

Drug war allies

by Robert_J_Caldwell

The United States and Mexico are doing something historic in the struggle against Mexico's drug cartels, responsible for 90 percent of all illicit narcotics on America's streets. To a greater extent than ever before, they are joining forces, thereby advancing the only strategy with a hope of success.

The Bush administration calls it the Merida Initiative, a \$1.4 billion, multiyear security partnership linking the United States, Mexico and Central America in a new regional counternarcotics alliance. It's aimed squarely at the rapacious drug cartels that control narcotics trafficking through Mexico and into the United States. Taken together with existing counternarcotics programs in the Andean nations of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, the Merida Initiative represents, as a senior State Department official put it, "a hemispheric assault to cripple drug trafficking and criminal organizations, disrupt and dismantle their networks, and help fortify state institutions to ensure these groups can no longer operate effectively."

By far, the most remarkable part of this plan is Mexico's participation.

For decades, Mexican presidents have declared that drug trafficking represents a threat to their national security. But successive Mexican governments have been stubbornly reluctant, for reasons of nationalism and domestic politics, to engage with the United States in a joint strategy to fight the drug cartels. That reluctance has now given way to a recognition that combating this burgeoning threat requires a full partnership with the United States.

Credit Mexico's new president, the able and impressive Felipe Calderon, for this belated but welcome acknowledgment. Calderon took office last December vowing an all-out government offensive against Mexico's drug mafias - ultra-violent criminal syndicates that threaten to turn Mexico into a narco state. Calderon sent 20,000 troops of the Mexican army into the fight against the traffickers, began extraditing captured drug kingpins wanted in the United States, reorganized Mexico's federal police forces and significantly increased funding for counternarcotics programs.

Among the results: the largest cocaine seizures in Mexican history, record seizures of drug cartel assets and dismantling methamphetamine mega-labs capable of producing five tons of highly addictive meth annually for the U.S. market.

But Calderon quickly realized that this wasn't a fight Mexico could win on its own. He needed help from the United States. In an unprecedented action, Calderon's government approached the Bush administration to ask for assistance.

Judging, rightly, that Calderon had proved his government a reliable partner in the counternarcotics struggle, the Bush administration responded affirmatively to Mexico's appeal for help. After months of careful negotiations between Washington and Mexico City, both governments agreed on what the Bush administration calls the Merida Initiative.

The plan calls for the United States to assist in equipping and training Mexico's counternarcotics police and security forces. Surveillance aircraft and technology, helicopters, modern weapons, communications and drug-detection equipment are to be part of the package. No doubt the Merida Initiative also includes classified provisions for a far greater sharing of intelligence by both countries on drug trafficking and the major narcotics-smuggling cartels.

The Bush administration has included \$500 million in funding for the Merida Initiative for fiscal year 2008, with the plan's remaining \$900 million to be funded in the plan's second and third years. In all, \$50 million would be allocated to Central American governments and the rest to Mexico.

Critics, mainly the left in Mexico and assorted liberals in this country, are labeling the Merida Initiative "Plan Mexico." That's intended as an unflattering reference to Washington's long-standing program of paramilitary assistance that helps Colombia fight drug trafficking, terrorism and a narco-funded communist insurgency.

In fact, there is no valid comparison. No U.S. military or police advisory teams will be stationed in Mexico. Most of the Merida Initiative aid would go to civilian, not military, agencies in Mexico. Calderon's government needs help with law enforcement, not its military.

The predictable argument that the drug war is futile, and thus that the Merida Initiative is doomed to fail, is belied by the facts, and by the prevailing strategic imperatives for Mexico and the United States alike.

Public education and law enforcement have helped reduce cocaine demand in the United States by 75 percent since the 1980s. Counternarcotics efforts in Mexico and the Andean countries this year have driven up cocaine prices in 37 sampled American cities by 44 percent and reduced cocaine purity by 15 percent. The per-gram cost of methamphetamine has soared by 73 percent in 2007 even as meth purity fell 31 percent. All these are clear indications of drug-supply shortages attributable to counternarcotics efforts.

It's just as clear that Mexico and the United States share an urgent national security imperative. Drug cartels threaten the rule of law in Mexico, a country that shares an 1,800-mile border with the United States. Left unchecked, they might ultimately imperil Mexico's political stability and economic development. And, as noted, Mexico is either the source or the trans-shipment point for 90 percent of all narcotics entering the United States. The violence and gang warfare spawned by the drug trade have long since crossed the U.S.-Mexico border right along with the tons of drugs coming from Mexico.

If ever two countries shared a common enemy, it's Mexico and the United States against the drug cartels that are a scourge to both nations. The common U.S.-Mexico strategy and joint enforcement efforts represented by the Merida Initiative are desperately needed and long overdue.

Robert J. Caldwell is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's Sunday Insight section and can be reached at robert.caldwell@uniontrib.com.

Drug war allies by Robert_J_Caldwell