

Several videos on the internet have suggested that the solution to Mexico's drug war is the US Special Forces (SF). Joe Rogan's interview with John McPhee is one case in point. Donald Trump has vaguely expressed thoughts about sending the US military into Mexico as well. Those advocating for the Special Forces have claimed that if the US released the SF on Mexico's cartels, the SF could put an end to the War on Drugs in Mexico, because the Mexican cartels are no match for the SF. This solution is naïve as it is simplistic in its understanding of Mexico and the War on Drugs.

It is chimeric to think the SF can go into Mexico and permanently wipe out the cartels. There is no doubt the SF is a better trained and equipped force. That is not in doubt. The SF may hit a specific target and kill cartel members—maybe even the cartel's leader—but they won't eliminate the cartel or drug trafficking entirely. Time and time again, Mexico's cartels have shown their ability to adapt, reorganize, or morph into a new cartel. Using the Zetas as an example, despite intense Mexican and US pressure between 2006 and 2018, the Zetas survived. While they are no longer the existential threat to the Mexican state that they once were, they still exist along the Gulf coast or have watched former members defect to the Cártel del Noreste (CDN).

Geographically, the SF cannot hold Nuevo Laredo or Juarez for any extended period of time, let alone would they be able to control Culiacán or Guadalajara. These are sizable cities with many people allied to the cartels. Mexico is also a large country with a diverse geography, from mountains to jungle to porous coastlines. Mexico can barely control its Guatemalan border, in addition to its border with Belize or the multiple air and sea transport routes entering the country. There is no possible way the SF could identify and destroy every point where narcotics traffickers are conducting operations. It's not like the traffickers all assemble in one giant fortress where they hang out and put out a sign saying: "here we are come and get us *bendejos*." The cartels operate in urban areas as much as they do in rural areas. Using Mao's dictum, cartel members "move amongst the people as fish swim in the sea." The SF would have to go into urban centers to find cartel members. Would it even be possible to land the SF in Mexican cities? It's not as if the Mexican Marines don't already do the same thing.

Many commentators claim that with the SF's help, Mexico could repeat what President Bukele has achieved in El Salvador. Mexico is not tiny like El Salvador. Much of Bukele's success stems from this fact and the fact that Bukele has been granted extra constitutional powers to detain suspected MS-13 and Calle 18 members indefinitely without *habeas corpus*. A law like Bukele's would not last long in Mexico. Moreover, Mexico's cartels have fully Colombianized Mexico. The cartels are able to extend their influence over the economy and the politics of every Mexican state. The SF's ability to penetrate into the Mexican system would be limited owing to the fact that they are a foreign entity. There is also the possibility that narcocorruption will infiltrate the Special Forces, as has happened in the past when the US military became involved in drug operations (e.g., Colonel James Hiett in Colombia). The SF will not be winning the hearts and minds of the Mexican people, because they would be conducting straight forward military operations, not liberating the people from an oppressor (some Mexicans see the cartels as heroes—just listen to the narcoballads). Furthermore, would the Mexican government tolerate the US military operating without constraint on its sovereign territory? Would the US tolerate the Mexican military on US territory for any extended period of time? Let me remind you of the Punitive Expedition of 1916, which almost led to war between Mexico and the US as the US drove deep into Mexico in search of Pancho Villa.

A militarized solution to Mexico's cartel war has been tried before. Felipe Calderón implemented the Merida Initiative with US assistance. The Merida Initiative was a revamped Plan Colombia that militarized the War on Drugs in Mexico. The Mexican death rate hit levels not seen since its revolution. Would Mexico accept a return to this kind of bloodletting if the Special Forces are set loose on Mexico? Be certain that innocent civilians will be killed. It's likely that US military operations will also initiate another dirty war in Mexico similar to the one that existed in the 1970s. Not only will criminal elements be eliminated, but so will political elements, because they go hand in hand. At the end of the day, the question remains: Did the militarization of Mexico's drug war with the Merida Initiative change anything in Mexico? No. Both Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel López Obrador distanced themselves from this strategy because it tore Mexico apart. Claudia Sheinbaum shows little interest in militarizing Mexican society to combat what most Mexicans see as a US problem.

Even if the Mexican government went all out in cooperation with the US and significantly beat back the cartels, drug traffickers will pop up like a root fire in other countries throughout the hemisphere, including places like Brazil, the Southern Cone, Central America, and the Caribbean. If history teaches any lesson, the cartels will migrate to a new location where there is less pressure. New routes will be developed and triangulated through Africa, Europe, and the Pacific-Asian Rim.

The US could attempt to run a Condor program against Mexico's cartels, but rest assured that the reach of Mexican cartels extends well beyond Mexico. As a result, a Condor program would necessitate an enlargement into other countries such as Panama and Brazil where there is already a significant presence. Another question that has to be asked is what would emerge in the wake of the destruction of Mexico's cartels in a Condor operation. Will more violent organizations appear? Anti-imperialist narcotics-financed guerrillas? Hardened terrorists? Will the Mexican government be able to maintain its vigilance against the appearance of new cartels, or will it require a permanent US military presence in Mexico? An alternate solution stemming from this scenario would be to kneecap the cartels and control them from within. However, controlling the cartels from within is fraught with moral and legalistic problems that can only be done covertly. And again, if history is any lesson, it will eventually lead to scandal. These many issues beg the question of whether or not it is a good idea to eliminate the enemy that the US already knows (the Mexican cartels that already exist).

The elimination of every single Mexican cartel member (which is totally unrealistic), will not solve the supply side of the equation. Andean narcotics production has increased in recent years despite hundreds of millions of dollars being dumped into the Andes over the last three decades to reduce production. In other words, whatever the Special Forces might achieve in Mexico, it will be for naught. Supply creates its own demand. Therefore, the elimination of Mexico's cartels achieves nothing without simultaneously addressing supply and demand issues. Despite massive crop eradication programs, supply remains high. In many countries, such as Bolivia and Peru, eradication programs have provoked anti-US sentiment. US eradication programs go up against much more than criminal elements. It also confronts intrinsic and indigenous societal and economic issues.

The US has never seriously sustained long-term crop substitution programs, nor has it seriously addressed the demand side of the equation, which many Latin American nations see as the central issue.

It is unrealistic to think the US has the capability to exert a military and police presence in every corner of the world to stop the flow of narcotics. US debt and other domestic priorities already put a limit on what the US can actually achieve. A militarized solution will also alienate US partners throughout Latin America who have resoundingly rejected a militarized approach. A better solution and a truly America First policy (Charles Lindbergh's version rather than Trump's distorted neoconservative version), would be to send the SF to the US southern border and employ them in operations in coordination with the US Bureau of Customs and Immigration to stop traffickers and coyotes crossing the US border. They would not be violating the Mansfield Amendment, because technically they would be defending the US border and not conducting police operations within the US itself. Rather, they could rely on intelligence provided by US domestic agencies such as the DEA or FBI for interception operations.

Of course, another solution is legalization, but that is a whole other subject. The question for the US is whether or not it wants to legalize highly addictive narcotics that affect one's long-term physical condition. If yes, how does the United States deal with the proliferation of narcotics in all aspects of society, such as the workplace or school? How does the US address the issue of addiction and people becoming wards of the state as a result of addiction? Does legalization lead to a more productive, more ideal society? The model used in Oregon failed because there were no measures of enforcement to proscribe squatting and the open use of narcotics on the street, nor were the proscriptive measures combined with treatment programs. Legalization became a mess that backfired.

I have one final word for those who still insist the Special Forces can win the War on Drugs for the United States in Mexico. Delusional.