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A Backyard Challenge

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While President Barak Obama's meetings in Mexico in mid-April resulted in several promising agreements, the challenges presented by the increasing violence and instability in Mexico are serious and will take years to resolve. Despite the Administration's recent efforts to backtrack from statements that Mexico is on the verge of a collapse, many experts believe that the country is, at the very least, in a serious struggle to preserve the rule of law. Addressing the ongoing problems in Mexico will be a critical test of the U.S. government's ability to marshal all of its instruments of power to deal with a growing criminal insurgency on its border.

Over the past few years, criticisms about the militarization of American foreign policy have grown. In response, within the U.S. government a concerted effort has been made to develop new approaches that balance so-called "hard power" with "soft power" in order to maximize all of America's capabilities to shape circumstances on the ground. Some important strides were made with the publication of two Army field manuals: one on counterinsurgency and the other on stability operations. These are not just military manuals. They are the best existing descriptions of how to balance the select use of military force with economic and political initiatives. The synergies developed should then shape positive developments and stem violence fueled by relatively small groups of criminals, insurgents and non-state actors.

Moreover, the manuals are not merely past legacies of the Bush Administration. The development of these manuals was spearheaded by military and civilian officials, by past and current political appointees, and by career civil servants. Many of the individuals involved in the effort to improve America's ability to respond to instability and counter violent insurgents are now key players on the Obama administration. Thus the ideas behind how to fight and win against insurgents are truly bipartisan. This certainly does not guarantee success, but it might make implementing ideas a bit easier.

The United States is not at war in Mexico, but Mexico is more than a counternarcotics problem. While not facing a full-fledged insurgency, *the parallels* of how to conduct effective counterinsurgency and related stability operations are relevant to achieving improvements in Mexico. There, as in other insurgencies, extremists use violence to decimate an existing political order and intimidate a frightened population into submission in order to achieve political and economic power.

Regardless of how the drug cartels are characterized, they share many of the same characteristics with insurgents and employ many similar tactics. Gang leaders increasingly use internet videos of executions to spread fear in a manner pioneered by Al-Qaeda and there are reportedly

clandestine cells – on both sides of the border – which are activated as needed to carry out killings.

Responding to the challenges in Mexico will test whether the U.S. government has, in fact, absorbed the hard-earned lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan. The challenges in Mexico suggest that the Obama administration needs to keep in mind several key aspects of counterinsurgency and stability operations.

First, as in classic insurgencies, “political power is the central issue” and each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate. In Mexico, although drug kingpins do not necessarily have an ideological agenda, they are actively seeking to control the political space through a combination of coercive threats and economic corruption.

Second, as in most counter insurgency operations and stability operations, there is a need to restore the functioning of local governments. In the case of Mexico, this problem is particularly acute in the six northern border states where homicide rates are soaring and police officers are being specifically targeted.

Third, critical to success is population security. As the COIN manual points out, maintaining security in an unstable environment requires vast resources on the part of the government, while just a small number of extremists with simple weapons and good operations security can undermine safety over a large area. Population security will require the concerted rebuilding and strengthening of local police forces as well as reform of the national army.

Fourth, safe havens are also a problem that the Obama team will need to address. Drug cartels control of key swatches of territory in northern Mexico, allowing them to use physical safe havens as base areas. The COIN manual explains that historically, sanctuaries in neighboring countries have provided insurgents places to rebuild and reorganize without fear of interference. The problem is compounded by the fact the U.S. border states - thanks to lax gun laws - are the de facto suppliers of the Mexican “insurgency.”

Fifth, success in all of these areas will require a balance between external assistance and local actors. Obviously the Mexican government will be the key player in all of these initiatives. The challenge for the Obama team is twofold: on the one hand to develop a robust cooperative working relationship with Mexican authorities and on the other to ensure that various agencies stay coordinated. Addressing the problems in Mexico simultaneously is critical to success there. Further complicating these two challenges is that assistance must be given in a way that enhances the legitimacy of the Mexican government and minimizes the profile of the United States. This is also a COIN “rule” – one which is extremely important in the case of Mexico given the historic tensions with the United States.

The Bush administration was criticized for its failure to marshal different parts of the government to come together to undertake effective reconstruction in Iraq and to respond to the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. Mexico is the Obama administration’s tough test case of whether the new Administration can persuade different parts of our government to put aside their parochial interests and to work in concert to achieve desired outcomes.

Mexico is not the only case that will demand the marshaling of various instruments of U.S. power simultaneously to achieve related and interconnected objectives. However, if the Obama administration is unable to achieve a reduction in violence in our “own backyard,” it is hard not to be gloomy about the future.

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