

MESSING & ROHRHOFF: Mexico imploding



COMMENTARY:

Americans have a surreal view of Mexico based on glittering tourist hot-spots such as Cancun, Acapulco and Puerto Vallarta.

However, in reality, many places in Mexico are imploding with strife because of the influence of criminal organizations. While U.S. foreign policy concentrates on adjudicating conflict by spending trillions in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, we neglect the expanding turmoil in our own backyard.

A destabilized Mexico would cause us social-political, economic and security problems expanding from Brownsville, Texas, to Millinocket, Maine. The United States must consider

spending more of its largess on our neighbors instead of a collection of far-flung countries where there may be no traction.

Our foreign policy interest should be concentrated concentrically with the most attention paid to nations that are closest geographically, have vital economic ties, hold natural resources and have historical importance. Countries like Haiti to Venezuela must draw greater attention. However, Mexico is of paramount concern because Mexican problems become American problems at our porous border. While immigrants pour from the Mexican border for economic reasons now, those numbers will multiply exponentially if Mexicans are fleeing for safety.

The sovereignty of the Mexican government is slipping into the hands of drug lords and corrupted officials. The highly financed cartels, with a market share estimated at \$40 billion annually, will continue to use their creativity to smuggle drugs into the United States and battle the legitimate Mexican government.

Drug cartels have developed an effective modus operandi for several decades, and are flexing their muscle as of late. This includes the death of at least 6,000 of their own citizens in the last few years. A recent former high-level U.S. Embassy official in Mexico says, "Narcos are assassinating senior law enforcement officials, something that has never happened before." This was highlighted by the murder of Mexican Police Chief Edgar Eusebio Millan Gomez in Mexico City in May.

The prospect that a collapsing Mexican government could have U.S. soldiers rushing to the border for a conflict that they could drive to on a single tank of gas, is looming in the distance. If the United States continues to neglect the severity of issues in Mexico, Americans could be looking at active warfare and a refugee nightmare a mere two-hour drive from Phoenix.

The United States must ratchet up its support for Mexico in its fight. Another half-hearted attempt has been made with the near-sighted Merida Initiative, a \$1.5 billion plan to assist the Mexican government in its battle against drugs.

This initiative, while a step in the right direction, is chump change under the circumstances. It has four main flaws. The first is that many officials within the Mexican government, police and military have been corrupted by the narco-dollar. Secondly, the initiative does not address the source of the drugs. Thirdly, the plan does not have the best system of accountability, which is especially important in states with rampant corruption. Finally, Congress has already reduced the plan by \$100 million, which lowers the capability for success.

The key to stability in Mexico is first ensuring security, then feeding, healing and providing work for its fundamentally decent citizens to undermine narcotics trade.

Just education, law enforcement and treatment will not end trafficking if illegal drugs are abundantly available. These drugs must be eradicated in the fields where they grow, and stopped in transshipment so they can't make it to the drug lords. Methamphetamine production labs should be taken out at every turn.

Mexican drug lord strategy is to oversupply, which in turn increases demand because of accessibility, keeping the cycle of dark-side capitalism flourishing.

Realistically, there will be no end to illegal drug use. Our best hope is to reduce demand to its lowest manageable level, thereby supporting those who help us combat this scourge.

An example of a measure of success is Colombia. It was the dedication of a few courageous people, both Colombians and Americans working together with a \$3 billion-plus program that allowed for success.

The commitment by individuals like Gen. Rosso Jose Serrano, head of the Colombian Police 1994-2000, produced the tipping point. Colombia's fight over recent years to regain sovereignty led to the downfall of the Cali and Medellin cartels and debilitated the FARC narco-guerrillas.

The United States needs to assist dedicated Mexican leaders with the same vigorous help that was utilized in Colombia: Democracy cannot coexist with illegal drugs. If the United States does not get involved meaningfully with Mexico right now, tens of thousands of lives will be lost or ruined, and the additional costs will be in the hundreds of billions.

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