

# **How the War on Drugs has intervened in the US-Mexico Security Relationship**

**Wayne McLean, PhD Candidate**

**Politics and International Relations Program**

**University of Tasmania**

**Email: [w\\_mclean@utas.edu.au](mailto:w_mclean@utas.edu.au)**

## **Abstract:**

The US-Mexico relationship is problematic when viewed from a security studies viewpoint. Here, US behaviour towards Mexico seems inconsistent. Why, for example, does the ‘war on drugs’ seemingly take precedent over Mexican domestic stability? In a similar vein, Mexico is the third biggest energy supplier to the US, yet rarely features in the energy security discourse in the way that distance threats such as Iraq and Iran do. How can we reconcile this outwardly contradictory hierarchy of strategic priorities through a security lens?

This paper explores these contradictory variables and puts forward the case that the US uses soft issues to project power into areas where hard power would be problematic. In the Mexican case this has resulted in a stable and fruitful international relationship despite differing domestic perceptions. At the same time, the use of war on drugs as a tool to exert influence has the potential to create blowback should current Mexican domestic problems around powerful cartels continue to cause instability.

## **Introduction**

This paper attempts to reconcile some of the contradictory variables exposed in international relations when looking at the role of the ‘war on drugs’. I take a broadly realist approach which starts with the assumption that states always act in their own interest. Yet, as the evidence I present here demonstrates, the war on drugs often creates situations that seem counter-productive to this central premise when used in a foreign policy context. This central contradiction is that the purported goal of the war on drugs revolves around moral and health issues and that these harm the national interest. But as this paper demonstrates, there have been few successes of the ‘war’ in achieving its overall goals. From a domestic health perspective, demand for illicit drugs has been stable for the past 30 years with no correlation

with the intense effort to restrict and police the transnational drug trade.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, from a security perspective, the evidence suggests that the war on drugs decreases national security, most notably by fuelling a major conflict in Mexico and assisting in the establishment of de facto narco-states on the US border.

Thus when using the traditional security approach to assess US-Mexican interaction, the role of the war on drugs intervening as a foreign policy variable seems inconsistent. Why would a state act in a way that is contrary to its own interests? I attempt to reconcile these inconsistencies by exploring alternative ways to frame the war on drugs. One prominent avenue is that the US has used the façade of moralism as a way to both intervene and wield influence in areas where overt security manoeuvring might be perceived as hostile. I explore the literature in this area before taking a traditional security approach, tracing out a broad pattern of US intervention framed around moral issues, but with empirical security considerations behind them. Secondly, I apply this to the US-Mexican relationship with an emphasis on the Mexican Drug War. I conclude with the claim that the war on drugs is ultimately a security tool used by US foreign policy makers, but in the Mexican case this usefulness has been inflated and exploited beyond its original scope, leading to the potential for a paradoxical decrease in US security. In short, drugs are a false ‘threat’ that the US has used as a tool to project power. But in the Mexican case, the threat is at risk of becoming actualised and intervening in the larger security factors dictating the region.

### **Framing the Security Debate**

The literature in this area is still embryonic, with scholars often viewing the division between the new security agenda and traditional threats as dichotic rather than complementary. Here, human and environmental security emerged as major theme, while analysis on the war on terror was often viewed as incompatible with purely power-based assessments of international politics. For example, Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay claim that the Bush Doctrine and the war on terror signalled a new and revolutionary approach to US foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, scholars such as Melvyn P. Leffler took more literal approaches to US foreign policy analysis viewing the interventionist push of the Bush doctrine following the 9/11 attacks as complimentary, as opposed to subservient to the national interest.<sup>3</sup> But over the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hakim, *Rethinking US Drug Policy* (Beckley Foundation, 2011), 4, <http://www.thedialogue.orgwww.thedialogue.org/PublicationFiles/Rethinking%20US%20Drug%20Policy.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America unbound: The Bush revolution in foreign policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, ‘9/11 and the past and future of American foreign policy’, *International Affairs* 79, no. 5 (2003): 1045–1063.

decade, such assessments have not elicited any major findings compared to those who remained using traditional frameworks. In fact, in hindsight, US actions around the early 2000s now seem more in line with larger geopolitical behaviours rather than ones specifically designed to counter terrorism and unknown asymmetrical threats. Indeed, clear outcomes are visible in regional power structures. Here, the US remains a key player in the region and is well positioned to influence and project power not only across the Middle East, but also Central Asia and Pakistan into the future. This pertinence means it can counter Iranian ambitions and temper Pakistan's instability, while dampening China's interest in the broader region.

Following on from this, it is my assumption that critical events such as small wars, terrorist activities and other non-state activities, both planned and unplanned, can in fact be serendipitous to foreign policy making. This is because at the material level, states seeking to maximise their national interest will attempt to manipulate these alternative security crises for their own benefit. In short, non-traditional security challenges simply allow for alternative expressions of traditional forms of power. Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have used this approach in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, where they argue that organisations and individuals can infiltrate and exaggerate certain foreign policy process by influencing public opinion and leveraging their history and circumstances.<sup>4</sup> In their opinion this works to the immediate benefit of Israel, but to the detriment of broader US strategic goals. Both Russia and China too, are highly protective around issues of sovereignty for similar reasons, as they believe that the US uses certain groups as coercive tools to enable foreign policy outcomes. For example, in 2012 Russia introduced a controversial 'foreign agents' law that places restrictions on NGOs that have political links, due to a perception that Western actors use these channels to meddle in Russian affairs.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the acceleration of covert activities throughout the Cold War supports the idea that projection of power is complemented using non-traditional mediums. This is especially relevant in Latin America, where covert action has long been the preferred method of engagement, being used in Guatemala (1963), the Dominican Republic (1965), Chile (1972), El Salvador (1980), Honduras (1980), Nicaragua (1980) and Panama (1989). Financial and technical assistance became the preferred method of engagement over direct military assistance. In general, this approach of using back channels to seek foreign policy outcomes stems from the 1954 Doolittle report which stated that (in the Cold War environment) 'there

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<sup>4</sup> John J Mearsheimer and Stephen M Walt, *The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> 'Lower House gives final approval to "foreign agents" bill — RT Russian politics', n.d., <http://rt.com/politics/duma-bill-ngo-libel-095/> (accessed July 30, 2013).

are no rules in such a game [...and...] if the United States is to survive, long standing concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered.'<sup>6</sup>

Given this history of non-traditional security threats crossing into overt national security concerns, it is surprising that there have been few scholarly attempts to link the drug trade to wider US objectives. Most attempts that do exist come from the radical fringes of the literature, such as Noam Chomsky who asserts that a 'Drug War Industrial Complex' exists<sup>7</sup> alongside a number of post-modernists whom use problematic epistemologies. One example is Eva Herschinger who pitches drugs in terms of the 'antagonistic frontier' within an international hegemonic discourse.<sup>8</sup> While intellectually interesting, this approach has very few practical outputs. As a consequence, literature linking the drug war to larger material pressures has historically been tainted by both a lack of information and apocryphal frameworks with little practical applications. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, there is compelling evidence of existential patterns of behaviour that suggests the US uses rhetoric and action around drugs as a method of projecting power.

### **The Conjunction of Drugs and Politics in US Foreign Policy**

The USA's first foray into drugs as political tool emerged alongside Woodrow Wilson's 'moralistic' foreign policy in the aftermath of the First World War where the temperance movement linked its core messages to the wider goals of Wilsonian internationalism. For example, the 'World League against Alcoholism' lobbied to direct US foreign policy towards a new liquor driven variant of the Monroe Doctrine, with strong US post-World War I criticism of Spanish attempts to import alcohol to the dry countries of Europe in Iceland, Finland and Norway.<sup>9</sup> This in itself might be perceived as an opaque way of keeping check on Spanish intentions given their strong involvement in Latin America. The World League, which was funded by the Anti-Saloon League, campaigned successfully for Wilson, and received some measure of support for this objective by linking temperance to the larger goal of exporting US exceptionalism. This link was clearly demonstrated when Wilson publically

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<sup>6</sup> 'doolittle\_report.pdf', n.d., [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_conversions/45/doolittle\\_report.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/45/doolittle_report.pdf) (accessed July 22, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> 'The Drug War Industrial Complex, Noam Chomsky interviewed by John Veit', n.d., <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/199804--.htm> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Eva Herschinger, "'Hell Is the Other": Conceptualising Hegemony and Identity through Discourse Theory', *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 1 (September 1, 2012): 65–90.

<sup>9</sup> 'Full text of "America and the world liquor problem"', n.d., 82, [http://archive.org/stream/americaandworld00chergoog/americaandworld00chergoog\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/americaandworld00chergoog/americaandworld00chergoog_djvu.txt) (accessed July 24, 2013).

proclaimed that ‘world democracy demands world prohibition.’<sup>10</sup> Ultimately the Wilsonian project failed, but the linkage of drugs and foreign policy objectives re-emerged in 1970 when Richard Nixon implemented the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act. In doing so, he claimed that drugs demanded a ‘national emergency’ and that ‘America’s public enemy number one in the United States is drug abuse.’ Furthermore, he stated the ‘in order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive.’<sup>11</sup>

These claims coincided with immediate security concerns arising in Latin America and worries of a broader shift towards leftist ideologies in the region. As a consequence, rhetoric around drugs was often used as a way to justify support for various ‘friendly’ leaders who the US could rely on, despite numerous cases of these leaders being funded by drug proceeds themselves. So, for example, in Panama, the strategic role of the Panama Canal and ability to control the sea-lanes was critical to US interests. Therefore, support for anti-communist groups was partly justified through comments such as that in 1986 of DEA administrator Jack Lawn whom acknowledged Manuel Noriega’s ‘vigorous anti-drug trafficking policy’.<sup>12</sup> Initially the US ignored Noriega’s flaws and allowed Panama to be used as a base for US operations to counter the leftist Sandinistas in neighbouring Nicaragua. In support of the broader message, Ronald Reagan appeared on television to declare that support for regime change was critical, as ‘the Sandinistas have even involved themselves in the international drug trade.’ He continued by claiming that ‘every American parent concerned about the drug problem will be outraged to learn that top Nicaraguan Government officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking.’<sup>13</sup> These claims failed to cite the similar flaws of their preferred ally inside the area. Reagan failed to mention that Noriega, the de facto leader of Panama via military rule, who acted in a semi-dictatorial capacity from 1983 to 1989, was a key player in the regional drug trade. Overall, he acted as a key conduit for the Medellin cartel in Colombia and ran a virtual narco-state with far more extensive than was occurring in Nicaragua. Eventually, after becoming an embarrassment to the US, he was jailed in 1992 by the US on charges of drug trafficking and racketeering.

Such inconsistencies in American attitudes to drugs and foreign engagement continue today. For example, in Afghanistan, US actions have resulted in a surge in heroin production. This is despite the situation in 2001, when a successful Taliban campaign to eradicate the crop

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<sup>10</sup> Ian Tyrrell, ‘Prohibition, American cultural expansion, and the new hegemony in the 1920s: an interpretation’, *Social History/Histoire Sociale* 27, no. 54 (1994).

<sup>11</sup> Charles M. Blow, ‘Drug Bust’, *The New York Times*, June 10, 2011, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/opinion/11blow.html> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> DIANE Publishing Company, *Drugs, Law Enforcement And Foreign Policy: Report By The Committee On Foreign Relations, U.s. Senate* (DIANE Publishing, 1996), 92.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua’, n.d., <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/31686a.htm> (accessed July 24, 2013).

resulted in a worldwide heroin shortage with only 8,000 hectares cultivated.<sup>14</sup> The need to finance Taliban actions against the US led to a sharp increase after the 9/11 attacks and since the US led occupation this number has increased to 154,000 hectares of cultivated crop in 2012. This recent peak has been accompanied by the paradoxical situation of US troops protecting opium fields.<sup>15</sup> A NATO official in a 2010 New York Times article claimed that ‘U.S. forces no longer eradicates [poppy fields]’ with a US official adding that ‘we don’t trample the livelihood of those we are trying to win over.’<sup>16</sup>

These factors beg for a reassessment of the role of drugs in US foreign policy. If the role of drugs is supposedly a moral one, then why has the US resorted to practical security considerations in a number of settings over a period of time and been selective in its prosecution and support of certain actors? One approach is to ask whether drug policies are in fact used to not only obfuscate perceptions of American imperialism in Mexico, but to also prevent potentially problematic US domestic discourses intervening in pertinent US security issues. It is here where the Mexican case is informative.

### **The Role of Domestic Perceptions**

A mutual low threat perception is essential in both Mexico and the US where domestic populations are susceptible to overreaction. This in turn can be detrimental to national security goals and military planning. Given Mexico’s proximity to the homeland, it follows that management of security issues is highly sensitive. We can apply Stephen Walt’s concept of balance of threat in this case, where he identifies a number of variables including strength, proximity, capability and intentions as a modified version of ideas of balance of power. From this perspective, Mexico is more likely to balance against the US if the perceived threats are large enough.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence, the US must manage perceptions of its transnational engagement in order to avoid accusations that it interferes in Mexico’s sovereign affairs. Not doing so risks reshaping the regional balance of power. Therefore, the current friendly relationship and role of Mexico as a compliment to US regional power is likely to remain if Mexican domestic perceptions remain favourable. This issue of perception is especially

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Summary\_Findings\_FINAL.pdf’, n.d., 5, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Summary\\_Findings\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Summary_Findings_FINAL.pdf) (accessed July 24, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Tilford, ‘Opium production done in front of the eyes of foreign troops in Afghanistan - Wichita Military Affairs | Examiner.com’, *examiner.com*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/opium-production-done-front-of-the-eyes-of-the-foreign-troops-afghanistan> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Rod Nordland, ‘U.S. Turns a Blind Eye to Opium in Afghan Town’, *The New York Times*, March 20, 2010, sec. World / Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/21/world/asia/21marja.html> (accessed July 22, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, ‘Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power’, *International Security* 9, no. 4 (April 1, 1985): 3–43.

pertinent in a pluralist democratic country such as the US that has a tendency to inflate certain issues.

From the Mexican perspective, foreign policy planners ‘enjoy’ what Mario Vargas Llosa termed the ‘perfect dictatorship’, which is complemented by highly concentrated media. This description stems from the fact the President is allowed only one six year term, but does so with a wide range of executive powers. It means that despite democratic trappings, Mexico has a highly decisionistic capability within its political class and security planners. Complementing this is a highly concentrated media landscape. Here, 92% of Mexico’s television stations owned by two companies, Televisa and TV Azteca.<sup>18</sup> Outside of these major outlets, there exists an unwritten law of self-censorship in the print media due to threats of violence and repercussion from a number of actors, most notably cartels.<sup>19</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, this semi-authoritarianism presents a perverse beneficial outcome: that authoritarian countries are at an advantage when making decisions that maximise power because leaders are not beholden to their internal audience. They do not need to ‘sell’ their message as they can more easily mobilise the assets of the state in line with foreign policy objectives.<sup>20</sup> This has historically been beneficial to the US as the concentration of power and corporations within a few small elite Mexican cliques meant that the US could use its considerable economic clout to manipulate foreign policy without needing to resort to more extreme interventionism as experienced elsewhere.

The tightly controlled message on the Mexican side is complimented by a *domestic* US perception of the drug war as a relatively benign issue to their interests. Instead, the immigration debate is the most pertinent issue where Americans engage with Mexican issues. This occurs despite the Mexican Drug War being a serious conflict. For example, Ciudad Juarez is now more violent than Baghdad, while over 100,000 drug war related deaths have occurred since 2006.<sup>21</sup> Despite this, Mexico ranks low in domestic perceptions compared to other perceived threats abroad. For example, in the 2009 Pew Research report of public perception, Islamic extremism, Iran’s nuclear program and the Taliban ‘represent major

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Mexico’s media under scrutiny in documentary’, *LA Times Blogs - La Plaza*, February 24, 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/laplaza/2009/02/violence-against.html> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Mexico journalists face “self-censorship, exile or certain death”’, *Text*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-01-23/mexico-journalists-face-self-censorship-exile-or/2583070> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough explanation of these concepts, see Randall L. Schweller, ‘Neoclassical realism and state mobilization: expansionist ideology in the age of mass politics’, in *Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy*, ed. Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> ‘Mexico’s murder capital - Al Jazeera English’, n.d., [http://www.aljazeera.com/photo\\_galleries/americas/2011415194132805218.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/photo_galleries/americas/2011415194132805218.html) (accessed July 30, 2013).

threats to the well-being of the United States.<sup>22</sup> Mexico does not rate a mention in the top ten foreign policy issues.

Comparative empirics around other visible security threats such as Iraq provide a useful parallel. So, for example, while oil is often cited as a key variable in US actions in the Gulf, oil trade between Iraq was 163 billion barrels compared to 400 billion barrels imported from Mexico. Similarly, during 2009, at the height of the drug war, there were 11,753 conflict related death, versus 5,132 in Iraq.<sup>23</sup> At each conflict's respective height (2006 in Iraq and 2008 in Mexico) there were 12,284 Mexican deaths<sup>24</sup> and 29,113 deaths in Iraq related to conflict.<sup>25</sup> The death count is fungible and variable depending on the metric used, but overall, these figures demonstrate the Mexican drug war is a major security concern for the US.

As a consequence, one would think the existence of a potentially failed state on its Southern border would have a higher profile. Yet, the issue is low in the hierarchy of foreign policy concerns for the US domestic audience. Granted that the US and Mexico are not adversaries, but this makes management and the potential for misperception even greater when viewed in light of internal insecurity. Thus within military circles, Mexico ranks high on the security agenda, with the Joint Operating Environment (JOE) 'Future Trends' report, produced by the Department of Defence, stating that in the near future 'Mexico could represent a homeland security problem of immense proportions to the United States'<sup>26</sup> and that 'in terms of worst-case scenarios for the Joint Force and indeed the world, two large and important states bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse: Pakistan and Mexico.'<sup>27</sup>

Given these facts, we would assume that US would seek to ameliorate the potential for instability in the future in Mexico. It follows that the drug trade is a key source of instability in Mexico. Therefore, one has to ask why there have been no serious moves to advocate for the integration of drugs trade within a more regulated framework. If the moral considerations are dropped in the face of practical considerations as has happened elsewhere in US foreign engagement, why is that not the case on the US-Mexican border, where territorial proximity should exert greater pressures?

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<sup>22</sup> '569.pdf', *Pew Research Centre - US seen as less important*, n.d., 19, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/569.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> 'Civilian deaths from violence in 2009 :: Iraq Body Count', n.d., <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2009/> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> William Booth, 'In Mexico, 12,000 killed in drug violence in 2011', *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2012, sec. World, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-mexico-12000-killed-in-drug-violence-in-2011/2012/01/02/gIQAUGUdWP\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-mexico-12000-killed-in-drug-violence-in-2011/2012/01/02/gIQAUGUdWP_story.html) (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> 'Iraq Body Count', n.d., <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> United States Joint Forces Command, *The Joe 2008 Joint Operating Environment* (DTIC Document, 2010), 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

First, consider the root cause of the problem itself – drug consumption. In utilitarian terms, we would expect a very high cost to society from these drugs in order to justify the national security implications of maintaining a strict anti-drugs regime. But in terms of harm the infrastructure and ability of the state proper, the evidence is flimsy and unimpressive. For example, in the UK, David Nutt developed a rational harm scale for a paper in the *Lancet*. He found that Alcohol had a much higher ‘harm score’ of 72 than methamphetamine (33) and Cannabis (20). This score included a number of areas including crime and loss of tangibles such as imprisonment, income and housing costs.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, according to the Office of National Drug Control and National Drug Intelligence Centre, marijuana accounted for 61% of cartel related revenue followed by 28.5% for cocaine, 7.3% for methamphetamine and 2.5% for heroin.<sup>29</sup> From this perspective, the drug with the ‘least’ harm to society is responsible for the most revenue to organised crime.

Furthermore, it is the illicit nature of the drug trade accompanied by increasing demand that creates large incentives for organised crime. This is despite increasing domestic deterrents which have led to the US prison population reaching over 2.2 million in 2010.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately it is the extremely high profit margins that create the incentive to traffic drugs, despite the harsh deterrents. For example, cocaine costs around \$2,000 a kilogram at the Colombian source and sells on the ground in the US for \$27,000. The product is also ‘cut’ by dilution meaning that the product is only about 30% purity when it reaches the retail level, effectively tripling this street figure.<sup>31</sup> The attractive margins have resulted in non-governmental players gaining access to considerable amounts of power and in some of the Northern Mexican states such as Chihuahua, Sinaloa and Guerrero, they have the political, societal and military strength to challenge the sovereignty of the state. This is particularly so in the Northern States where cartels have moved beyond the drug trade into racketeering, extortion and demanding ‘war taxes’ from the broader population. For example, a Mexican report found that under the now abandoned La Familia cartel, 85% of legitimate business had links with the cartel.<sup>32</sup> The same report found that 8% of Mexican municipalities across the country were ‘completely under

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<sup>28</sup> David J Nutt, Leslie A King, and Lawrence D Phillips, ‘Drug harms in the UK: a multicriteria decision analysis’, *The Lancet* 376, no. 9752 (November 6, 2010): 1558–1565.

<sup>29</sup> The White House, *National Drug Control Strategy*, 2006, 36, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ondcp/212940.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> ‘cpus10.pdf’, n.d., <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus10.pdf> (accessed July 31, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> ‘Mexico’s Cartels and the Economics of Cocaine’, *Stratfor*, n.d., <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/mexicos-cartels-and-economics-cocaine> (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> June S Beittel, ‘Mexico’s drug trafficking organizations: Source and scope of the violence’, *United States Congressional Research Service* (2013): 45.

control of organized crime'.<sup>33</sup> At the national level, some estimates state that the drug trade is 3 to 4% of Mexican GDP and directly employs half a million people.<sup>34</sup>

As a result of this increasing political power, calls for regulation have come from a number of high level sources including former President Vicente Fox – whom instigated the internal ‘drug war’ himself in 2006. He recently claimed the ‘War on Drugs invoked by President Nixon 40 years ago as has been a total failure.’<sup>35</sup> In a similar manner, the most recent former President Felipe Calderon has called for ‘market mechanisms’ to be applied to reduce the role of drug money.<sup>36</sup>

Despite US opposition, the integration of illicit substances into regulated frameworks is not unheard of and has occurred elsewhere in the world with some success. For example, Portugal decriminalised drugs in 2001 and trafficking was reduced as a result.<sup>37</sup> More obvious security driven regulatory efforts have been used in Peru. In this instance, the Shining Path was using funding from illicit coca sales to fund anti-government actions. Tolerance of the drug economy removed this income stream leading to the decline of the group throughout the past decade.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Turkey licenses opium production in order to prevent a black market with political implications emerging.<sup>39</sup>

It follows that the challenge for the political analyst is to fit these variables into a more standardised security framework, because if drugs are purely a ‘moral’ or even a health issue, then many of the main claims of realism become tenuous given that these US actions on the international stage can cause self-harm to the state because of the intervention of idealist variables. Furthermore, these inconsistencies in the Mexican case are especially odd, as more clear-cut realpolitik logic can be found in US actions worldwide, where morality seems to be clearly exchanged for gains on the international stage. In particular, US actions in Iraq and Afghanistan have clearly traded mass casualties in exchange for protection of the national interest. Over the duration of US operations in the Middle East, 4,486 US soldiers have been

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Mexico’s Drug War’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, n.d., <http://www.cfr.org/mexico/mexicos-drug-war/p13689> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Roque Planas, ‘Vicente Fox Sits Down With High Times Magazine To Blast Drug War’, *Huffington Post*, July 16, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/16/vicente-fox-high-times\\_n\\_3606689.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/16/vicente-fox-high-times_n_3606689.html) (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> ‘Calderon: “Impossible to end drug trade”’, *Washington Post*, n.d., <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/25/calderon-impossible-to-end-drug-trade/> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Portugal’s drug policy: Treating, not punishing’, *The Economist*, August 27, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/14309861> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Adrian Stover, ‘Losing The War on Drugs, One Field at Time’, *SAIS Review* 33, no. 1 (2013): 164.

<sup>39</sup> See Jorrit Kamminga, ‘The Political History of Turkey’s Opium Licensing System for the Production of Medicines: Lessons for Afghanistan’ (2009), <http://dspace.cigilibrary.org/jspui/handle/123456789/23440> (accessed July 28, 2013).

killed in Iraq and 2,255 in Afghanistan alongside 150,000 civilian deaths attributable to US actions.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, in 2005 methamphetamines killed 900 Americans, while cocaine was responsible for around 5,000 deaths.<sup>41</sup> The CDC (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) does not report deaths or injuries from marijuana, as there has never been a recorded fatality from its use<sup>42</sup> despite this being *the* major source of income for the Mexican cartels. What can explain these two different attitudes?

Within international relations theory and security studies, the securitisation discourse of Barry Buzan attempts to provide some answers for such non-traditional security issues.<sup>43</sup> His argument holds that drugs are a constructed security problem and the social construction and ‘securitization’ of such issues occurs through various speech acts. Using this framework, Danny Kushlick identifies these key speech acts in the drug debate as occurring during the 1961 ‘Single convention on narcotic drugs’, which prohibited the supply and production narcotic except for medicinal use, along with a more explicit version presented during the 1988 UN conventions on drugs.<sup>44</sup> In this instance the preamble specifically invoked the drug trade as an organised threat to international order stating that the drug trade ‘threaten[s] the stability, security and sovereignty of States.’ Using the language of securitization, this resulted in the drug issue being verbalised and actualised on the security agenda. Outside of Kushlick’s analysis Nixon’s aforementioned speech and the implicit use of the phrase ‘war on drugs’ served a similar purpose for the domestic American audience.

While this constructivist logic is attractive, it ultimately absolves the theory of identifying more practical motives behind actions. Specifically, how can we demarcate this role of ‘moralism’? This view might help describe why people *think* in a certain way, but it does not assist the security analyst in identifying ulterior motives for certain state actions such as the illicit nature of drugs which seems counter-intuitive. As a consequence, this view is limited once ‘constructed’ variables enter the discourse, as the framework can be fetishized and dictated to by a myriad of other constructed ideas. This disables a key function of this paper,

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<sup>40</sup> ‘iCasualties | Operation Iraqi Freedom | Iraq’, n.d., <http://www.icasualties.org/Iraq/Index.aspx> (accessed July 31, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> ‘Methamphetamine Use Estimated to Cost the U.S. About \$23 Billion In 2005 | RAND’, n.d., <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2009/02/04/meth.html> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> ‘Annual Causes of Death in the United States | Drug War Facts’, n.d., <http://drugwarfacts.org/cms/?q=node/30#sthash.IAn9P4qt.eQRnS0iK.dpbs> (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> See Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: a new framework for analysis* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Danny Kushlick, ‘International security and the global war on drugs: The tragic irony of drug securitisation | openDemocracy’, *openDemocracy*, August 10, 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/danny-kushlick/international-security-and-global-war-on-drugs-tragic-irony-of-drug-securitisation> (accessed July 21, 2013).

which is to discount the role of moralism in search for a more empirical track identify drugs' seemingly exceptionalist role in the international politics.

I instead start from a more 'traditional' point and assert that the 'moralism' in foreign policy and the drug debate – when framed through an international relations lens – has a clear motive and intent to wield influence and power by other means. Presenting a fairly standard power based assessment of international politics achieves this. Here, the US as a regional hegemon, seeks to protect its sphere of influence as it has always done since James Monroe demanded European powers remove themselves from the Americas, followed by the Roosevelt Corollary, which explicitly sought to protect US interest in the region through military means.

The limits of power based assessments though, is they tend to throw aside domestic factors in their analysis. This 'black box' model, typified by the Waltzian view provides solid but crude assessments of international power, and does so at the expense of exploring more subtle ways that states exert their influence. Furthermore, the hegemonic nature of the US in the Americas creates an environment where traditional state-centric power based assessment elicit little information. Hegemony and regional unipolarity is the end of the story in the face of immense US primacy; that is unless we look at factors inside the state. Thus, in order to provide more analytical richness to a realist driven framework, we can link the key motive in the war on drugs to the want and need of the US to maintain regional hegemony.

### **Tracing the US-Mexican relationship**

Mexico has been and remains a critical part of the US grand strategy in maintaining this regional hegemony, and has been remarkably calm and benign in terms of US strategic interests over the past 70 years. This is itself is somewhat mysterious as Mexico is essentially a socialist country and shares many of the traits that the US has fought so strongly against in other areas in Latin America. Jorge Castaneda claims the ability of the US to manage this ideological contradiction stems from the emergence of 'two lefts' – a hard left, represented by leaders such as Chavez, and the soft left emerging out of Chile, Brazil and Mexico.<sup>45</sup>

At the international level, US objectives were helped by a broader Mexican foreign policy was known as the 'Estrada Doctrine' that revolved around a policy of neutrality and non-intervention. This doctrine also stated that Mexico should not give value judgements on internal coups and would not withdraw diplomats or change relations in the event of governmental change, because to do so would breach the nature of other states sovereignty. This in itself stemmed from Mexico's experience with the US and opposition to the idea of Manifest destiny. It possessed the secondary function of allowing elites to remove the

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<sup>45</sup> J.G. Castañeda, 'Latin America's left turn', *Foreign Aff.* 85 (2006): 28.

perception of Mexico being a US stooge. So, for example, it allowed Mexico to publically support Cuba, the Sandinistas and various other leftist groups in the region while still remaining in line with US objectives.

This clear role for Mexico in the regional order changed after the fall of the Soviet Union and was followed by a number of destabilising events. The most notable was the ratification of the North American Free trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The NAFTA agreement has allowed for tighter control by the US of critical interests in the region, especially oil and natural gas, as well as allowing for cheaper manufacturing. At the same time, institutional entwinement was quickly followed by the devaluation of the Peso. This necessitated a bailout by the US government in order to preserve domestic political stability. In turn, this amplified internal dissent, most notably with the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas State. Political elites were also shaken by the assassination of PRI candidate for the 1994 election, Luis Doanldo Colosio. All in all, these combined factors led to concerns in the US about Mexican stability and the possibility of a more substantial turn away from the US in Mexican foreign policy.

Not long after, in 1996, the US driven *Plan Colombia* was having successes in countering left wing groups who were being funded by the drug trade. As a result, much of the organisational aspects of the drug trade exploited the vacuum of instability in Mexico to push trafficking operations closer to the US border. This decade of political instability helped contribute to the end of 70 years of PRI rule, when *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox was elected in 2000. As a result, Mexico experienced a rare shift in foreign policy, moving towards an activist role under the right leaning PAN. It moved to promote its own regional regimes, such as the Puebla-Panama Plan, that sought to promote integration and development between Mexico and Central America and Colombia. But these regional activities were short-lived and relatively unsuccessful. They were quickly abandoned in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks when Mexico realigned in foreign policy with that of the US. From a domestic security perspective, the power of the drug trafficking organisations also grew when the PAN tore up agreements under the so-called 'Pax Mafiosa' where there were unwritten agreement between political leaders and the cartels.

### **US involvement in Mexican Security Affairs**

Within this assessment we must find links to the US regional engagement, and both 9/11 and the drug war acted favourably in terms of allowing US interests to return to the area after the shocks of the 1990s and the shift in foreign policy under PAN. Similarly, the drug war allowed for improvements in Mexican perceptions of the US, which have increased over the

past decade. For example, in 2009 69% of Mexicans had a favourable opinion of the US.<sup>46</sup> This has combined with high levels of support for US assistance in training the Mexican military (78% in 2009).<sup>47</sup>

Strangely, these positive perceptions have increased alongside a deteriorating security situation despite the fact that the US has both links and interests with the instability in the Northern States. For example, there are demonstrable links between US Special Forces and the Los Zetas. The Zetas are known for their violent enforcement of their area using videos and public displays of mutilation and torture as a deterrent. Arturo Guzmán Decena established the group in 1999 using Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE) defectors and aligning themselves with a factional leader of the Gulf Cartel, Osiel Guillen. The US links stems from the fact that the bulk of the core Zetas were initially trained as anti-drug commandos by the US Special Forces Group the 'Snake eaters' in the 1990s at Fort Bragg.<sup>48</sup>

The recent arrest Miguel Angel Trevino Morales also resulted in revelations of more extensive US involvement than once thought. For example, the DEA and justice department are believed to have known his location for three years before his providing specific information to the Mexican government in July 2013.<sup>49</sup>

The Zetas are one of around ten cartels operating who have varying amounts of power, with the Zetas having a substantial military capability and the ability to challenge state sovereignty in certain areas and have recently taken to demanding 'war taxes' to enable them to build a military capability to take on government forces.<sup>50</sup> This expression of power was demonstrated via a 'narco-blockade' of the 13 major Monterrey roads, including Highway 85 to the US border through Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas in 2010.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> 'How Mexicans See America', *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, n.d., <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/05/01/how-mexicans-see-america/> (accessed July 25, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> 'Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico | Pew Global Attitudes Project', n.d., <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/08/31/crime-and-drug-cartels-top-concerns-in-mexico/> (accessed July 27, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Chris Arsenault, 'US-trained cartel terrorises Mexico', *Al-Jazeera*, November 3, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2010/10/20101019212440609775.html> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> 'Borderland Beat: US Knew the Movements of Z40 for 3 Years', n.d., <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2013/07/us-knew-movements-of-z40-for-3-years.html> (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> William Booth, 'Mexican president calls for nation's help to curb defiant, violent criminals', *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2010, sec. World, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/07/AR2010080702604.html> (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> 'BBC News - Mexican cartel blockades streets in Monterrey', n.d., <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-10977501> (accessed July 28, 2013).

From an analytical point of view, we might frame the drug war as serendipitous to US interests as this has meant that Mexico must reengage the US in security terms. The key expression of this was the ‘Merida Initiative’. This agreement allows for the US to provide equipment and training to Mexican and Central American forces to counter criminal activities.<sup>52</sup> Since 2008, the program has provided 11 Black Hawk and 13 bell helicopters for counternarcotic operations.<sup>53</sup> This was designed to tackle the inflation of the drug issue in the light of the Mexican drug war and explicitly frames a number of issues in terms of security. Within the agreement there is no cooperation on human rights or harm reduction strategies - only on traditional military issues.<sup>54</sup> The initiative had funding of USD\$1.6bn for 2007-2010. Interestingly, much of the funding will enter Mexico through indirect tracks such as private military firms and defence contractors who have strong relationships with the US government. At the same time, this allows a level of plausible distance between perceptions of direct US military action. Despite this cooperation, violence has increased during the initiative with Mexican policy expert Shannon O’Neil expressing that the violence and scope of the conflict has spread from mainly Sinaloa in 2007 and 50 municipalities, to over 240 in 2012 including major industrial hubs including Monterrey, Acapulco and Nuevo Laredo.<sup>55</sup>

The initiative has also been linked to the highly controversial ‘gun walking’ operation where ATF agents supervised the illicit transfer of weapons across the border to cartels in the hope of tracking the route of the weapons and identifying trafficking routes. Mexican authorities were unaware of the program. While the ‘fast and the furious’ program has been used as a political football in the US, it has also fuelled criticism within Mexico domestically. This can be used to show the power of anti-US sentiment. For example, an editorial in *La Presna* – the most widely read (tabloid) paper in Mexico City – framed the program as an extension of the 19<sup>th</sup> US idea of manifest destiny which was used to justify war with Mexico and US expansion West and South to create an area of ‘freedom’. The writer asks ‘¿El manido discurso de la soberanía, que no por dicho hasta el cansancio deja de ser verdad?’ which translates broadly as ‘why does the discourse around sovereignty [espoused by the US] time and again fail to be true?’<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Bureau of Public Affairs Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, ‘Merida Initiative’, January 20, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/merida/> (accessed July 27, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> ‘Laura Carlsen: A Primer on Plan Mexico | Scoop News’, n.d., <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0805/S00074.htm> (accessed July 27, 2013).

<sup>55</sup> ‘O’Neil\_Testimony.pdf’, n.d., [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O’Neil\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/O’Neil_Testimony.pdf) (accessed July 28, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> ‘El destino manifiesto: rápido y furioso - El agua del molino’, n.d., <http://www.oem.com.mx/oem/notas/n2006274.htm> (accessed July 27, 2013).

Cross border operation are not new in this respect either. ‘Operation Wide Receiver’ had similar objective under the Justice Department in 2006, where weapons were supplied to individuals with links to cartels in the hope that the weapons could provide a map of illicit activities.<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, US weapons makes up the bulk of arms used by cartels with ‘approximately 70% of weapons recovered from cartel crime scene and submitted for tracing [...] traced to the United States.’<sup>58</sup>

There are also broad patterns in the tolerance of cartel driven money laundering. In the economic sector, HSBC laundered \$881 million of drug money over a decade.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Wachovia, now part of Wells Fargo, transferred over \$378 billion of cash through *casas de cambios* or money exchanges while failing to apply anti-money laundering measures.<sup>60</sup> Despite these concerns Wells Fargo received \$25 billion in federal funding as part of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, with this funding in itself having a security purpose of preventing widespread economic collapse.

When assessing these elements, we can assert that the US has a major role in the conflict, being the main consumers of drugs that supply the cartel coffers, the main supplier of weapons, and a conduit for financial gains. More immediately, there is evidence it provided special ops training for main cartel members despite widespread knowledge that Mexican military personnel are prone to corruption, with the GAFE defection rate at 25%.<sup>61</sup> This combination of factors led ex-Foreign minister Jorge Castaneda to recently castigate US security efforts in Mexico warning that ‘Los americanos son hipócritas, no nuestros amigos’ (*the Americans are hypocrites and not our friends*).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Earlier ATF gun operation “Wide Receiver” used same tactics as “Fast and Furious”’, *Washington Post*, n.d., [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-10-06/politics/35278837\\_1\\_gun-operation-fast-and-furious-operation-wide-receiver](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-10-06/politics/35278837_1_gun-operation-fast-and-furious-operation-wide-receiver) (accessed July 27, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> ‘TheWarOnMexicanCartels.pdf’, n.d., 29, [http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files\\_new/research-policy-papers/TheWarOnMexicanCartels.pdf](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/research-policy-papers/TheWarOnMexicanCartels.pdf) (accessed July 27, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Robert Mazur, ‘How Bankers Help Drug Traffickers and Terrorists’, *The New York Times*, January 2, 2013, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/03/opinion/how-bankers-help-drug-traffickers-and-terrorists.html> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> ‘How a big US bank laundered billions from Mexico’s murderous drug gangs’, *the Guardian*, April 3, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/03/us-bank-mexico-drug-gangs> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Arsenault, ‘US-trained cartel terrorises Mexico’.

<sup>62</sup> ‘:: Otras :: “PREFIERO SER HIPÓCRITA, QUE PENDEJO”: JORGE CASTAÑEDA’, n.d., <http://jorgecastaneda.org/index.php?newsId=647A06B8-7C37-3E5A-AFE3-F80E49893671> (accessed July 28, 2013).

## Behaviours, Risks and Tipping Points

Is US behaviour deliberate? No – but in attempting to view this as part of a larger framework, we must recognise the regional incentives from the perspective of a state seeking to maximise its security posture. In short, the US is a state that engages in behaviour that allows security engagement in translucent ways. As this paper has shown, there are multiple ways in which the core issue – the drug trade – could be handled more adroitly to obtain better security outcomes, including the establishment of a regulatory framework to legitimize the drug trade, but these remain unexplored. Thus from a behavioural perspective, we can hypothesize that low-level ‘manageable’ conflict is ultimately a useful tool for the US to remain relevant in the area.

At the same time, such behaviour invites large risks. For example, there is now a large cartel presence in the US and fears that violence may spill over the border. This fear was actualised in Brownsville, Texas during 2010 when Gulf cartel members murdered two Zeta members.<sup>63</sup> According to Associated Press, Cartel operations within the US are also increasing with a presence in 1,200 communities as of 2011.<sup>64</sup>

From a theory-based perspective, the interesting point is to try an estimate when the use of the drug issue becomes an overall liability to the national interest. When do the security benefits outweigh the risk of blowback? When is the tipping point reached? Randall Schweller’s neoclassical realist approach would suggest that this is more likely to happen later rather than earlier, with states slow to recognize clear and present dangers.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, this research seems to compliment his argument by suggesting that states will use all mechanisms available to project power, including those that might seem counter-intuitive. Thus, states will attempt to achieve short-term gains despite the risk of long-term blowback. There are already precedents for unintended outcomes of covert security operations. For example, Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds claimed in a 2005 *Foreign Affairs* article that blowback from US support for the mujahedeen in the 1980s culminated in the 9/11 attacks.<sup>66</sup> Here, the US used back channels to engage and support groups that supported their security objectives, but then neglected them once the structural pressures (in the form of the dissolution of the Soviet Union) disappeared.

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Borderland Beat: Two Zetas executed in Brownsville, Texas’, n.d., <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/10/two-zetas-executed-in-brownsville-texas.html> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> ‘AP IMPACT: Cartels dispatch agents deep inside US’, *The Big Story*, n.d., <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-impact-cartels-dispatch-agents-deep-inside-us> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds, ‘Blowback Revisited-Today’s Insurgents in Iraq Are Tomorrow’s Terrorists’, *Foreign Aff.* 84 (2005): 2.

## Limits of Analysis

While this analysis tries to use empirics to drive its argument, it is hard to capture the root cause of resistance to drug regulation worldwide. There are a number of reasons for this, and this analysis runs the risk of appearing naïve in exploring the role of drugs from a primarily utilitarian perspective. At the same time, this value free assessment reveals a number of gaps in the current scholarly approaches and the problems this presents when combining traditional and new security threats. From a research perspective, the central problem is the nature of the black market itself. It is hard to make hard claims based on speculative data. Estimating illicit trade will always result in erratic and uncertain data. Likewise, the nature of cartel operations and structures is not open to rigorous analysis. Los Zetas victims include a number of reporters and those involved in local administration meaning there is a deficit of high quality information and data. According to a 2012 freedomhouse.org report, 70% of journalists have been threatened.<sup>67</sup> This coercive power was demonstrate when the day after Zetas head Miguel Morales was arrested no local newspaper printed the story for fear of reprisals.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, much of the data available comes from blog sites such as Blog del Narco, whose writer has been forced into exile in Spain, while the technical office is missing.<sup>69</sup> Even in the digital realm, uncredited authors have been targeted, because the Zetas are believed to have infiltrated law enforcement and have access to online surveillance tools.<sup>70</sup> For example, an supposedly anonymous writer for the website Nuevo Laredo en Vivo, Marisol Macias Castaneda, was found decapitated with her head left next to a keyboard with a note stating ‘I’m here because of my (online) reports’.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> “Freedom in the World 2012 | Freedom House”, n.d., <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2012> (accessed January 9, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Associated Press, ‘Residents of Nuevo Laredo, scarred by violence, anxious after arrest of local cartel’s boss’, *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2013, sec. World, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/residents-of-nuevo-laredo-scarred-by-violence-anxious-after-arrest-of-local-cartels-boss/2013/07/17/4587399a-eeaf-11e2-bb32-725c8351a69e\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/residents-of-nuevo-laredo-scarred-by-violence-anxious-after-arrest-of-local-cartels-boss/2013/07/17/4587399a-eeaf-11e2-bb32-725c8351a69e_story.html) (accessed July 29, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> ‘Blog del Narco: author who chronicled Mexico’s drugs war forced to flee’, *the Guardian*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/16/blog-del-narco-mexico-drug-war> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Damien Cave, ‘Hackers Challenge Mexican Crime Syndicate’, *The New York Times*, October 31, 2011, sec. World / Americas, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/01/world/americas/hackers-challenge-mexican-crime-syndicate.html> (accessed July 30, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> ‘Borderland Beat: Zetas renew attack against online social networks’, n.d., <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2011/09/zetas-renew-attack-against-online.html> (accessed July 30, 2013).

## Conclusion

In reviewing the evidence presented here, the overall finding is that systemic pressures do seem to dictate many of the processes in play in the Mexican-US relationship. The US has an interest in keeping a strong relationship with Mexico, which has many domestic uncertainties. These uncertainties have the ability to facilitate a shift away from the US should the US be perceived as hostile in its actions or if domestic instability accelerates. It is here where the US attitude towards the war on drugs and Mexican relations can be linked, albeit in a somewhat tenuous way. Thus I claim there is *some* evidence to suggest that the US uses the war on drugs to remain salient in the region without amplifying problematic domestic factors.

If these processes are successful, there are rational outcomes for the state. For example, a key criticism of the drug war is that it has cost the US \$1 trillion dollars without success.<sup>72</sup> But in utilitarian terms, this is equivalent to only two years of US military spending.<sup>73</sup> Over a forty-year period this equates to around 5% of the military budget, which seems reasonable if viewed through a security lens. If this influence via the war on drugs can help keep Mexico stable, reign in its activist tendencies, and assist the US in maintaining regional hegemony, then this cost seems more reasonable.

At the same time this approach comes with great risks. Cartels, which have morphed from simple drug trafficking towards possessors of substantial political and pseudo military power, have the potential to create substantial blowback. Indeed, the US has a history of neglecting the results of internal meddling once goals have been achieved. As such, the use of the drug war as a tool of coercive power has the potential to change into an empirical security threat. In this sense, the behaviour of the US in exploiting the role of drugs for security purposes may ultimately be self-defeating behaviour that results in security losses over the long-term.

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<sup>72</sup> For example, see ‘Forty Years of Failure | Drug Policy Alliance’, n.d., <http://www.drugpolicy.org/new-solutions-drug-policy/forty-years-failure> (accessed July 31, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> ‘US military budget - Wolfram|Alpha’, n.d., <http://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=US+military+budget> (accessed July 31, 2013).

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