**Mexican Project: Can there be a peaceful solution to the drug war in Mexico, or is violent crackdown the most effective option? What is the future of the drug war in Mexico?**

Narco-culture in Mexico and the resultant increasing power and rivalry between drug cartels has created a menacing environment of fear and organised crime throughout the country. This has developed into one of the biggest and most challenging problems in Mexico, raising major issues of national and international security, and strong questions about the strength of Mexico’s capacity to find a solution. This essay will analyse and evaluate the two main options which the Mexican government can take to try and resolve the conflict: negotiation towards a relatively peaceful resolution or a violent crackdown strategy (a war on drug cartels in essence). To do this effectively, this essay will first define and conceptualise the topics, strategies and terms used and then outline a brief history and development of the drug war. Following this, the essay will then open up into a more analytical discussion looking at the pros and cons of each strategy and the likely future developments and then suggest an alternative approach Mexico can take; one of strengthening its institutions and reversing the balance of power to combat drug cartels (Morfini, 2019). This will then lead to a natural summary showing how perhaps the best option for Mexico to take is to focus on strengthening its own institutions rather than negotiate or engage in war with cartels.

To start with, it is important to understand what is meant by the ‘drug war’ in Mexico. The drug war in Mexico is a perpetual, asymmetric conflict that began between the Mexican government and its allies against the numerous drug cartels that operate in and around Mexico (Etter & Lehmuth, 2013). The war is considered to have begun on the 11th December 2006, when newly elected President Felipe Calderon ordered the military to send 4000 troops to the state of Michoacán known as ‘Operation Michoacán’ (Flannery, 2013). This is widely recognised as the official start of the war; interior minister Francisco Ramirez Acuna quoted as saying “the battle against organised crime has just begun” (BBC News, 2006). For this essay, this will be seen as the official starting point of the ‘Mexican Drug War’.

It is also important to understand the strategy used by the Mexican government throughout the drug war. The current strategy and tactics of counter-narcotics employed to tackle the cartels is centred around implementing a violent crackdown through government sanctioned military operations and interventions with international support, most notably from the US (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). This escalation of violence is primarily attributed to Felipe Calderon and his approach to the cartels following his election to presidency, in fact it was one of his first actions as president; he ignited the Mexican Drug War within 10 days of him taking office (Rosen & Zepeda, 2016). Critics argue that Calderon’s approach towards the drug war has drastically escalated the level of violence between both sides of the conflict, and has spilled over onto civilian and public populations putting them in danger as well (Chabat, 2010). In 2011, 5 years after the ‘start’ of the Mexican drug war, it has been estimated over forty thousand people have been killed (Rawlins, 2011). Calderon’s approach stems from the pattern of history before his presidency, with a ‘let it be’ policy being employed resulting from decades of facilitated corruption (Chabat, 2010). The Mexican government prior to Calderon has taken measures to fulfil US anti-drugs objectives that came from a place of diplomatic appeasement following the death of DEA Enrique Camarena in 1985 (Chabat, 2010). Because of this, Mexican policy towards the cartels has shown more of a will to fight cartels and acknowledge the problem, rather than effectively dealing with it. When Calderon took charge, he placed huge emphasis on taking a tougher stance against the cartels – arguably a product of public pressure demanding for more in ending drug violence and control. The increased death toll and damage to the Mexican people has resulted in many questioning the success of Calderon’s war on drugs and now raises the notion that a new strategy is needed to address the issue of cartels. From this the dichotomy of approaches has formed: increasing violence to eradicate cartels; or negotiating a peaceful solution to the problem.

The first approach that this essay will assess is the use of violence to coerce, intimidate and eradicate drug cartels. The essence of the drug ‘war’ is that it involves a violent confrontation to find a solution to the problem of drug cartels and drug trafficking, so there is argument here that a violent war is inevitable, especially with the cartels who will refuse to give in to the law (Chabat, 2010). This inevitable conflict has reinforced the strength of utilising this strategy because it already accommodates for the cartels desire to fight to the death rather than succumb to the law, and so can only naturally lead to a violent confrontation as the solution. Persisting drug related violence that claims numerous innocent victims also brings the state’s capacity to protect its population into the fray, and so the government is pressured by the public to take action. US pressure also provided a strong influence in Mexican decision making, with US geographical proximity and subsequent security and economic interests involved as a result of the drug trade. The drug war has stimulated closer US-Mexican security cooperation as a result of this; between 2007 and 2012, there has been a significant increase in extraditions to the US (Beittel, 2019). In 2008 the US launched the $1.4 billion Merida Initiative that sent the bulk of its funding to Mexico to battle organised crime (Rawlins, 2011). So, US support and cooperation as well the importance of the political economy between the two states is also an important reason in understanding why violent crackdown is an effective option, because of the collateral benefits of doing so in the wider political landscape. Calderon has therefore adopted this strategy to fragment the larger organisations in order to destabilise them and ultimately make them weaker and thus much easier to destroy (Beittel, 2019). Crackdowns also can start conflicts within organisations if members fight for competition over leadership and territorial vacuums; this internal conflict whilst adding to the death toll can certainly result in organisations helping facilitate their own demise (Dell, 2015). Furthermore, there has been direct results of the military crackdown strategies. Calderon has managed to capture or kill over 40 major cartel members; a significant victory was in December 2009 when the Mexican marines essentially destroyed the Beltran Leyva cartel (Bonner, 2012). They have also dismantled or weakened the Gulf, Juarez and La Familia Michoacana organisations (Bonner, 2012). From these factors then, the increased militarisation of the conflict as shown by the Calderon administration does have some effectiveness in dealing with the cartels in a more aggressive and direct no-nonsense manner and can ultimately lead to their weakening and destruction. It can be seen as a viable option for the Mexican government due to this plethora of factors and influences, one that was almost politically logical at the time of Calderon’s appointment in office (Chabat, 2010).

However, there are numerous problems with this strategy that limit its effectiveness and viability as domestic policy. To start with, this is a very costly strategy. Calderon’s administration has been heavily criticised in its use of violence and accused of actually increasing the level of violence and casualties in the conflict. In 2009 the number of drug-related deaths was approximately 7000, and in August 2010 this number was 28,000 (Chabat, 2010). Critics argue that without the military interventions throughout the drug war, the drug related homicide rates would be much lower (Espinosa & Rubin, 2015). Whilst a large number of deaths come from battles between police and army against the cartels, the power and territorial vacuums created by Calderon’s crackdowns have resulted in ensuing violence between cartels as the compete for power (Contreras, 2013). Moreover, the increased violence used by the state to deal with the cartels has resulted in the cartels becoming more brutal and more determined to bring the fight to the state (Kellner & Pipitone, 2010). This brutally has also been broadcast through cruel video messages, beheadings and banners by cartels to spread fear amongst populations and territories (Ellingwood, 2008). This is incredibly damaging and traumatizing to Mexican society as well as reduces the power of the government because it lacks the capacity to control the conflict. The strategy to attack the cartels is also ineffective, as targeting high level traffickers known as the kingpin strategy does remove the head of the organisation, the bulk mid-layer organisational system remains relatively intact (Bonner, 2012). As well as this, economically the escalation of violence jeopardizes the opportunity for foreign investment which is detrimental to its GDP (Gould, 2008). From this we can therefore see that escalating violence is not a particularly effective long-term solution, as well as ethically correct - there have been multiple claims of human rights abuses by Calderon’s police and military in the drug war (Chabat, 2010).

The other option available to the Mexican government is to attempt to negotiate a relatively peaceful surrender from the cartels, to end the violence and promote peace within the country. Appeasing the cartels can be an effective option for the future Mexican governments as it reduces the persisting violence between cartels, the government forces and the public (Bonner, 2012). A negotiated surrender also has its benefit in bringing a resolution to a seemingly endless war; notorious cartel leader ‘El Chapo’ himself said that “the drug war will never end” (Morfini, 2019) The cycle of drug trafficking and subsequent violence is perpetual rather than a conventional war where there is an expected end. Many critics and politicians in Mexico believe the ‘war’ has failed and caused more harm than good which has nudged current president Lopez Obrador’s to consider the viability of negotiated peace with the cartels. Following the tougher stances of Calderon and Pena Nieto’s terms, AMLO seeks to end the conflict through his message of *abrazos, no balazos* – “hugs not bullets” (O'Grady, 2019). He aims to do this through social programs and reduced jail times for cartel members; the reasoning behind this is that he sees the cause of the drug war to be rooted in poverty and inequality, and sees diplomacy as the means by which to address this issue rather than violence (VOA News, 2018).

Whilst this strategy does have its benefits in reducing violence in short term, as well as the potential to decrease poverty and provide better opportunities for poorer Mexicans, the drawbacks are far too large to ignore with the most obvious being the loss of Mexican sovereignty and autonomy of the government to territorial cartels. This is a massive undermining of the Mexican government autonomy and its capacity to protect and control its population and territory. It will concede the strength of Mexican rule of law and relegate the country to corruption and potentially more violence under the guise of organised crime (Bonner, 2012). Bargaining with cartels simply shifts the balance of power back into their favour and simultaneously reduces the faith of Mexican public in the strength of its own institutions (Chabat, 2010). US-Mexico relations will also be damaged should the government choose to pursue this strategy. Furthermore, this raises the frightening idea that perhaps Mexico is on its way to becoming a failed state should this be the strategy future governments decide to employ.

Now that we have assessed the two current strategies employed by the Mexican government and their relative ineffectiveness, this essay will attempt to portray an alternative approach that could provide a better long-term solution to the drug war. This approach centres around strengthening Mexican institutions, eradicating corruption in government, army and police from top to bottom and enforcing and upholding rule of law. Weak institutions, combined with social exclusion and poverty make Latin American nations more vulnerable to drug trafficking and cartel violence (Shifter, 2007). There are insufficient resources and effective instruments by which to tackle this problem; the faith in police is so little due corruption, and there are doubts over the army and the risk of human rights abuses (Shifter, 2007). Over 90% of crimes are never reported in Mexico because of lack of trust in the police force (Rios & Wood, 2018). The concept of a narco-state is one that challenges the essence of Mexican political institutions and also threatens US national security so it is a non-feasible reality and needs to be addressed by ensuring Mexican institutions restore the balance of power. In the long-term this is a difficult proposition to implement because it requires patience, persistence and cooperation not only by institutions but also the public. The balance of power favours the cartels and needs to be reversed in order to tackle the roots of the problem. The US has been able to tackle the problem of organised crime far more effectively than other countries not only in Latin America, but also the world and this is due to its strong institutions (Chabat, 2010). The difficulty in implementing reforms to strengthen institutions comes from turning it into reality. Establishing and implementing a strong rule of law that applies to everybody in the same way independent of status is the first big step Mexico needs to take (Rios & Wood, 2018). Also US demand for drugs needs to be addressed as it creates a lucrative market for traffickers; therefore Mexico needs to work with and urge the US to focus on reducing the demand for traffickers and thus diminishing the market (Chabat, 2010). The future of the drug war will be defined by how Mexico changes the dynamic of power between the state and the cartels; by addressing these systemic problems that allow cartels to gain power and influence, counter-narcotics efforts may be more effective.

Rios & Wood highlight 6 obstacles to implementing a strong rule of law: 1) eradicating corruption; 2) strengthening Mexican judicial institutions capacity to provide order and security; 3) strengthening Mexican democracy and moving away from authoritarian elements; 4) lack of legal order and businesses vulnerable to extortion and insecurity; 5) Mexican ‘mentality’ which places preference for economic gains over obeying the law; 6) lack of critical view by largely government controlled media (2018). They further present methods by which to convert approved reforms on paper into reality by tackling these problems. Firstly, the empowerment of citizens to monitor and demand higher and more accessible quality of public education to realise the negative consequences of drug trade and corruption. Improved transparency will improve access to information and subsequently awareness and knowledge of the issue. Mexico must effectively create a harder business environment to avoid regulations and promote equality and healthy competition; market discipline leads into political discipline. Mexico must focus on crime prevention rather than punishment, as well as create a Congress that is professional, transparent and accountable. Finally, Mexico must also invest heavily into creating a strong and trustworthy police force, through higher standards of training and more professional policing. Through these methods, Mexico can effectively procure change systemically and tackle the issue of drug cartels across all levels; top down and from the ground up.

In conclusion, the future of Mexico’s drug war rests heavily on reforming state institutions and Mexican societal problems. Inequality, poverty and corruption are deep rooted causes of the rise in power of drug cartels and the difficulty of removing them. Therefore, Mexican institutional reform is essential for any effective counter-narcotic strategy; direct negotiation or violent crackdown will only provide short-term results but ultimately revert back into the terrifying cycle of violence that has plagued Mexico for decades.

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