

THE MERIDA INITIATIVE: AN EARLY ASSESSMENT OF U.S.-MEXICO SECURITY¹

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ABSTRACT:

This article provides an initial assessment of the Mérida Initiative, the recently proposed United States-Mexico security strategy, and draws attention to some potential obstacles to its success. The following discussion analyzes the Initiative through the lens of U.S. anti-drug and counterterrorism policies in Latin America, and within the context of the shortcomings of Plan Colombia. While Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative focus on different aspects of the drug trade and narco-terrorist activities, they are both a part of a broader U.S. strategy toward the wars on drugs and terrorism. In order to provide an understanding for the expansion of U.S. anti-drug and counterterrorism strategies from the Andean region to Mexico, the article first will briefly review Plan Colombia and discuss three main criticisms of its approach and strategies. Second, it will assess the Mérida Initiative proposal, emphasizing some of its potential shortcomings, which could become major obstacles to its long-term success. This article will argue that these shortcomings are comparable to those associated with Plan Colombia. Third, it will recommend some strategies to policymakers in order to improve the Mérida Initiative before its implementation. Given the mixed results of U.S. anti-drug and counterterrorism frameworks under Plan Colombia, and the questionable strategies proposed through the Mérida Initiative, U.S. policymakers must re-evaluate their approach toward the wars on drugs and terrorism if they hope to achieve their objectives and realize long-term progress.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, the war on drugs has been a central policy concern in Washington and has continued to shape U.S. relations with Latin America, especially Colombia. By 2000, after years of questionable progress, U.S. anti-drug strategies culminated in Plan Colombia, one of the most expensive and ambitious efforts in the war on drugs. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, anti-drug strategies toward the region shifted and were soon absorbed into a larger U.S. security strategy on the war on terrorism; drug traffickers quickly evolved into narco-terrorists, and “all illicit cross-border activity including migration, money laundering and contraband became potential channels for terrorism” (WOLA 2007, 4). Despite this policy shift and extensive criticism of Plan Colombia’s effectiveness, particularly in terms of reducing the drug supply, encouraging development, and fostering regional stability, Washington’s approach has extended beyond the Andean region and into Mexico with the Mérida Initiative. The Initiative is a recently proposed anti-drug, anti-crime, and counterterrorism security strategy by the Bush administration.² However, like Plan Colombia, it is unclear whether the Mérida Initiative will provide long-term solutions to Mexico’s drug and security problems.

This article will present an initial assessment of the Mérida Initiative within the framework of U.S. security policy, and relate them to the shortcomings of Plan Colombia. While

Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative vary in some of their individual strategies, they both fall under the broader rubric of U.S. security policy in the regional wars on drugs and terrorism. This article does not presume that the individual histories of and current conditions in Colombia and Mexico are analogous; rather, it bases its discussion on how these countries are linked under U.S. security policy in terms of narco-terrorist activities and the production and transit of illicit substances. To begin this assessment, the article will first give a brief overview of Plan Colombia and discuss three main criticisms of its approach and strategies. This overview will provide a context for the expansion of U.S. anti-drug and counterterrorism strategies from the Andean region to Mexico. Second, it will introduce and evaluate the Mérida Initiative proposal, highlighting some of its potential shortcomings, which could be detrimental to its long-term success. As this article will argue, these shortcomings are similar to those associated with Plan Colombia. Third, it will suggest a few strategies to improve the Mérida Initiative that U.S. policymakers should consider before its implementation. Given the mixed results of U.S. anti-drug and counterterrorism frameworks under Plan Colombia, and the questionable strategies proposed through the Mérida Initiative, U.S. policymakers must reassess their approach toward the wars on drugs and terrorism if they hope to achieve their objectives and realize long-term progress.

PLAN COLOMBIA: BACKGROUND AND ASSESSMENT

In 2000 under the Clinton administration, the U.S. Congress passed legislation to implement Plan Colombia, originally a six-year assistance package that provided an initial US\$1.3 billion to the region.³ Under the Andean Counterdrug Initiative, Plan Colombia's funding for Colombia amounted to approximately US\$2.8 billion between fiscal year (FY) 2000 and FY 2005 (Veillette 2006). Although the final version differed from President Andrés Pastrana's original vision of the Plan, its stated objectives were to restrict the flow of narcotics from Colombia and encourage economic and political development, internal security, and regional stability (Battaglino 2006; Ramírez Lemus et al. 2005; Serafino 2001; Veillette). The Plan would serve as a mechanism to stabilize conditions in a country that has experienced over 40 years of conflict with leftist guerrillas, and internal fighting with right-wing paramilitaries since the 1980s (Veillette, 9). The U.S. and Colombian governments also hoped the Plan would fortify internal security and government institutions, such as the Colombian National Police, and thus encourage investment in Colombia's economy, especially its oil sector.⁴ By enhancing internal security, building government institutions, and thus encouraging economic development, Plan Colombia would theoretically abolish many of the conditions that support the existence of the drug trade. In accomplishing its goals, the Plan would then minimize the spill-over effects caused by drug trafficking and insurgency activities, and hence promote regional stability.

However, anti-drug and security operations emerged as the top priorities of Plan Colombia. As with previous policies, the anti-drug agenda dominated and became the central theme of the Plan, given Colombia's reputation as a leading supplier of heroin and as the world's top producer of cocaine (Veillette). Consequently, U.S. policymakers dedicated a large majority of funds to supply-reduction measures and anti-drug operations, overemphasizing internal security and eradication at the expense of institutional and economic development strategies (Battaglino; Buzan and Wæver 2004; Ramírez Lemus et al.). Regardless of any internal debates over this strategy, the Colombian government accepted U.S. financing and adopted the internal security and eradication approach, hoping that it would generate much needed stability and

order, and thus eventually lead to the country's development. After September 11, 2001, this strategy intensified and became enveloped in the Bush administration's dual anti-drug and counterterrorism policy approach toward Colombia (Battaglino; Buzan and Wæver; Veillette; WOLA). This shift occurred within the context of widespread public support for counterterrorism programs at home and abroad, and was reflected in a post-9/11 report by the U.S. Department of State, which listed the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) as foreign terrorist organizations (Isacson 2005, 48; Ramírez Lemus et al., 106-112). As a result, anti-drug and counterterrorism strategies merged and became even more militarized as the drug war transformed into a wider war against terrorism (WOLA). However, despite this shift, Plan Colombia had major shortcomings and failed to address the root problems of Colombia's internal conflicts. The implementation of limited strategies and some of their unintended negative consequences, combined with considerable funding imbalances, hindered the Plan's ability to accomplish some of its primary objectives.

One of these failings corresponds to the eradication of the drug supply through aerial fumigation, which was a key component of the Plan. Fumigation rapidly expanded after the implementation of Plan Colombia in an attempt to decrease drug-cultivated areas by 50 percent over the Plan's original six-year lifespan (Jelsma 2004, 215). In fact, from "2000 through 2003, the U.S.-backed fumigation program sprayed herbicide on more than 380,000 hectares of coca, equivalent to more than eight percent of Colombia's arable land" (Ramírez Lemus et al., 113). In spite of these efforts, increases in crop cultivation (and drug production) elsewhere in the Andean region offset the decreases in Colombia (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2006, 23, 25). The shift in cultivation and/or production from one area to another has been described as "[the] 'balloon effect' whereby suppression of production in one country leads to more in another" (Buzan and Wæver, 330).

In addition, the rise in cultivation and production in other countries in the region have countered efforts to contain spill-over effects of insurgent activities and the drug trade (The Economist 2003). Thus, the balloon effect exacerbated an already tenuous situation, as guerrilla insurgents continued to gain "influence over an ample area of the Amazon region (...) attempting to gain control over the frontiers that border Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru" (Vargas 2004, 124). Furthermore, farmers have implemented new strategies to adapt to fumigation: to avoid crop detection, they mix illicit and licit crops, or plant on smaller lots. Rather than eliminating the drug supply, the expansion of the fumigation program simply relocated it and generated a situation in which the crops are now more difficult to detect, and therefore are more difficult to eradicate (Battaglino, 9; International Crisis Group 2005, 23). It has also led to the displacement of millions of rural inhabitants, which has contributed to regional instability.

Second, the results of the alternative development component of Plan Colombia have been minimal. The alternative development program was intended to provide the government with the means to "negotiate contracts with impoverished coca farmers under which they [would] agree to manually destroy their crops. In return, the government [would] give each family up to \$2,000 in subsidies and technical assistance to grow substitute crops like rice, corn and fruit" (Cooper 2001, 16). However, farmers have continued to cultivate illicit crops, mostly due to funding shortages for the program and a lack of viable alternatives within Colombia's economy. Despite the need for alternatives to drug crop cultivation, from FY 2000 to FY 2005, alternative development funding ranged from approximately one-third to just over one-half of the annual spending on eradication and interdiction programs in Colombia (Veillette). This is

partially because the Plan's original proposal called for US\$3.5 billion for development from other international donors (Ramírez Lemus et al., 109). However, Washington's insistence on a militarized, anti-drug approach dampened the European Union's eagerness to be involved, and to furnish the much-needed aid.⁵

Lacking ample resources or incentives, farmers have continued to grow illicit crops. The Plan did not specifically establish a market and demand for alternative crops, and licit crop cultivation has fallen short of providing the same level of income as coca or poppy crops. Moreover, government aid was slow to reach those who qualified for it, if it arrived at all, which inhibited participation in the program (Ramírez Lemus et al.; Crandall 2005). Thus, both spending imbalances and implementation problems have resulted in minimal progress through the alternative development program.

A third failure of Plan Colombia has been its focus on militarization to the detriment of human rights and the rule of law, which are inherently linked to Colombia's domestic security situation. The Plan's insistence on military solutions in its anti-drug and counterterrorism activities has increased the autonomy of the military and re-emphasized its use in performing typical police duties, such as maintaining public order. As a result of this militarization, human rights violations — arbitrary detentions, extra-judicial executions, torture, massacres, and disappearances — have increased (Battaglini).⁶ Battaglini points out that, because drug traffickers and terrorists are now virtually indistinguishable under U.S. and Colombian security strategies, military force, as opposed to negotiation, is the only acceptable policy response. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of State continued to certify the Colombian government's progress with regard to human rights despite little improvement (Veillette). Given certification and the continual flow of aid, there was little motivation for the Colombian government to reform. Thus, "human rights conditions placed on U.S. assistance have largely failed to end recipient forces' complicity in human rights violations" (Ramírez Lemus et al., 101). Moreover, funding for rule-of-law, political development, and human rights programs was a relatively insignificant part of the Plan's entire budget (Ramírez Lemus et al.). Yet these programs are part and parcel of strengthening democratic institutions and practices in Colombia, which are necessary to address the conditions of internal strife and the widespread abuse of human rights. While the Bush and Uribe administrations, and other top officials, are quick to point out the recent decrease in the number of kidnappings and the decline in drug-related crime and homicide rates, social justice advocates maintain that Colombia has realized these gains at a cost to fundamental democratic principles.⁷ In all, the inability of Plan Colombia to promote the rule of law, political development, and respect for human rights, demonstrates the need for more commitment to these principles in future policies, such as the Mérida Initiative.

Needless to say, there is room for improvement in this approach toward the wars on drugs and terrorism. With regard to Colombia, U.S. and Colombian policymakers need to increase assistance for alternative development. In order for the benefits of alternative development to have a meaningful and sustained effect in decreasing the drug supply, policymakers must balance the spending ratio. Without a concerted effort to assist rural populations in moving away from illicit crop cultivation, farmers will continue source the illegal drug industry. Funding is needed for administrative operations to ensure the efficient processing of alternative development applications and program benefits to qualified farmers. Additional investment in crop research is essential in order to provide farmers with appropriate crop substitutions given soil structure and climatic conditions. Government leaders must also expand the terms of alternative development to include education, training, and career services for those wishing to leave the agricultural

sector and/or seeking urban employment. Eradication and interdiction programs will never be fully effective without equally strong alternative development strategies.

Another missing component of the alternative development program is a market for new crops. The U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA) could provide a solution; however, it is unclear if, or when, this agreement will obtain approval from the U.S. Congress. In the CTPA's current form, many agricultural products receive duty-free treatment, such as cotton, wheat, soybean meal, apples, pears, peaches, cherries, and other fruits and vegetables (Villarreal 2006, 4). While perhaps controversial for U.S. legislators from agricultural states, a separate future agreement could grant preferential treatment for alternative crops and should include provisions to make low-interest credit available to those enrolled in the program.

As noted above, rule-of-law, political development, and human rights programs are fundamental to the development of democratic institutions in Colombia. A drastic increase in funding for these programs is needed in order for them to be effective. In addition, they should incorporate a number of elements. The Leahy Amendment, passed in 1997, stipulates "that no U.S. security assistance can be provided to foreign military or police units implicated in human rights violations unless (...) measures are being taken to bring the case to justice" (Youngers 2005, 349). While admirable in its purpose, its application has been minimal. The U.S. government must dedicate resources to enhance oversight of Colombia's security force operations, and to establish instruments of horizontal accountability within the country. Funding should also emphasize more training for security forces with regard to the rule of law and human rights, and mandate that personnel who violate these principles suffer the consequences. Government leaders must direct more attention toward issues of judicial reform, emphasizing transparency and due process. A greater allocation of funding should go to cover legal training, additional courts, prisons, and the burdensome administrative costs associated with implementing reform. Overall, in order to put an end to the violence and internal strife that has wreaked havoc in Colombia for decades, policymakers must invest in the consolidation of democratic institutions and practices. By taking these lessons into account for future anti-drug and counterterrorism policies in the region, such as the Mérida Initiative, U.S. policymakers and their regional counterparts will have greater success in achieving their goals in the wars on drugs and terrorism.

THE MÉRIDA INITIATIVE: A PRE-MORTEM ANALYSIS⁸

On October 22, 2007, President Bush announced his funding request for US\$1.4 billion on a new two-year security strategy that focuses on anti-drug, anti-crime, and counterterrorism operations, mainly in Mexico (Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State 2007a). The chief objectives of this strategy, known as the Mérida Initiative, are to enhance security within the hemisphere and to prevent the entry and spread of narcotics and transnational threats within the region, specifically the United States (U.S. Department of State 2007b). Although the details have yet to be worked out in Congress, the Mérida Initiative proposal would commit an initial US\$500 million to Mexico (US\$306 million for anti-drug, counterterrorism and border security operations, US\$100 million for institution and rule-of-law building, and US\$56 million for public security and law enforcement activities) and US\$50 million to Central America for anti-drug, counterterrorism, and law enforcement operations (Lugar 2007). In its current form, a majority of the Initiative's funds would be directed toward interdiction, intelligence, and inspection equipment and activities, aircraft, communications systems, and anti-

drug/counterterrorism training (U.S. Department of State 2007b). While Mexico and Central America currently receive assistance from the United States for similar activities, this would significantly bolster the funding level.

The Mérida Initiative is a direct response to drug, gang, and other organized crime activities in Mexico, which has led to a recent surge in violence and domestic instability. It also dovetails a number of institutional reforms undertaken in Mexico to address these problems. Because of Mexico's proximity to the United States and the Bush administration's security policies since September 11, the Mérida Initiative serves as a mechanism to further "securitize" relations between the two countries, promote U.S. domestic security interests, and impede the growing volatility south of the U.S. border. Approximately 90 percent of the cocaine that reaches the United States comes from Mexico; and while the statistics do not specify how much of this cocaine originates from Colombia, one can infer that Mexico is an integral part of the narco-transit system of Colombia — the source of 70 percent of the global supply (National Drug Intelligence Center 2006b, 3-4). In recent years, Mexico has also experienced an increase in drug-related killings. In early 2007, for example, reported killings reached 2,650 and were already surpassing the 2,120 noted for 2006 (Lugar). While President Felipe Calderón has made some progress with his aggressive measures against crime and narco-trafficking, setting a country record for cocaine seizures, the "drugs still flow and the violence continues" (Meyer et al. 2007, 7).

The Mérida Initiative is arguably a natural extension of the anti-drug and counterterrorism activities under Plan Colombia. In his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon stated that the Initiative "represents an effort to integrate security programs from the Andes, through the isthmus of Central America and into Mexico, up to the Southwest border of the United States" (Shannon 2007). As a consequence of the trafficking connections between Mexico and Colombia, and the scope of the Mérida Initiative with respect to Plan Colombia, the Initiative is commonly referred to as 'Plan Mexico' by many media outlets (Carlsen 2007). However, both the U.S. and Mexican governments have been deliberate in highlighting the differences, especially with the criticisms and the mixed results associated with Plan Colombia (Heredia 2007). Generally speaking, the Mérida Initiative targets regional narco-transit and other trafficking activities whereas Plan Colombia is largely based on source-based eradication through crop fumigation and aerial interdiction operations (Hansen 2007; U.S. Department of State 2007b). Furthermore, Mexico's Undersecretary for North American Affairs Carlos Rico has stressed that, unlike Plan Colombia, the Mérida Initiative would not involve the use of U.S. troops on Mexican soil, due to the sensitive issue of Mexican sovereignty (Thomson 2007). Nonetheless, both strategies (and countries) are integral components of U.S. security policy in the region and embody the same overall approach to the wars on drugs and terrorism. Moreover, like Plan Colombia, the anti-drug and counterterrorism operations through the Mérida Initiative would heavily rely on the involvement of the Mexican military.

While differences exist between Plan Colombia and the current version of the Mérida Initiative, there are early signs that the Initiative may encounter many of the same problems as the Plan. First, as the situation in Colombia has demonstrated, increased militarization of anti-drug and counterterrorism operations can have adverse effects. Critics fear that the current design of the Mérida Initiative "could contribute to the creation of a police state in Mexico," given the need of the government to combat the armament and intelligence capabilities of traffickers and organized crime syndicates, which frequently surpass the capacity of traditional law enforcement

agencies (Carlsen). Confrontations between the armed forces and various actors involved in trafficking and organized crime are likely to increase under the Mérida Initiative, and the potential for human rights abuses is also likely to increase. While law enforcement officers are trained to use the least amount of force possible to resolve conflicts, the military is trained for combat operations, “in which force is used to vanquish the enemy (...) The difference in roles and tactics means that conflict and abuses are virtually inevitable when the military is brought into a law enforcement role” (Meyer et al. 2007, 9). In addition, further militarization, combined with the current dearth of civilian oversight of the Mexican armed forces, increases the odds for corruption and collaboration with traffickers and organized crime syndicates which could undermine the Initiative altogether.

Second, although the Mérida Initiative calls for funding for institutional and law enforcement development programs, it falls short of providing the judicial and prison systems and law enforcement units with the assistance they need to operate effectively and uphold the rule of law. In fact, a mere one-fifth of total funding is dedicated to institution and rule-of-law building, and only slightly more than one-tenth is budgeted for public security and law enforcement activities.⁹ This budgetary deficiency was also a shortcoming of Plan Colombia. Since there is currently little oversight of the Mexican military, institution- and rule-of-law-building programs are particularly important to ensure accountability and prevent human rights abuses. The military and other security forces must function as examples of state actors who abide by the rules of the system and respect human rights. The prevalence of strong democratic institutions and practices provide a framework in which alternatives to violence can be used to resolve conflicts. When these institutions and practices “are lacking, even well-planned efforts can fail to achieve their intended aim” (Ramírez Lemus et al., 131).

Third, as with Plan Colombia, there are concerns over the potential spill-over effects throughout the region as a result of militarization and the intensification of anti-drug and counterterrorism activities in Mexico. Despite the growing strength of gangs in Central American countries, a relatively minor amount of funding under the Mérida Initiative is dedicated to Central America, which will need more resources to counteract the destabilizing consequences of the rise in anti-drug and counterterrorism operations. As a result of this funding imbalance, the Initiative could provoke, rather than reduce, the spread of transnational threats. In his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Senator Richard Lugar (2007) cautioned that “[i]ncreasing crime in Central America threatens regional stability, debilitates national economies, and exacerbates illegal migration to the United States.” He stressed that policymakers in Central America “feel that they will not be able to confront threats effectively without more assistance. They fear that gang members and drug traffickers will flee Mexico for Central America where it will be easier to operate.”

These issues present formidable challenges to policymakers, and raise the question of how to proceed in light of Plan Colombia’s shortcomings and the mounting criticisms of the Mérida Initiative. Given the fact that the U.S. Congress is likely to pass the Initiative (it is attached to the Bush administration’s 2008 war funding request, which Congress has already partially approved), it is essential that policymakers now reflect on the potential shortcomings discussed above and develop more sustainable strategies before implementing the current version of the Mérida Initiative (Carlsen; Scully 2008; The White House 2007).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to finding solutions to the aforementioned problems, policymakers should also consider the following three strategies while negotiating the details of the Mérida Initiative. First, as in Colombia, the United States and Mexico (as well as other countries in Central America) need to design structural reforms and meaningful alternative development programs to improve infrastructure, increase access to government, and expand employment and educational opportunities for those who are poor, destitute, and otherwise vulnerable to the lure of crime-related activities. “More than 20 years of efforts to address the problems related to drug trafficking through increased law enforcement efforts and the use of the military have repeatedly shown themselves to be insufficient” (Meyer et al. 2007, 11). In order for the anti-drug and counterterrorism operations to produce long-term results, they must be combined with efforts to give alternatives to a life of crime, and to overcome the roots of social and economic problems in these countries. This is not to suggest that deeper socio-economic conflicts can be resolved overnight through employment and education programs, but they can provide a step forward and are a necessary counterpart to the Initiative’s other activities.

Second, reforms to current gun laws in the United States and tighter entry restrictions in Mexico are necessary to debilitate the illegal arms trade and keep weapons out of the hands of organized crime syndicates and traffickers in Mexico and Central America.¹⁰ To address this issue, the Mexican government has been lobbying for stronger restrictions on gun sales in the United States. In fact, “Mexican authorities estimate that more than 90 percent of the weapons that they confiscate were originally purchased in the United States” (Meyer et al. 2007, 10). Some U.S. states, such as New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona, do not place purchasing limits on assault weapons, magazines, or handguns. Moreover, background checks are not required for gun show sales, which make it relatively easy for traffickers and smugglers to purchase weapons and transport them across the border. Consequently, Mexican policymakers assert that current U.S. laws are fuelling arms-related crime and trafficking, which escalate regional instability and the presence of transnational threats. Without a strategy to break up the illegal arms trade, it will continue to present obstacles to the success and sustainability of the Mérida Initiative (Meyer et al. 2007).

Third, while the Mérida Initiative calls for funding for ‘demand reduction’ programs, critics are sceptical that it will be extensive enough to have a meaningful impact on the drug market in the United States. It is imperative that Washington recognizes the importance of a dual strategy that simultaneously considers the supply *and* demand of illegal drugs. Fighting narco-terrorism and stopping the flow of drug money to organized crime and terrorist groups requires more resources for the campaign to eliminate the domestic demand. The 2006 National Drug Threat Assessment points out that U.S. demand for cocaine and heroin have remained stable, keeping up with the supply (National Drug Intelligence Center 2006a). However, U.S. policymakers have traditionally committed less than a third of its anti-drug funding to reducing demand, which includes prevention and treatment (Lee 2004, 207; Livingstone 2004, 144). The U.S. government needs a more robust preventative and corrective approach to tackle the demand issue. A deeper commitment to the improvement of educational and treatment programs would be a move in the right direction.

Although these three suggested strategies are by no means an exhaustive list, they provide some guidance as more details of the Mérida Initiative surface. The underlying message

here is that policymakers in both countries need to reflect on the root causes of Mexico's drug and security-related problems, as well as some of the shortcomings of previous anti-drug and counterterrorism strategies, such as those of Plan Colombia.

SUMMARY

This article has provided an initial assessment of the Mérida Initiative, the recently proposed U.S.-Mexico security strategy, and has drawn attention to some potential obstacles to its success. The discussion above evaluated the Mérida Initiative within the context of U.S. anti-drug and counterterrorism policies in the region and the shortcomings of Plan Colombia. While Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative focus on different aspects of the drug trade and narco-terrorist activities, they both fall under a broader U.S. approach toward the wars on drugs and terrorism.

Three failures of Plan Colombia that were covered here are its inability to effectively eradicate the drug supply, to provide alternatives to planting illicit crops, and to promote the rule of law and respect for human rights. Fumigation operations under Plan Colombia have contributed to instability and the spread of drug cultivation and production in the region. A severe funding shortage for alternative development programs through the Plan and the lack of substantial financial support from the Colombian government has left many farmers with virtually no substitute for drug crop cultivation. Furthermore, insufficient funding for rule-of-law, political development, and human rights programs coupled with militarization under the Plan has done little to abate human rights violations and strengthen democratic institutions.

As this article showed, there are early indications that many of the shortcomings of Plan Colombia have been passed on to the Mérida Initiative. First, the heavy reliance on the Mexican military for the Initiative's proposed anti-drug, anti-crime, and counterterrorism operations risks a further intensification of insecurity, violence and corruption in Mexico. As in Colombia, a dependence on the armed forces to perform police operations can also lead to an increase in human rights violations. Second, the lack of adequate funding for institutional, rule-of-law and law enforcement development programs is a serious inadequacy of the Mérida Initiative. Government institutions, such as judicial and prison systems and law enforcement units, need support to carry out their functions effectively and to ensure that the rule of law is upheld. Moreover, additional funding in these areas would contribute to some of the efforts Mexico has made in recent years in terms of judicial reform. Third, as with Plan Colombia in the Andean region, the Mérida Initiative could lead to continuing instability throughout Central America over the medium and long terms. The spill-over effects of the Initiative may overwhelm countries to the south of Mexico, given the current funding allotment for Central America.

In addition to addressing these problems, this article recommended strategies to help improve the outcomes of the Mérida Initiative if it is eventually implemented. Policymakers will see better results if they design and fund alternative development programs that will give the susceptible populations of Mexico and Central America alternatives to a life of crime. Legislative reform to U.S. gun laws is also an essential component to combating arms trafficking in Mexico and Central America. Additionally, the U.S. government must devote more resources to reduce domestic drug use. Future progress will depend on policymakers' ability to critically assess their strategies and adopt an approach that will be mutually beneficial and sustainable for all countries involved.

Overall, despite collaboration on some fronts, U.S. policymakers must be mindful to approach drug and security issues in a cooperative manner with neighbouring governments. This is to say, strategies that are developed cooperatively will have a better chance at success and lasting results. Given that these issues are of growing importance throughout the Americas, cooperation and moving forward together on anti-drug and counterterrorism strategies remains in the best interest of all countries in the region.

NOTES

¹ During the publication of this article, the Mérida Initiative obtained the approval of both the U.S. House and Senate and was signed into law (as attached to the Iraq Supplemental Funding Bill) on June 30, 2008 by President Bush. Prior to its passage, the U.S. Congress redrafted parts of the Initiative, decreasing US\$100 million from the original request. In addition, Congress allotted more funding to Central America and inserted some requirements pertaining to human rights conditions. Following the Initiative's endorsement in Washington, the Mexican government released its counter-narcotics plan, the Comprehensive Strategy Against Drug Trafficking, which entailed steps to reduce the government's reliance on the military in the war on drugs and increase the involvement of law enforcement officers. The plan also included strategies to combat corruption, particularly within law enforcement units, and improve confidence in law enforcement and other public agencies.

² While there has been collaboration between the U.S. government and its Latin American counterparts under both Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, the U.S. government has provided the bulk of funding and has played a substantial role in the development and implementation of those strategies.

³ To view the timeline of major congressional activity on H.R. 4425 (which became P.L. 106-246, the Military Construction Appropriations Act of 2000 -- part of the Plan Colombia legislation), please visit <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d106:HR04425:@@R|TOM:bss/d106query.html>. This timeline shows that the bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives on May 16, 2000 in Roll Call No. 184 with a vote breakdown of 382 to 22, and passed the U.S. Senate with amendments in Record Vote No. 106 with a vote breakdown of 96 to 4. The Conference amendments passed the House on June 29, 2000 in Roll Call No. 362 with a vote breakdown of 306 to 110. It passed the Senate on June 30, 2000 by voice vote.

⁴ The Colombian National Police began fighting leftist guerrilla groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), in the 1960s, and had little success as these groups expanded to take advantage of the government's neglect and absence in much of Colombia's territory. By the 1980s, due to the failings of the National Police and the government's institutional weaknesses, right-wing paramilitary groups, namely the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), materialized in order to combat the guerrillas and defend landowner interests. From the 1990s onward, the Colombian government has sought to rebuild and strengthen the National Police.

⁵ While it will not be debated here, this article recognizes the European Union's contribution in terms of local development, especially with regard to its "laboratories of peace" pilot program. Battaglino's paper (2006) provides an overview of the role of the European Union in Colombia.

⁶ Battaglino (2006) cites data from the 2006 annual report of the Colombian Jurists Commission.

⁷ This article acknowledges the results of President Uribe's security approach, as pointed out by Cook (2007) and Valera (2005). However, human rights and social justice advocates stress that these results are hollow if the state fails to uphold and respect the rule of law in the course of its actions.

⁸ A "pre-mortem" analysis is not a prediction that a particular strategy or project will fail; rather, it is what Gary Klein describes as a method to evaluate why a strategy or project might fail in the future. Project managers in the public and private spheres use this method of analysis to assess their plans prior to implementation in order to find weaknesses and correct them, thus enhancing the likelihood of success. Please see Gary Klein, 2003, *Intuition at Work: Why Developing Your Gut Instincts Will Make You Better at What You Do*, New York: Doubleday.

⁹ For a detailed breakdown of the Initiative's funding allocation, please see Colleen W. Cook, Rebecca G. Rush, and Clare Ribando Seelke, 2008, *Mérida Initiative: Background and Funding*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service. <https://www.wola.org/media/Mexico/CRS%20report.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2008).

¹⁰ The author recognizes the important debate over gun ownership rights under the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This article does not take a formal position between so-called *individual* and *collective* rights advocates in the Second Amendment debate; rather, it proposes that both gun ownership proponents and opponents

should collaborate to find a mutually agreeable solution on the illegal arms trade issue. The Mexican government will also need to do its part to restrict the importation of illegal arms into the country.

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