



The question of the war on drugs in Mexico

Security Council (SC)



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Introduction

Mexico has struggled for a long time with the illicit trade of drugs and the organised crime which accompanies it. Since the 1970s, the drug trade from Mexico to the United States has been steadily rising. The demand for drugs has increased rapidly and with it, crime and violence rates. This has also meant the establishment of different drug cartels, with infamous drug lords leading highly violent and corrupt criminal organisations, revolving around producing and trading drugs like marijuana, fentanyl, and cocaine. Since December 2006, the Mexican government has made use of its army to fight off drug cartels and other drug-related criminal organisations. This is when the war on drugs in Mexico officially began, and the situation only got worse. The deployment of troops has caused more deaths, more human rights violations, and overall a worse situation. After more than 16 years, the war on drugs is still going on, with people dying every day. To improve the situation, the Mexican government has tried to work together with the UN, which has provided aid in several different ways. Examples of this are technical assistance, capacity building, and the development of effective drug control strategies. The UN's Office on Drugs and Crime has played a big part in these aid programs, working closely with the Mexican government to address the challenges posed by drug trafficking.



Definition of Key Terms

Drug cartels

A drug cartel is a criminal organisation which produces, smuggles, and distributes illegal drugs on a large scale, with significant influence and wealth.

Kingpin strategy

The kingpin strategy is a strategy implemented by the Mexican government focussed on arresting the most important leaders, kingpins, of drug cartels and other drug trafficking organisations (DTOs).

War on drugs

The war on drugs refers to the approach that is used by the Mexican government since December 2006. This approach consists of fighting drug cartels and drug trafficking organisations by mainly using military forces.



General Overview

A brief history of drug trafficking in Mexico

The illicit trade in drugs from Mexico, fuelled by the high demand for drugs in the United States, has been going on for a long time. During the 1960s and early seventies, the Mexican drug trade primarily focussed on the trafficking of marijuana, with drug traffickers taking advantage of corrupt Mexican officials and weak law enforcement against drug trafficking. Later, in mostly the 1980s trafficking increased when the United States' policy against the Colombian drug trade was launched, and the flow of drugs from South America slowed down. Mexico also became a main supplier of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine for the United States. This rise in drug trafficking also induced the founding of the first drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) in Mexico, these organisations also included several more well-known cartels, for example, the Tijuana and Sinaloa cartels. These organisations established very well-organised and powerful networks to bring drugs into the USA, and violence and corruption rates kept rising in these organisations, in order to keep controlling different territories and access to the drug market. Violence in and in between different drug cartels kept rising and the situation kept getting worse. New cartels were established, and others were split into more sub-groups.

In December 2006 the situation with drug trafficking organisations was so bad the newly inaugurated Mexican president officially declared a 'War on drugs' by sending 6500 troops into the state of Michoacán, in order to stem the fighting caused by rival cartels fighting for territory, which had been going since 2005, and to dismantle as much DTO as possible. This war on drugs was supported financially and militarily by the United States, and eventually, an extraordinary amount of 50000 troops were deployed in states with significant drug cartel activity, with mixed success. The army began by supporting already existing law enforcement agencies, but soon began to be a replacement for them. Human rights violations became more and more common, since security forces were under pressure to make arrests, and get confessions, meaning that for example, torture by security forces increased by 600% from 2003 to 2006, according to Amnesty International. And there are many more examples of human rights abuses by security forces and cartel members. The costs of the war on drugs are well illustrated by the number of homicides since 2006, more than 360.000, with most of them being directly related to the war on drugs.

One of the main strategies used by the Mexican government to combat DTOs has been the kingpin strategy, this entails that security forces try to arrest as many important leaders of drug cartels, in order to destruct these drug cartels from the top down. This strategy for example led to the arrest of the Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquín 'El Chapo' Gúzman. But as with most of the other arrests of drug cartel leaders, the situation did not change fundamentally. Following the arrest a power vacuum would arise, meaning a big increase in fighting in the organisation for who will be in charge, causing a lot of unrest in the surroundings. And eventually, when a new leader has arisen, the situation has not changed and the operation, and more importantly its costs, both in lives and money, have all been for nothing.



Furthermore, the kingpin strategy has been criticised, because one of the effects of this strategy is a weakening of the cartels and big DTOs, without tackling underlying problems, such as corruption, impunity, and a lack of economic chances in Mexico. Arresting a leader of an organisation deeply tied to drug trafficking thus often results in some smaller criminal groups being formed, which engage in a lot of deadly feuds, from which civilians are also suffering.

The current Mexican Criminal Landscape

It can be difficult to know how the different criminal organisations are operating and what different organisations exist. A tool which has helped us to do this, are the narcoblogs. These are several different citizen journalism websites, which focus on mapping out this criminal conflict, which is much easier for these websites since they are made by civilians. From these narcoblogs, we see that between 2009 and 2020, a total of at least 543 different armed groups have operated, with the amount of active ones more than doubling from 76 to 205. Most of these groups are small to medium-sized organisations, which are very different from the 'classic' drug cartels often associated with organized crime in Mexico. This fragmentation of Mexican organised crime, which mainly revolves around drug trafficking, has a high correlation to the number of homicides. First of all, it has created more potential fronts of conflict for criminal groups. This eventually led to more conflicts because there were fewer criminal groups and drug cartels which had less allies that could keep these smaller groups from fighting each other. The situation in Mexico right now is characterized by this large amount of small criminal groups, which are not only focussing on drug trafficking, but expanding themselves to other fields of crime. Furthermore, several bigger groups and drug cartels are being fragmented by internal conflict and the consequences of the kingpin strategy. This criminal landscape, a recipe for homicides and violence, has been created mainly by the war on drugs.

Drug cartels

To understand how to solve the issue of the war on drugs in Mexico, it is essential to understand how most drug cartels operate. One of the main factors in this issue is understanding how they work and why it is so hard to combat them.

Most of the drug cartels have a vertical hierarchy, with one main leader, with some smaller leaders under him, and even more and smaller leaders under them, etcetera. This creates a pyramid in which these organisations are managed. One of the more outstanding parts of the organisation in drug cartels is the fact they have hardly any written communication or guidelines. Almost all commands and other communications are given verbally and in person. This is a key factor in how drug cartels can be very flexible in adapting to changes in the drug market or new law enforcement policy, which is possible because they are not slowed down by long, highly structured procedures, and can adapt via personal interactions. This limitation to face-to-face contact in drug cartels does not lead to less coordination in these organisations. Most of the crimes organised by cartels are carefully planned out and there are always backup plans. They have proven to be very effective in providing specific tasks to members all over the organisation. These very limited tasks and roles mean that



one, or even a hundred, members of a big cartel are not able to provide sufficient information to law enforcement, because they have only been given limited information. But who are these members of drug cartels? Usually, these are poor, uneducated people with little connection to society dragged into the deep webs of these cartels, which often leaves them with little empathy towards others in society.

This complexity of drug cartels makes them, and the whole issue, hard to combat.



Major Parties Involved

Mexico

Because the Mexican government has started the 'War on Drugs', Mexico is a big actor in this issue. Mexico is struggling with high violence rates and a vast number of human rights abuses and will receive most aiding efforts from other countries with gratitude. They are, however, often criticised for their violent approach, which has had limited positive effects.

The United States

The United States is a key player in Mexican drug trafficking, due to the high demand for drugs in especially states bordering Mexico. The US government has also contributed to the Mexican war on drugs with the Mérida Initiative, which provided \$1,5 billion of assistance during its first few years, and in the last years, the yearly assistance sits at about \$140 million. This money is being used to aid Mexican security forces and reform the criminal justice system to a system which resembles the US system more closely. Many parties believe the US should be a leading resolver in this conflict since they have the largest illegal drug market.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

For the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the Mexican drug war is a big concern. The UNODC has provided several different forms of aid towards Mexico, such as providing drug identification technology. It has also started different initiatives, with a shared goal of improving the drug-related situation in Mexico, concerning urban safety and bringing together people from different parts of society to tackle this issue.



Timeline of Events

Date	Event
Late 1960s 1978	US drug use rates rise. The founding of the Guadalajara cartel, which was the first Mexican drug cartel.
Late 1980s	One of the biggest Mexican cartels, the Sinaloa cartel, was established.
1 Dec 2006	Mexican President Felipe Calderón enters office.
11 Dec 2006	Start of the 'War on Drugs'.
2 Jan 2007	Mexican government launches an operation to fight the Tijuana cartel.
22 Oct 2007	The US announces the Merida Initiative to assist Mexico in its drug war.
2009	Calderon sends another 10.000 troops to Ciudad Juarez, one of the bloodiest places in the drug war.
12 Jan 2010	Police capture Teodoro 'El Teo' Garcia Simental, another drug kingpin.
22 Feb 2014	Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzman, leader of the Sinaloa cartel, arrested.
11 July 2015	Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzman escape from prison.
18 Nov 2019	UNODC donates drug identification technology to the Mexican government.
6 Jan 2023	29 people killed in drug cartel gunmen fight.



Previous attempts at solving the issue

The United Nations has noticed a big increase in homicides and human rights violations due to the violent war on drugs in Mexico and, obviously, thinks this is very pressing. Thus, the UN has taken several steps in resolving the issue of the war on drugs in Mexico. One of the key measures the United Nations is taking is supporting drug policy reform. They recognise the current approach to drug control, has had limited effects, focusing too much on punishment and repression. The UN is now promoting alternative approaches, which focus on public health and human rights, such as harm reduction programs and decriminalization of drug use. The UN is working with several Mexican civil society organisations and human rights groups to monitor human rights abuses and is pressing the Mexican government to take steps towards protecting human rights. Finally, the UN is supporting border security in Mexico, working with both the US and Mexican governments to disrupt drug trade along the border. The UN is providing technical assistance and support for border security forces and advocating for the Mexican government to take steps towards addressing corruption along the border.



Possible solutions

In the previous chapters, we have seen that the Mexican and US governments and the United Nations have taken various measures to resolve this issue. Still, we see the consequences of the war on drugs today: only one month ago an article from the Guardian named “Twenty-four hours of terror as cartel violence engulfs Mexican city” came out which shows us the drug-related violence that is still taking place in Mexico until this day. This lets us realise the efforts previously made to resolve the issue have not been sufficient, and maybe a whole new strategy is needed.

Delegates need to find ways to strengthen current efforts at resolving the issues, and/or find new solutions. These new solutions could focus on limiting the demand for drugs in mainly the United States, by starting campaigns against drug use, improving the situation of poor citizens, implementing more strict legislation, or trying to solve the issue mainly with the international community, instead of leaving it mostly to Mexico and the US themselves. In strengthening current efforts at resolving the issues, it is a good idea for delegates to inspire some clauses on measures already taken by the UN, which they think would be more effective if these were legally binding, which is possible because you are in the Security Council. Other countries may believe only the human rights situation needs to be improved, and the issue will be solved.



Useful documents

This is the site of the UNODC, where articles are made on the efforts the UNODC tries to fight drug-related problems and crime. You will find tons of information on the Mexican Drug War when searching for terms such as: 'Mexico' or 'War on drugs Mexico'

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/index.html>

This website gives a great overview of the War on Drugs in Mexico:

<https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-3-mexico/moments-in-mexican-history/inside-mexicos-drug-wars/>

This Wikipedia page, despite being a Wikipedia page, gives a great overview of all the events in the Mexican drug war:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Mexican_drug_war



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