

U.S. focus putting Mexican cartels on notice

by The San Diego Union-Tribune.

The war against drug cartels rages on in Mexico, and it has the full attention of the Obama administration. The conflict also has the potential to redefine for the better what has traditionally been a complicated and rocky marriage between the United States and its southern neighbor.

It's not often that we see the president of the United States and three Cabinet secretaries travel to Mexico over the course of a few weeks to show support for the Mexican government's assault on the violent drug-trafficking organizations. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is in Mexico now, meeting with Mexican officials. Attorney General Eric Holder and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano are scheduled to arrive next week for a conference on arms dealing. Two weeks after that, President Obama will visit Mexico City to meet with President Felipe Calderon.

This focus by the administration is intended to send a series of messages. It tells Calderon and the Mexican people that the White House understands the importance of their valiant fight against the drug traffickers, and that this is a battle they won't have to wage alone. It also puts the drug dealers on notice that Washington considers their line of work to be, as Holder said recently, a threat to the national security of the United States. Most of all, it tells the world that the United States is accepting its share of responsibility for a crisis that is being fueled by Americans' appetite for illicit drugs and the eagerness with which arms dealers in this country are selling their products to drug dealers in Mexico.

All of this is to be commended. It is certainly a step in the right direction for a relationship that has its ups and downs.

Americans can no longer fool themselves into thinking that the drug violence only affects Mexicans, that their drug dabbling is a harmless vice, or that the Second Amendment somehow gives individuals the right to smuggle guns into a foreign country. Content to look down their noses at Mexico as corrupt, backward and incompetent, Americans have not always treated their neighbors with the respect they deserve.

Likewise, Mexicans have to stop blaming all of their problems on the United States. Mexican officials have long looked the other way and allowed the drug business to prosper under their noses. Mexico's popular culture went so far as to turn drug lords into Robin Hood figures, idolized by the population because they would stroll into poor villages bearing groceries, clothes and toys for the children. Now the drug lords are brutalizing those same villages, and guess who stand ready to lend a hand: Los Americanos.

Right now, Mexican drug dealers have people on both sides of the border running scared. But if the United States and Mexico can put aside their differences and work together to eradicate this plague, it will be the dealers who wind up on the run.

What are we waiting for?

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