs. risk-free populations, activities, and circulations are “moving out” to colonize the infrastructures, systems, and circulations which sustain transnational capitalism” (2011, 132).

Increasingly, the referent object of these security practices is surplus humanity – an amalgam of the criminal underclass, migrants, refugees, displaced, the unemployed, ethnic and sexual minorities, the homeless, and the poor. Surplus humanity consists of people who cannot be profitably incorporated into global capitalism – a sifting that

A War on Mexican Drug Cartels or a War on Surplus Humanity?

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occurs in terms of the conjoined logic of capitalist exploitation and racial exclusion (Fraser 2023). In this regard, Robinson (2019) writes:

By now, in this age of capitalist globalization, surplus humanity may be a politically as well as analytically superior concept to make sense of that mass of humanity thrown into the margins of the system. While there is a certain delinquent element among the mass of humanity that has been “thrown hither and thither” [Robinson quotes Karl Marx here] by the destabilization of capital, surplus humanity appears to be a structural category thrown up by an accelerated restructuring and a more advanced global capital accumulation (50).

It is the nation that must ultimately be protected from the supposedly contaminating effects of surplus humanity. This is ironic because capitalism, via digitalization, is expelling labor from production – with much higher levels of expulsion projected for the future. Neo-fascism, as a means to secure the legitimacy of the state, does not call a halt to ongoing processes of restructuring so much as it advances the interests of certain sectors of the capitalist class (particularly fossil fuels and extractive industries – see Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 2020) while mitigating the ontological insecurity for segments of the working classes and middle classes who otherwise would regard themselves as people with no future at all. It is also the case that the suppression of surplus humanity is a remunerative economic proposition for corporations involved in detention, deportation, border security, surveillance, counterinsurgency, and arms manufacturing. It generates employment and, as a bonus, the ongoing enculturation of broad segments of the public, employed by these agencies, into the routines of everyday repression (Connolly, 2017).

Branding the cartels as terrorist organizations opens numerous pathways of militarized accumulation while also defending the nation against the menace of the surplus humanity, now in the form of cartels, street gangs, migrants, drug users, and, of course, the criminal underclass. The borders of all of these groups are blurry and elastic, enabling wide-ranging practices of repression directed against anyone who resembles surplus humanity. Thus, a new war on drugs featuring U.S. military intervention against Mexican drug trafficking groups is not a means for drug (fentanyl) interdiction; it rather portends a new mode of political rule and capital accumulation in the United States.

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A War on Mexican Drug Cartels or a War on Surplus Humanity?

Written by Richard W. Coughlin

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