

The Neighbor To The South

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One of the fundamental reasons for the United States' position as sole superpower is geography. Since the end of World War II, a central pillar of U.S. defense policy is that as long as it can maintain control of the oceans on either side, North America is secure. Unless Canada and Mexico were to somehow greatly increase in strength such that they no longer needed U.S. trade, essentially the only thing that can threaten America's survival would be a nuclear missile strike.

However, this pillar may bear re-examining soon. The U.S. Navy still secures the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and no imminent threat of nuclear attack from anywhere exists. But what affects a nation's neighbors affects a nation—even a superpower—and all is not well on America's southern border.

As the post-war U.S. economy soared, so did trade with its neighbors. In 2007, U.S.-Mexican trade totaled around \$350 *billion*. Mexico exported about \$210 billion worth of goods to the U.S., and imported about \$140 billion from the same. America is, by far, Mexico's largest trading partner, while Mexico is America's third-largest trading partner. Trade between these two nations is so substantial that U.S. fiscal policy dictates that U.S.-Mexican border regulations be "flexible" enough not to hinder the free flow of goods. This is largely why U.S. politicians are reluctant to "secure the border." Not only would it entail constructing a wall nearly 2,000 miles long and substantially increasing military manpower (at enormous cost), but tightening border checks would impede trade. The U.S. has concluded that easy trade with Mexico is of greater benefit than a fully secured border—affecting, of course, U.S. immigration policy.

However, in 2007, an estimated \$40 billion—20%—of the \$210 billion of Mexican exports to the U. S. came from illegal drugs. To put that into perspective, \$170 billion worth of trade is being not-so-evenly "distributed" among roughly 100 million Mexicans, while a handful of drug cartels split \$40 billion. A massive amount of money—and thus power—is flowing into the hands of a few individuals who are, by definition, opposed to the interests of national and local governments.

The Mexican drug cartels' increasing and expanding powers are producing severe consequences. First, competition among the cartels is sparking ruthless violence. Not only are rivals killing the local smugglers and dealers, but also top cartel leaders. No one is immune. In 2005, law and order broke down in the Mexican border town of Nuevo Laredo to such an extent that the Mexican army had to be sent in. As the cartels vie for smuggling routes into the U.S., the borderlands are rife with intra-cartel turf violence, and in the major cities brazen attacks are occurring even in broad daylight.

Second, Mexican law enforcement has been ineffective in stemming the violence—let alone the drugs—due to corruption and assassinations. Law enforcement personnel at all levels are being forced to choose between accepting cartel bribes and being killed. In July 2006, nearly the entire police force of Apatzingan (a city of 120,000) was interrogated on suspicion of working with the cartels. Of the 220 officers interrogated, charges were brought against 27, and another 40 officers never returned to work.

Because of the cartels' enormous power and hubris—and their increasing ability to bribe or kill officials who would oppose them—a faint chance exists that Mexico could become a "failed state," one in which the government is unable to protect its citizens, regulate trade, etc., similar to the Lebanon of the 1980s. Even in present-day Lebanon, Hezbollah, a non-state entity, regularly dictates terms to the Lebanese government, reacting with violence if it is opposed. Though the relative goals of Hezbollah and the drug cartels differ, there are parallels in what happens when a powerful, minority entity puts itself above the law via paramilitary, political, and/or economic means.

A non-state actor wielding substantial influence over a state is a geopolitical event that changes the calculus of the region's nations. Just as Israel is wary of Lebanon—not of Lebanese policies or interests, but of Hezbollah's massive influence—so also will the U.S. government become increasingly distrustful of its southern neighbor as the cartels' power mounts.

For the last half-century, conventional wisdom has held that, as an essential trading partner, Mexico is an ally. The proposed Security and Prosperity Partnership (a.k.a. the North American Union) is based on this premise, that lashing the U.S., Canada, and Mexico together militarily and economically will secure and prosper all three nations. However, if Mexico ceases acting like a sovereign state and either fractures into mini-states governed by the cartels, or begins acting as an arm of a dominant cartel, the dynamics of the region will change, forcing U.S. policy to change as well.

Moreover, were Mexico to fail as a state, the cartels would likely just move north and continue their operations, introducing a level of instability even America could not ignore. Even if Mexico continues to be viable, unless the cartels are eliminated—a task Mexican President Felipe Calderon is attempting—at the very least the border areas will continue to see rising violence and corruption.

It is worth recalling that several Mexican governments have failed, particularly in the last two centuries. In addition, the U.S. invaded and occupied parts of Mexico for six months in 1916 when the Mexican revolutionary, Pancho Villa, established himself north of the border and began instigating significant instability in the borderlands. If violence and corruption along the border continues to increase, or if Mexico's government succumbs to the influence of the cartels, a threshold may be reached where the U.S. concludes that it is in its best interests to intervene. That tipping point has not yet been reached, but some analysts are beginning to explore its prospects.