



## **REVISITING GLOBAL SECURITY FROM THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: THE POTENTIAL U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN MEXICO**

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Time and repetition conditions consumers of news and other media to believe that the U.S. military presence was always intent to move into places like Iraq and Afghanistan. For those twenty or younger, this is all they have known. For those that are older, the idea that the Cold War's end would facilitate the expansion of the U.S., not to mention NATO to such places was never assumed. Rather than re-engage issues such as access to energy, denial of safe havens to terrorists, human rights or even international development, the notion of 'self-preservation' in one's own national interest has not been as thorough of late as we would like to believe. To be sure, the U.S. military has a plan for everything. Not because they are necessarily bellicose by the nature of their mission but because it is their job to consider all contingencies and parameters that just 'might' erupt for each of the respective Geographic Combatant Commands. With U.S. involvement in Afghanistan at its apex, the question that surfaces now is what's next? While Syria fires on their own people or the prospect looms of defanging an Iran moving closer to nuclear weaponry, there is one such contingency that no one is talking about and for good reason – the involvement of U.S. troops in stabilizing Mexico.

To be sure, Mexico is a proud country, one still harboring resentment over the loss of territories that now belong to the United States as a result of the 1848 Mexican-American War.<sup>1</sup> Until 9-11, the atrocity perpetrated on Americans were the dozens executed on Mexican and U.S. soil by Pancho Villa.<sup>2</sup> Taking another look at Mexico today, one has to consider all of the reasons given to send U.S. troops into other countries and wonder if Mexico is not next. American soldiers kicked down doors in Iraq and Afghanistan over issues of terrorism, human rights, instituting the rule of law and nation-building. From 2006 until the end of 2010, estimates of casualties in Mexico range from 34,000 to over 40,000.<sup>3</sup> Re-calculations during 2012 have even been as high as 47,000 or even 48,000.<sup>4</sup> While any set of estimates include some of the criminals themselves, the ugly truth is that law enforcement<sup>5</sup> personnel on both sides are murdered wholesale with journalists on the U.S. side not far

behind the fate of their Mexican colleagues<sup>6</sup> Now 500 teachers are too afraid to teach having been extorted by the cartels to pay a portion of their salary as protection money. The fate of the four kidnapped teachers that refused remains unknown.<sup>7</sup>With the scale comparable to Sadaam Hussein's Iraq and the Taliban rule of Afghanistan, can outright military intervention be far behind?

Not as far-fetched as one might think. Intervention in Mexico is just as much in the best interest of Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Asia as well. As early as 2006 Mexican Drug Cartels operated in 11 West African countries.<sup>8</sup> The significance is that Africa serves as the link that enables heroin to travel westward towards the Americas.<sup>9</sup> By 2012, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security publicly acknowledged that the cartels have entrenched themselves in Europe, primarily Britain, France and the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> This year (2012) has also seen business expand into Australia.<sup>11</sup> Mexican authorities in December 2011 seized 100 tons of chemicals used to make methamphetamine. The origins were traced to Chinese companies from Shanghai.<sup>12</sup> While the drug trade in a globalized market elicits cooperation throughout the illicit supply chain, the issue is no longer what the Mexican cartels produce and where they sell it. To truly understand the term 'narco-terrorism,' one has to further integrate extreme political agendas along with the massive resources to pay for it. With such business partners, the Mexican cartels are assisting Iran-supported Hezbollah in infiltrating the southern U.S. border – a mission they perform daily with near impunity.<sup>13</sup> That however is not all. Members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are not only implicated in the drug trade, they are reported to have worked with the Mexican cartels to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in Washington – a blatant act of war.<sup>14</sup>

Politically, Mexico is still a sovereign nation. At issue is whether the rule of law is still perceived as legitimate by its people or not.<sup>15</sup> If the answer is no, then sovereignty begs restoration since the people lack any mechanism for self-determination. The impasse then becomes this: At some point the Mexican government can invite outside forces to assist or allow itself to be conceived as illegitimate in the world community. That was the gamble that Manuel Noriega of Panama made and lost. In regards to Right to Protect (R2P)<sup>16</sup> this opens up the debate even further. Whatever political stripe weighs in on the intervention debate, it is the fear of the Mexican people that remains unable to hold its elected government to account for its instability. While the demand for drugs in the U.S. and abroad no doubt fuels this, militarily and strategically the command and control of this global network is in Mexico. To intervene attacks the very heart of the global war on drugs. To not intervene might very well delegitimize the drug war as perceived by the U.S. Government not to mention the efforts of the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) throughout the remainder of the world. With narco-terrorism just as much a security threat, interdiction at the street level will never yield the results of going directly to the beating pulse of the problem – the hierarchy of Mexico's cartels.

While this notion might still be in a marked folder in U.S. Northern Command's (NORTHCOM's) Headquarters outside Colorado Springs, Colorado, the variables now in motion makes this more and more a possibility. Of course some of these indicators may well be circumstantial yet they are intriguing nonetheless. For instance, U.S. forces are no longer a major driver of events in Iraq. Following this, the possibility of troop drawdown also in Afghanistan can either be unilateral or replaced by numbers filled by other NATO members. The latter would make this significant. Why would NATO allow the U.S. to go home with a mission in Afghanistan not yet finished; even in the waning days of its operation? By default, the shrinking defense budget most likely brings these troops directly back to the United States. They would refit, retrain and then wait. The question would then be 'wait for what' and 'how long?'

What is even more intriguing is where this regeneration of personnel and equipment might take place. Coincidentally a large proportion of U.S. military bases are less than a day's drive of the Mexican border.

Incredibly, the placement of these installations is spread either within easy reach or along the U.S.-Mexican border itself as if such an intervention was the plan all along. The purpose of this information then is not to instill a notion of comparison between the two or worse yet rattle a saber on behalf of U.S. military superiority. Instead there are two political nuances that were never conceived by NATO or interested countries all along. To explain this first requires this explanation of U.S. forces and where they are based.

Starting from the Southern California coast and moving east, the Navy's largest base (San Diego) and two additional tactical air bases (Edwards and March) pale in comparison to the Mojave Desert with in the south central and eastern part of the state. The Mojave Desert in Southern California hosts the largest Navy land base (China Lake), two Marine Corps Bases (Air-Ground Combat Center and the Mountain Warfare Center at Twentynine Palms) and the largest Army maneuver base in the world (Fort Irwin's National Training Center). In Arizona, the Army's US Intelligence Center and Network Enterprise Technology Command (Fort Huachuca) also hosts a unit from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). There are two air bases (Davis-Monthan which is tactical and Luke where fighter pilots are trained). The Marine Corps has an Air Station (Yuma) in Arizona as well. New Mexico hosts a tactical air base (Holloman). In Texas, one Army base (Fort Bliss) sits directly across the border from Juarez with the world's largest concentration of combat units nearby (Fort Hood). While each of the aforementioned bases have clinics and hospitals, the Army also located its major medical command center in Texas as well (Fort Sam Houston). There is one tactical air base in Texas (Dyess).

The first nuance is that there is a direct political impact on NATO. Very few people know that the German Air Force operates in New Mexico and Texas.<sup>17</sup>The reason for this is space. Tactical aircraft simply cannot conduct the training and combat maneuvers in Germany so they must conduct these in the United States within proximity to Mexico. If NATO allowed U.S. forces to go back to home soil from Afghanistan to regenerate, many would repatriate at or near the Mexican border. If such an intervention south were to transpire, NATO would not have to deploy to assist the United States – they are already there.

The second nuance is the money. The United States under the Department of Justice practices Asset Forfeiture<sup>18</sup> or confiscation of assets and other property belonging to proven criminal enterprises. The rationale is simple. Without Asset Forfeiture, the taxpayer pays for everything and the criminal might even keep the money. With Asset Forfeiture, it is the criminal that pays for everything. The largest single haul to date was \$205 million found in a room in 2007.<sup>19</sup>The second largest was \$15.3 million found in a car in 2011.<sup>20</sup>According to a 2009 U.S. Department of Justice report, the gross revenues for that year was \$39 billion.<sup>21</sup>With that kind of money ripe for the taking, the calculus of denying the southern border to Hezbollah and dealing a blow to those trading drugs for guns appears irresistible.

The debate over whether this option is right or wrong is open for others to contemplate. What is important is how humanitarian interests are bundled by strategic ones. More important still is how history repeats itself or within a globalized framework, how the improbable becomes probable. When 16<sup>th</sup> Century Dominican friar Bartholome de Las Casas laid upon his deathbed in 1566, he pondered the atrocities and enslavement by Spain amongst the indigenous people of Central America. While his curse and mention of God's wrath upon Spain could easily be wider interpreted to be Europeans and their legacy writ large,<sup>22</sup>no fulfillment of such a prophecy could be more complete as the disastrous implications of the escapist and self-destructive tendencies of millions worldwide that crave drugs. Rather than stop demand, the retail approach to interdiction has proven too diverse and futile to interdict. Rather than give up, the narrowing options are legalizing them everywhere or 'cutting the head off the snake' to level the balance.

## Endnotes:

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