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The Colombianization of Mexico? The Evolving Mexican Drug War

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A gangland-style multiple slaying in a restaurant. An economy propped up with narco-dollars. Assassinations of drug dealers, journalists and DEA informants. Drug scandals at the highest levels of the military. Judges inexplicably dropping charges against major kingpins.

It may sound like Colombia, circa 1990, but these are headlines from the last month in Mexico, and to many they suggest a country reeling under the weight of drug warfare and corruption. Analysts expect the problems will only get worse as Mexico tries to shake itself from the grip of powerful drug mafias that have deeply penetrated the country's institutions and are unlikely to let go without a bloody, violent fight.

John Anderson, "Mexican Drug Crisis Echoes Bloody Colombian Pattern," *Washington Post* 8/11/97

Gone are the days when Mexico's drug war was an abstraction for most people, something they lamented over the morning papers as if it were unfolding far away. Reminders are everywhere, like the radios blasting drug ballads that romanticize the criminals and the giant banners that drug cartels hang from overpasses to recruit killers and threaten rivals.

Marc Lacey, "Drug Violence Alters the Flow of Life in Mexico," *New York Times* 8/30/08

It is a time of extraordinary violence all over Mexico. Feuding drug-trafficking groups and the federal government's military crackdown against organized crime have left 5,376 dead this year.

Ken Ellingwood, "Extreme Drug Violence Grips Mexico Border City," *Los Angeles Times* 12/19/08

Introduction: The Colombianization of Mexico

The news from Mexico is grim. Drug-related violence has climbed every year of the Calderon Administration: at least 8150 people have been killed since he took office. No one is safe; Mexico's chief of police and the head of the federal police's organized crime division were both assassinated. Decapitated heads are thrown into discos, young children killed as bystanders. The violence is appalling and escalating.

For many, this suggests that Mexico is heading down the path charted by Colombia. Observers worry that Mexico is experiencing "Colombianization." Does the future of Mexico include such things as a burning Supreme Court building, bombs detonated in major financial institutions, and large swathes of land outside the control of the state and under the control of revolutionary forces?

Despite the news coming from Mexico, I would argue that Mexico is not undergoing "Colombianization". There are critical aspects of the situations in both Colombia and Mexico that differentiate the two countries. The need to distinguish between conditions in Colombia and Mexico is crucial. Public policy is shaped by analogies. If policy makers think the Mexico is undergoing "Colombianization," then there will be a tendency to apply the same policies to Mexico (a tendency already manifest with the *Merida Imitative*). Furthermore, poorly understood situations give rise to poorly planned policies that are unlikely to achieve their objectives. Since Mexico differs from Colombia, a "Colombian" solution is unlikely to work. In the material offered below, I hope to correct this misunderstanding by identifying significant dissimilarities between Colombia and Mexico. My goal is to accentuate the differences between the two countries that refute the "Colombianization" hypothesis. I conclude the paper with an

assessment of policies that have been pursued in Colombia and suggested for Mexico; the prognosis for the future is not good.

It is clear that drug trafficking generates violence and threatens state institutions. Decades of drug war policies that emphasize eradication, extradition, interdiction, and prohibition have not ended drug use in the United States. Research in the field suggests that supply side approaches fundamentally fail to resolve the problem. By targeting supply rather than demand, the illicit activity shifts location rather than stops. This is commonly referred to as the “balloon effect.” Likewise, the law enforcement, supply side approach is associated with increased violence as drug networks are disrupted. Thus, if the US and Mexico pursue the same policy as undertaken in Colombia, Mexico might well see increased violence. Furthermore, past experience suggests that drug traffickers will modify their operations rather than cease to traffic.

Key Terms and Concepts

The term “Colombianization” is often used to signify widespread drug violence. This is typically the implication when utilized with reference to Mexico. For example,

For years, people both inside and outside Mexico have worried that the country might descend into the maelstrom of corruption and violence that has long plagued the chief drug-source country in the Western Hemisphere, Colombia. There are growing signs that the “Colombianization” of Mexico is now becoming a reality. (Carpenter, 2005)

A quick review of the term indicates that it has been applied to many different countries in addition to Mexico (such as Guatemala, Brazil). I am not challenging its potential applicability to other countries. However, I would like to specify more precisely all of the elements implied by “Colombianization.” At a minimum “Colombianization” refers to “the disintegration of institutions-political, economic and social - and a permanent state of violent crime”. (Jordan, 1999: 166)

The rise of drug violence in Colombia was accompanied by the loss of state control within the borders of Colombia. Several non-state actors were strengthened; their power and prominence was financed by drug proceeds (see Jordan, 1999, esp. Chapter 9). While these various actors played a role in drug production and trafficking, a number of them had other political and economic objectives. Drugs provided a means to another end. Violence was only part of the process: the broad based breakdown of various institutions was another key aspect. Thus, the term “Colombianization” suggests that the state faces challenges to its basic functioning and its ability to govern. More than just gruesome violence and corruption, “Colombianization” connotes the beginnings of a failed state.

By utilizing the term “Colombianization” observers are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) making an analogy between Colombia and Mexico. Analogies play an important role in policy

development (see, for example, Khong, 1992). Of particular interest for me is the role that analogies play in framing an issue. While policy frames perform several functions, two are of special importance. First, frames suggest successful and unsuccessful strategies. Furthermore, frames shape public (and policy makers') opinion about situation and policies. As research in prospect theory demonstrates, frames determine the degree of risk acceptance (see, among others, Berejekian, 1997; Boettcher III, 2004; and, Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler, 1991). Risk aversion and risk acceptance is not constant; rather, people view risk differently depending upon whether or not they perceive the situation to be one of gain or loss. Frames are one method of establishing the "gain/loss" domain. A policy framed as successful (even mildly so) places it in a gain domain; this is associated with risk aversion and thereby increases the likelihood of maintaining current policy. In contrast, a frame that places policy in a loss domain opens the door to greater possibility of policy change, since loss domain is associated with risk acceptance. Thus, the framing Mexico has profound policy implications.

Is Mexico Another Colombia?

Should policy makers and analysts make an analogy between Mexico and Colombia? Clearly there is a case to be made for "framing" the situation in this way. The current situation in Mexico is reminiscent of Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s. Mexican traffickers are targeting state officials; corruption is plaguing local, state, and federal government. The homicide rate is rising fast; drug traffickers appear to act with impunity. Compare the two following quotes:

Machine gun- and grenade-toting ... dispense personal justice as it strikes them, waging gang wars, and assassinating police and judicial officials who resist corruption, or simply innocent citizens unwilling to sell their land, boat, business, or house. Thus lawlessness related to drug trafficking has a destabilizing effect on life ... (Lupsha, 1981: 110)

The gangland-style violence has left almost no corner ... untouched. Drug-related slayings take place in houses, restaurants and bars, at playgrounds and children's parties, and in car-to-car ambushes. ... [A]ll around are signs of social fraying. Menacing notes appear outside schools warning of harm unless teachers hand over their year-end bonuses. The city's most respected crime reporter, Armando Rodriguez, of the El Diario newspaper, is dead, sprayed by gunfire two weeks earlier as he sat in his car in front of his home. (Ellingwood, 2008)

The situations certainly sound similar. Indeed, one might not be able to identify which quote refers to what country. The article from 1981 concerns Colombia; the second quote (from 2008) is about Mexico. From the perspective of these reports, Colombia and Mexico share unfortunate

similarities. While almost thirty years separate the two quotes, the violence and destruction unleashed by the drug war has not changed.

From a more long-term perspective, the circumstances in Mexico and Colombia today could be considered unexpected. Ten years ago (1998-1999), the state of affairs appeared different. At that time Colombia seemed to be on the brink of collapse. The Colombian state was being marginalized; conflict between revolutionary forces and paramilitary forces dominated national security concerns. The state did not control all of its territory; often it was not even a participant in violent, large scale military actions.

In contrast, ten years ago Mexico seemed to be on an upward trajectory. It was on the verge of solidifying its democratization with the election of an opposition candidate, Vicente Fox, to the presidency. In terms of the drug war, the United States was confident that the end of PRI rule would signal a new era in US-Mexican relations. Typically the United States government had considered PRI rule as corrupt and a fundamental contributor to the failing drug war. (Scherlen, 2008) Relations between the states had been strained by the annual certification process. For part the 1990s Mexico had declined US counter narcotics assistance. But the election of Fox was perceived to mark a major change: State Department International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports for 2002 and 2003 stated that “the United States and Mexico achieved unprecedented levels of cooperation in fighting drug trafficking”. However, Fox Administration really marked a continuation of a deteriorating drug war. By the end of Fox’s term,

the United States ... openly berated Mexico for failing to stop a wave of drug-related violence that has taken close to 1,000 lives along the 2,000-mile border. The Bush administration ... issued numerous travel advisories and temporarily closed its consulate in the city of Nuevo Laredo, which has turned into a murder capital as drug traffickers fight for control of lucrative routes into Texas. (Thompson, 2005)

The election of the Calderon Administration in 2006 was cheered by the US government:

experts on the drug trade [were] optimistic that [Calderon] [would] do better than Mr. Fox. *They note that Mr. Calderon has adopted strategies that worked in Colombia in the 1990s*: using the military to take back regions where drug dealers control the local authorities, extraditing top cartel members to the United States and eradicating crops of marijuana and poppies. (McKinley, 2007-emphasis added)

Notice the policy analogy between Mexico and Colombia. In this case, observers were expressing a positive connection: successful policies in Colombia were to be implemented (and likewise be successful) in Mexico.

Of course, some might argue that the drug war has not been very successful waged in Colombia. While violence has declined from the levels experienced throughout the late eighties and the nineties, Colombia remains a main player in the international drug market. According to the latest data from the World Drug Report, Colombia continues to account for a majority of global coca cultivation.

When did the situation change? When did Colombia become a (possible) model for success and Mexico a country on the brink of disaster? Colombia clearly had higher levels of drug-related violence in the past; the latter years of the 2nd Uribe Administration have been associated with declining kidnapping, killing, and improvements in the security situation. Conversely, Mexico is now experiencing unprecedented levels of drug-related violence. Does this mean that Mexico is undergoing “Colombianization” and therefore should look to the Uribe Administration for clues to remedy the situation?

I would urge caution. There are many differences between the two countries, several of which impact upon drug war policy. First, each country has a distinct role in the international drug market. Colombia is both a producing country and transit country for heroin, cocaine, and (marginally) marijuana. Mexico produces marijuana and heroin but serves solely as a transshipment point for cocaine. Most of the drug war emphasis is on cocaine trafficking. This influences the strategies that can be applied, as well as the responses available to traffickers.

Another key element is geography. As Porfirio Diaz noted – “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.” Geography enables Colombia to successfully grow heroin, cocaine, and marijuana, as well as serve as a transit point for products traveling north. Its rugged terrain make waging counterinsurgency difficult; it also offers ample opportunity for drug production and transit to go undetected. Mexico’s key geographic characteristic is its border with the United States. The proximity of Mexico to the US has led to a long history of illicit smuggling (both drugs and alcohol in the early years of the 20th century). The long and porous border makes Mexico a natural transit country for illegal goods destined for the US. The difficulty with policing movement across the border has only increased with the growth of legal traffic between the US and Mexico.

These elements noted above are important differences between Mexico and Colombia. Yet they do not really identify why Mexico is not experiencing “Colombianization.” There are three crucial aspects that distinguish the situation in Mexico from that of Colombia. Each aspect in its own way refutes the “Colombianization” argument.

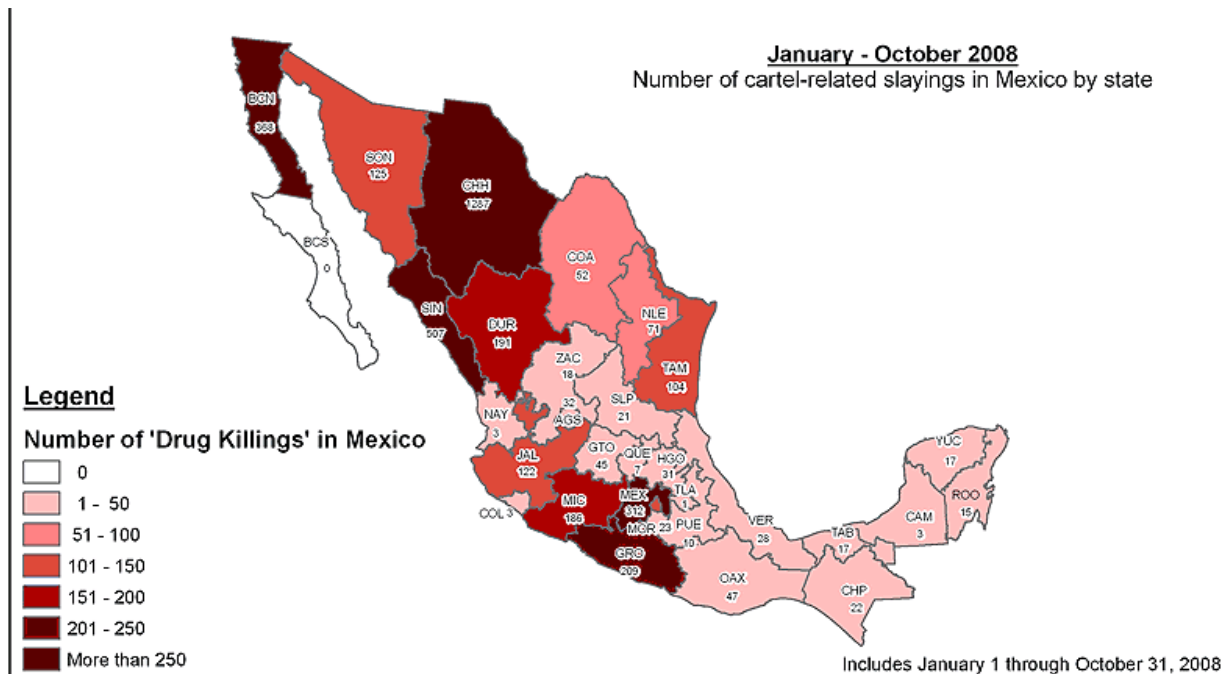
Level and extent of violence

A comparison of the two countries shows different degrees of violence as well as differences in its extensiveness. The number of drug-related deaths in Colombia and Mexico are often compared. For instance, in 2008 it is estimated that 5276 killings (ending December 2, 2008) took place in Mexico; however, Mexico’s overall homicide rate in 2007 was 11 deaths per 100,000 people – a fraction of the rates in Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador and Brazil (Lacey, 2008). Due to its larger population, Mexico can have an overall number of murders comparative

with Colombia and still not experience the same level of violence. The latest data from Colombia shows in 2007 a homicide rate of 37 deaths per 100,000 people. This rate is over three times that of Mexico; at the same time, it represents a significant reduction in Colombian violence. Twelve years ago, in 1997, it was 60 people per 100,000 (Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses, 2008).

Drug violence in Mexico occurs primarily in northern Mexico, near the border with the United States as well as traditional centers of production and trafficking, Sinaloa and Guerrero. While some spectacular events have taken place in other states (eleven bodies found bloody heads rolled into a disco in Acapulco, Guerrero, for example), extensive drug-related violence has not spread to other states. (See Map 1 for overview)

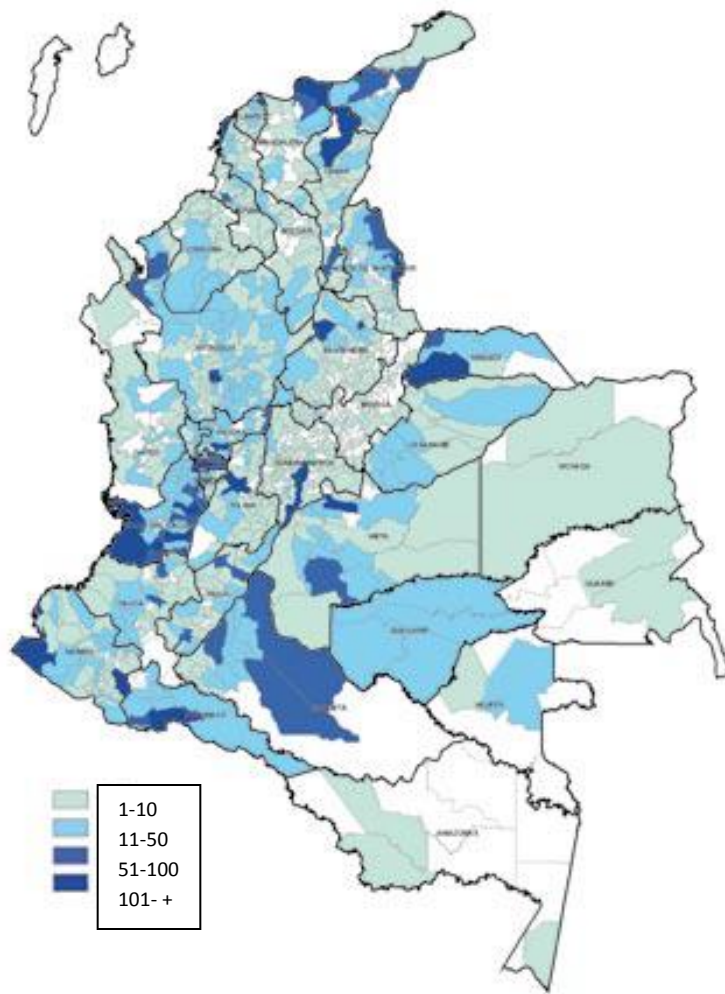
Map 1: Drug-related Killings in Mexico, Jan-Oct 2008



Source: Transborder Institute, University of San Diego

In contrast, a map of drug-related violence in Colombia encompasses the entire country. So many actors are engaged in violence that maps tend to distinguish between those with “high homicide rates” versus those closer to the national average. (See Maps 2 and 3) A review of the map indicates the pervasiveness of violence.

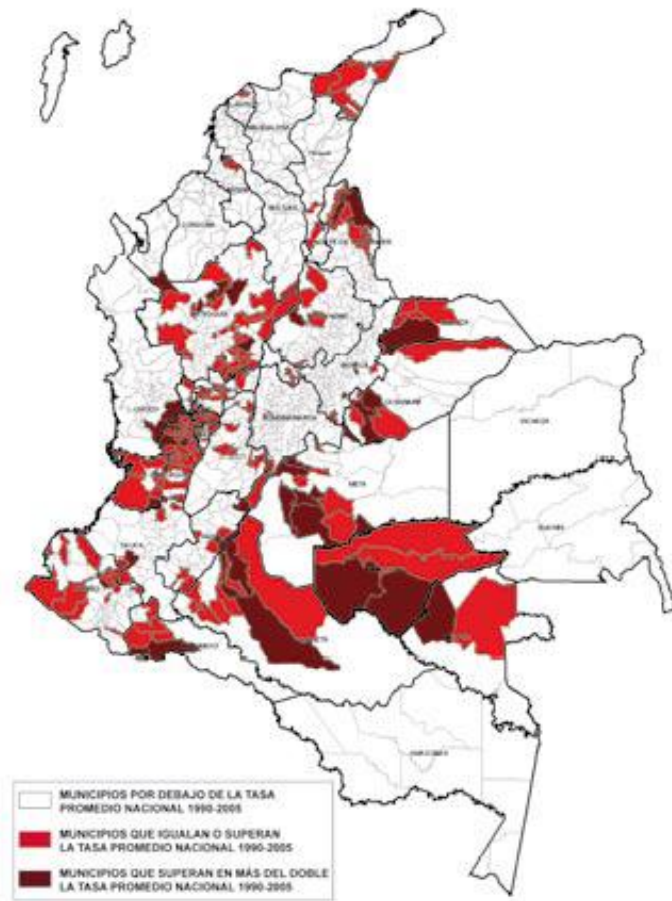
Map 2: Homicides, Colombia: 2005



Source: Dinámica espacial de las muertes violentas en Colombia, pg. 35.

The actual number of deaths noted in Map 2 does not provide sufficient information due to the varying population densities found across Colombia. Map 3 offers more information by coding the map with reference to homicide rates. Those areas not colored have homicide rates below the national average (41 per 100,000). Red areas have homicide rates higher than the national average. And dark red areas have homicide rates more than double the national average.

Map 3: Colombian Homicide Rates, 2005



Source: Dinámica espacial de las muertes violentas en Colombia, pg. 35.

Note that these figures do not include battlefield deaths from confrontations between the military and guerrillas, not does it include assassinations by paramilitaries groups, nor does it include deaths that take place in massacres.

As the above suggests, violence in Colombia is (1) more common, (2) more widespread, and (3) more extensive than the drug-related violence in Mexico. While the sense of vulnerability and insecurity might seem similar to observers, that experienced in Colombia is (and has been for decades) quantitatively and qualitatively different.

Socio-Economic and Political Conditions

Another distinguishing factor between Mexico and Colombia are the differing socio-economic and political conditions in each country. This is critical because of the another element to be examined later – the different actors engaged in violence in each country.

The UN Human Development Report provides information for a number of critical socio-economic variables. The objective of the Human Development Report is to assess the quality of life of people in different countries by measuring comparable indicators. In all of the variables measured by the UN Human Development Report, Mexico performs better than Colombia. (See Table 1). Taken together, this suggests a very different context within which each state must fight against drug violence. As explored in greater detail below, these socio-economic differences also influence which actors are engaged in violence and towards what goals.

Table 1: A Comparison of Socio-Economic Indicators for Mexico and Colombia

Indicator	Mexico	Colombia
Human Development Ranking	51	80
GINI Index (measurement of income inequality; the higher the number, the worse inequality exists)	46.1	58.6
Share of income/consumption, richest 10%	39.4%	46.9%
Share of income/consumption, poorest 10%	1.6%	0.7%
Population living below national poverty line (%)	17.6%	64%
GDP per capita (PPP)	10,751	7,304
Official unemployment rate	3.5%	11.8%

Data from UN Human Development Report 2007/2008

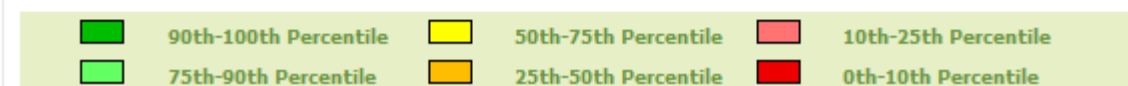
The high rate of poverty and sizeable income inequality in both countries is noteworthy. However, from a comparative perspective, the situation in Colombia is worse than in Mexico. I would argue that these socio-economic conditions influence drug production and trafficking; therefore, they are significant for the structuring of drug policy.

Political conditions in Mexico and Colombia differ as well. Freedom House ranks Colombia “partly free” while Mexico is considered “free”. (Freedom House, 2008) Indicators from the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators suggest the political context in Colombia, like its socio-economic context, is worse than in Mexico. (See Charts 1, 2, and 3)

Chart 1: Voice and Accountability

Statistical Table: Voice and Accountability, Comparison across selected countries

Country	Sources	Year	Percentile Rank (0-100)	Governance Score (-2.5 to +2.5)	Standard Error
COLOMBIA	17	2007	39.4	-0.28	0.12
MEXICO	16	2007	48.6	-0.02	0.13

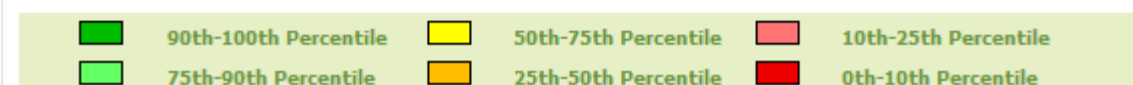


Source: Kaufmann, Daniel, Kraay, Aart and Mastruzzi, Massimo (2008)

Chart 2: Political Stability

Statistical Table: Political Stability, Comparison across selected countries

Country	Sources	Year	Percentile Rank (0-100)	Governance Score (-2.5 to +2.5)	Standard Error
COLOMBIA	11	2007	7.7	-1.65	0.20
MEXICO	11	2007	25.5	-0.57	0.20

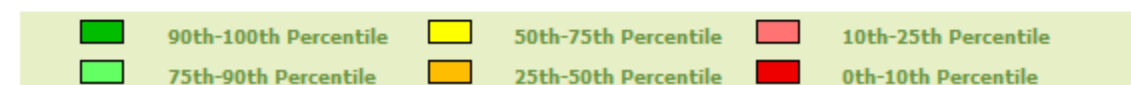


Source: Kaufmann, Daniel, Kraay, Aart and Mastruzzi, Massimo (2008)

Chart 3: Government Effectiveness

Statistical Table: Government Effectiveness, Comparison across selected countries

Country	Sources	Year	Percentile Rank (0-100)	Governance Score (-2.5 to +2.5)	Standard Error
COLOMBIA	15	2007	57.8	+0.03	0.16
MEXICO	15	2007	60.2	+0.13	0.16



Source: Kaufmann, Daniel, Kraay, Aart and Mastruzzi, Massimo (2008)

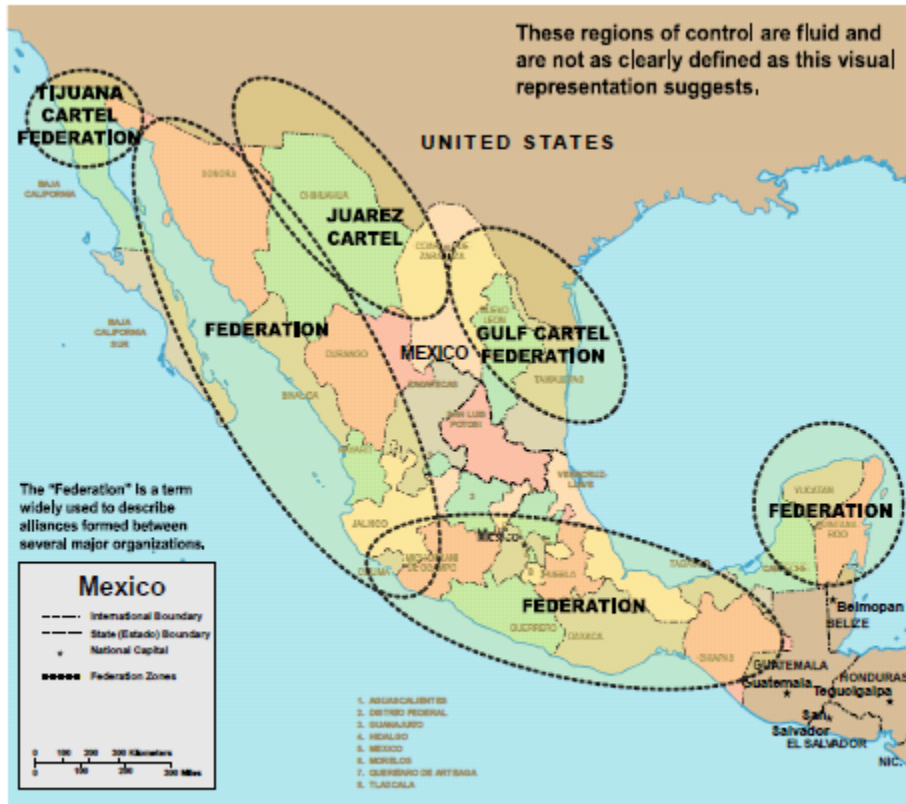
As in the case with socio-economic indicators, these political indicators suggest that conditions in Colombia are broadly worse than in Mexico. And both the socio-economic and political conditions have given rise to a critical distinction between Mexico and Colombia: the strength of non-actors that seek to achieve political aims outside the bounds of legal political activity.

Perpetrators of and Motives for Violence

I would argue that the conditions noted above give rise to the single most important difference between Mexico and Colombia—what actors engaged in drug production, trafficking, and why. In the case of Colombia, the situation in the country includes not only the state and drug cartels but also paramilitary groups (such as the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia – known by its Spanish language acronym, AUC) and revolutionary groups (such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – known by its Spanish language acronym, FARC). Each non-state actor has some role in the drug trade. But paramilitary groups and revolutionary groups have purposes beyond self-enrichment (in theory, at least). These actors are drug-financed but politically motivated. Revolutionary groups such as FARC and ELN are political forces that seek revolutionary change in Colombia; their roots lie in La Violencia and even earlier political movements in Colombia (see Kirk, 2003 and Livingstone, 2003, among others). The paramilitary groups arose to protect landowners, the wealthy, and drug traffickers from the revolutionary groups. Both sets of non-state actors pose a threat to the state by undermining what many consider to be the most basic attribute of a state: monopoly of use of force. Thus, the violence in Colombia is multifaceted: (1) clashes between drug rivals for control and dominance; (2) clashes between the state and revolutionary forces as part of an on-going insurgency; (3) clashes between paramilitaries and revolutionary forces; and (4) acts of violence committed by paramilitary forces against civilian populations. I would argue that it is this mix of drug-financed violence perpetuated by numerous actors that constitutes the essence of “Colombianization.”

In contrast, the violence that has plagued Mexico in recent years stems directly from the drug trade. The best known opponent of the state – the EZLN (known as the Zapatistas, or the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) have renounced the use of force. The other commonly identified group, EPR (the Popular Revolutionary Army) is concentrated in Guerrero. According to the Los Angeles Times, “the EPR is an ‘army’ probably consisting of fewer than 100 people, including several members of five extended families with roots in Oaxaca.” (September 20, 2007) It has not, since its emergence in the mid-1990s, developed into anything approaching either the FARC or the ELN. The violence being experienced in Mexico focuses on two elements: (1) intimidation of state actors in order to facilitate drug trafficking and (2) conflicts between drug traffickers in order to take control of an area and increase profits. A long-term perspective reinforces this interpretation. From the late 1980s on, every time a shift in cartel strength occurred (frequently due to the actions of the Mexican state against an organization), drug-related violence increased. (Scherlen, 2008) Compare the map below with Map 1: drug violence in Mexico is taking place in cartel-dominated locations.

Map 4: Mexican Drug Cartels and Their Areas of Operation



Source: U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, adapted by CRS (P. McGrath 3/2/2007)

The United States government recognizes the cartel-based source of Mexican violence and, more importantly, its link to the drug war. As a report to Congress notes, “[t]he 2002 arrest of Benjamin Arellano Felix, head of the Tijuana cartel, and the 2003 arrest of Gulf cartel head Osiel Cárdenas, led to a realignment of Mexican cartels and increased turf wars” as remaining cartels sought to increase their prominence and market share within the United States (Cook, 2007: 11)

Drug production and drug trafficking are contributing factors to Colombian violence. Arguably, the money associated with drugs has enhanced the capacity of revolutionary and paramilitary groups, thereby increasing the amount of violence. Likewise, it has made the task of the government even more difficult. In contrast, the violence in Mexico is wholly attributable to drugs. Indeed, the drug war itself has accentuated the violence in Mexico. The two cases are dissimilar; the United States should not advocate similar policy to both.

Conclusion: The Long-Term Perspective

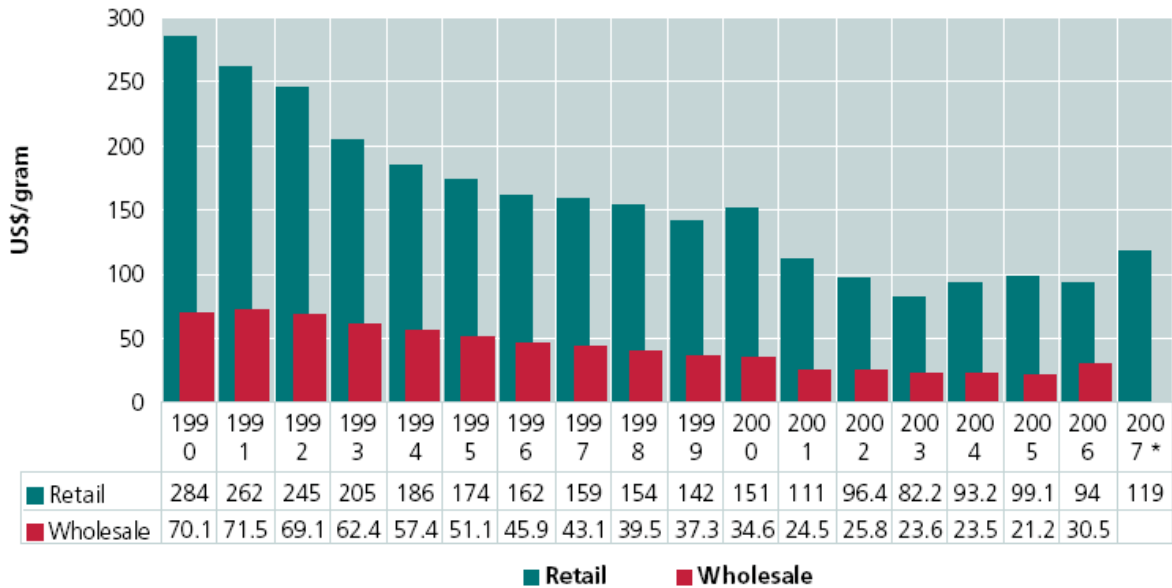
The United States should not look to Colombia to shape the drug war in Mexico. First, the conditions in each country are significantly different. Second, it is arguable that Plan Colombia and subsequent “Andean Imitative” have not been very successful (see, for instance, the GAO Report issued October, 2008). Clearly the security situation in Colombia has improved. Plan Colombia assisted a weak state caught in the midst of a fight between revolutionaries and paramilitaries. However, drug production and trafficking continue. Furthermore, Colombia is still a more violent country than Mexico. Colombia can only be considered a success if (1) it is compared to its recent past; (2) the focus remains on violence, not drug production and trafficking; and, (3) if Colombia is not compared to other countries. Unfortunately, analysts and policy makers typically perceive the “drug war” to be identical in these different countries. Furthermore, the recent success of the state against paramilitary and revolutionary forces has been seen as success in the drug war. And, given perceptions about the “Colombianization” of Mexico, this “success” in Colombia has resulted in calls for the implementation of the same policies in Mexico.

Evidence from Mexico’s own past as well as the experiences of other countries suggest that Mexico will continue to suffer an upward spiral of violence as drug war is pursued vigorously. As it is conducted at present, the drug war has a supply-side emphasis: eradication, extradition, and interdiction seek to lessen (and ultimately stop) the flow of drugs into the United States. However, without modifying the demand for drugs, the drug war creates perverse outcomes. Reduced supply with constant demand results in higher prices. Higher prices create a greater incentive for drug production and trafficking (higher profits). The arrest of a key figure opens the door for a new “kingpin”. To emerge as a leader in the illicit trade one typically must eliminate rivals, thereby increasing violence. Drug war tactics and strategy have caused the drug violence in Mexico. If Calderon continues to follow the same path with US support, the violence will not abate. However, since violence increases costs for cartels, smart traffickers will search for alternative routes and “peace negotiations” with rivals. As was seen in Colombia with the demise of the Cali and Medellin cartels, in the wake of extreme turf wars often arise a new set of traffickers who are more “low key” and “businesslike”.

A decrease in drug-related violence would be beneficial for Mexico. The scenario described above, however, should not be confused with a “victory” in the war on drugs. The relatively improved security situation in Colombia has had no impact on the flow of drugs out of the country. Indeed, any long term assessment of the drug war leads to the same conclusion: it is a failure. President Nixon first declared the war on drugs in June, 1971. President Ronald Reagan renewed federal efforts with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986; President George H.W. Bush inaugurated a concerted policy with the formation of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and the appointment of a “Drug Czar.” The evidence reveals that the enormous expenditures and countless deaths have not had a significant impact on drug use in the United

States. (Robinson and Scherlen, 2007) The US drug war policy has not achieved its objectives. US assistance to foreign countries has extracted tremendous costs without little to no gain. A long-term view of price for cocaine shows that is cheaper now than when the ONDCP was founded. Chart 4 starkly illustrates this.

Chart 4: Wholesale and Retail Price of Cocaine in the US, 1990-2007



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [World Drug Report](#)

Mexico is in a precarious position. Its long border with the United States makes it a natural target for drug traffickers seeking access to the United States. The supply-side emphasis of the United States places pressure upon Mexico to target and combat drug cartels, thereby resulting in increasing violence (not to mention corruption). However, as long as demand remains constant, drug trafficking cannot be eliminated. The stage is set for a long, drawn out, vicious war that will end with the consolidation of power by one or more cartels and a continuation of the drug trade. As in many policy areas, the future for Mexico is more in the hands of the United States than itself. Attacking demand in the United States would fundamentally alter the dynamics of the drug war; this however, can only be implemented by the United States government.

Will the US change its policy? I would argue that how drug war policy is framed is critical. As long as analysts, journalists, and government officials present the drug war in a “gain frame” (some success), politicians and public are likely to be risk adverse, and thus not supportive of changing policy. Widely publicized pronouncements about “higher prices and lower purity” for

cocaine lend support to the idea that the tide is turning in the drug war. Yet time and time again, these public announcements of success are followed by low-key reversals.¹ The “gain frame” of the drug war results from a consistent use of short-term perspective as well as selective use of data to present findings in their most beneficial light.

A long-term view of the drug war results in quite a different assessment. The failure to achieve goals and mounting costs place the policy in a “loss frame.” If this were more widely disseminated and publicized, policy change would be more likely: politicians and public in the loss domain would be more risk acceptant and thus more open to change.

Policy debate over US assistance to Mexico opens the door for policy change. If observers and officials reject the “Colombianization” analogy *and* seek a more long-term assessment of the policies pursued to date, the frame by which we understand the drug war in Mexico would change. Acceptance of the overwhelming failure of the drug war to achieve its goals would make discussion of policy alternatives more acceptable (less politically costly). And, with that change would come an opportunity to fundamentally transform drug policy in the United States and Mexico into one that has a better change for success.

¹ For example, in a press conference in the fall of 2005, the Drug Czar announced a “dramatic” increase in cocaine prices and a decrease in cocaine purity that were the “proud achievement of Plan Colombia and the U.S. counter-drug strategy in the Andes.” that were then more quietly shown to be an aberration 6 months later. Similarly, the US trumpeted the decline in coca cultivation in Colombia only to quietly acknowledge that this “decline” was in areas that had been under cultivation in the past but did not include new areas of cultivation which, when included, increased the total number of hectares under cultivation from the past year.

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