

MEXICO DRUG CARTELS: FIGHTING TRANSNATIONALISM WITH TRANSNATIONALISM

Particularly in light of the Administration's recent rollout of its Transnational Criminal Organization program, the NYT's article on our escalating war in Mexico raises several concerns. As I laid out, that program basically applies a number of GWOT tools—such as freezing of funds—to the fight against completely arbitrarily designated TCOs.

The NYT article shows how a terrorist approach has already been applied against Mexico's drug cartels.

In recent weeks, small numbers of C.I.A. operatives and American civilian military employees have been posted at a Mexican military base, where, for the first time, security officials from both countries work side by side in collecting information about drug cartels and helping plan operations. Officials are also looking into embedding a team of American contractors inside a specially vetted Mexican counternarcotics police unit.

Officials on both sides of the border say the new efforts have been devised to get around Mexican laws that prohibit foreign military and police from operating on its soil, and to prevent advanced American surveillance technology from falling under the control of Mexican security agencies with long histories of corruption.

Let's unpack this language: The US is operating

on Mexican soil at least partly to prevent “advanced American surveillance technology” from falling into corrupt Mexican security agency hands. Any bets on what that advanced technology is, particularly given that we could presumably wiretap extensively from the comfort of our own Folsom Street room or similar? How about drones?

The U.S. government has begun deploying drones into Mexico after Mexican officials requested U.S. aircraft to help them fight drug-trafficking organizations.

Although U.S. agencies remained tight-lipped Wednesday on flying drones over Mexico, the chief of the Mexican National Security Council, Alejandro Poiré, admitted that his government asked for this type of support to gather intelligence.

Poiré in a statement said the Mexican government defines the operations, most of which take place in border areas.

“When these operations take place, they are authorized and supervised by national agencies, including the Mexican Air Force,” Poiré said Wednesday.

Furthermore, Poiré said, the governments were not breaking any national sovereignty laws because they were simply assisting in gathering intelligence. The drones are for surveillance only and are not armed.

So, particularly given Benjamin Wittes’ and my earlier agreement that one of the risks of drones is that some entity—a terrorist organization or a drug cartel—would gain control of one or more of them, reflect on the apparent fact that we’re deploying to Mexico, in part, to make sure that Mexico’s corrupt security agencies don’t have control of the drones we’ve got flying over Mexico.

This feels a lot like Pakistan already: the unreliable partner, the transparent fictions to make it appear as if a military invasion is not a military invasion.

Now add in the mercenar-um, I mean, the “team of American contractors.” A way to put boots on the ground while still pretending we’re not putting boots on the ground (don’t want to get into another one of those spats about what constitutes hostilities, you know).

“The government has argued that the number of deaths in Mexico is proof positive that the strategy is working and that the cartels are being weakened,” said Nik Steinberg, a specialist on Mexico at Human Rights Watch. “But the data is indisputable – the violence is increasing, human rights abuses have skyrocketed and accountability both for officials who commit abuses and alleged criminals is at rock bottom.”

Of course, our past use of mercenaries have shown they are susceptible to the same kind of corruption that we point to, in Mexico, as the reason why we need to station our own people there to keep (presumably) drones safe.

Now compare this report on Mexico from the NYT,

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With this must-read story about how our night

raids in Afghanistan—that get their target over 50% of the time (presumably meaning they hit the wrong target almost as often)—have led locals in the area where the 30 Americans got shot down over the weekend to sympathize with the Taliban.

“There are night raids every day or every other day,” said a second doctor who asked not to be identified because he feared for his safety. He said he lives about 100 yards from the parched riverbed where the U.S. Chinook helicopter crashed.

“The Americans are committing barbaric acts in the area and this is the reason that the Taliban have influence,” he said.

We’ve been using the tactics we appear to be rolling out now in Mexico for a decade already in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And while we’re down to just 50 or so members of al Qaeda, we seem to be destabilizing two already dicey countries.

And that’s the thing—and the reason I keep saying that using drones and mercs maybe isn’t the way to fight these transnational threats.

We’re arguing that the Mexican government is not strong enough right now to fly its own drones, much less defeat the cartels (even putting aside questions of the market we refuse to address here in the US). Yet to combat that, we’re chipping away at Mexican sovereignty.

Why, if these transnational threats are so dangerous to nation-states, do we keep using transnational forces to combat them?