

# Mexico's Drug War and It's Unintended Regional Consequences

by

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Class of 2012

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**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**

*Form Approved*  
OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> xx-03-2012		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b>	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Mexico's Drug War and It's Unintended Regional Consequences				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Louis Eichburg United States Army				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Colonel Robert K. Nye Deputy Provost				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> Word Count: 11,007					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> In 2006 Mexican President Felipe Calderon started a war on drugs in a manner unprecedented in Mexican history. Mexico is the current U.S. focus for counter drug efforts, but this focus, marked by an inflexible approach seen by many as ineffective, shifted a great deal of the drug problem to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Negative second and third order effects from the Mexican war on drugs are destabilizing the strategic environment and threatening democracy as a form of government in these countries. The problem statement for U.S. strategic leaders is: How to develop and implement an integrated, synchronized, and holistic strategy for reducing the consumption of illegal drugs? Analyzing current U.S. policy via the elements of national power will highlight current shortcomings regarding the illicit drug environment in the Southern Hemisphere. Recommended policy adjustments along with requisite strategic means will demonstrate how the U.S. can improve the current environment in the region.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Balloon Effect, Northern Triangle					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  54	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b> UU	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UU			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b>



USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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## **Abstract**

Title: Mexico's Drug War and It's Unintended Regional Consequences

Report Date: March 2012

Page Count: 54

Word Count: 11,007

Key Terms: Balloon Effect, Northern Triangle

Classification: Unclassified

In 2006 Mexican President Felipe Calderon started a war on drugs in a manner unprecedented in Mexican history. Mexico is the current U.S. focus for counter drug efforts, but this focus, marked by an inflexible approach seen by many as ineffective, shifted a great deal of the drug problem to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Negative second and third order effects from the Mexican war on drugs are destabilizing the strategic environment and threatening democracy as a form of government in these countries. The problem statement for U.S. strategic leaders is: How to develop and implement an integrated, synchronized, and holistic strategy for reducing the consumption of illegal drugs? Analyzing current U.S. policy via the elements of national power will highlight current shortcomings regarding the illicit drug environment in the Southern Hemisphere. Recommended policy adjustments along with requisite strategic means will demonstrate how the U.S. can improve the current environment in the region.



## **Mexico's Drug War and Its Unintended Regional Consequences**

According to the 2012 World Drug Report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, illicit drugs remain a major international problem. Each year up to 200,000 people die as a result of illicit drug consumption, which also causes insecurity and economic and social turmoil.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere has the problem of illicit drugs and their negative second and third order effects been more visible in recent years than in Mexico. In 2006 the newly elected President of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, determined to combat drugs in a manner unprecedented in Mexican history. Mexico is the current U.S. focus for counter drug efforts, but this focus, marked by an inflexible approach seen by many as ineffective, shifted a great deal of the drug problem to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala which make up the Northern Triangle in Central America. Negative second and third order effects from the Mexican war on drugs are destabilizing the strategic environment and threatening democracy as a form of government in the Northern Triangle.

As President Calderon assumed power in 2006, Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) in Mexico reached a zenith. They held powerful influence over the Mexican government through corruption, controlled parts of or entire provinces and amassed billions of dollars in illegal revenue. Calderon immediately set about combating them by implementing what amounted to a four point plan, which included direct action employing the Mexican Armed Forces, targeting DTO leaders and resources, law enforcement and governance reforms aimed at eliminating corruption, judicial reforms aimed at conviction efficiency and transparency, and increased cooperation with the United States.<sup>2</sup> In January of 2011, the Mexican government reported that since 2006,

it had arrested approximately 89,444 DTO members. Since 2009, authorities have killed or captured 20 of Mexico's 37 most wanted DTO leaders.<sup>3</sup> "By mid-2010, Calderon's aggressive push resulted in the seizure of nearly one hundred tons of cocaine, sixty-five hundred tons of marijuana, nine hundred and fifty kilograms of heroin, seventy thousand small and large caliber arms, nearly five thousand grenades, and over \$400 million."<sup>4</sup> Because of very poor conviction rates in Mexican courts, Calderon increased extraditions of DTO members to the United States where conviction rates exceed 90%. Extraditions from Mexico to the United States totaled 160 from 2000 to 2005 but increased to 442 from 2006 to 2010. Mexican efforts decimated several DTOs including Beltran-Leyva, La Familia, and Arellano Felix and forced them to cut the purity of their product while raising prices, which threatened their consumer base.<sup>5</sup> Calderon's aggressive approach created a very hostile environment for the DTOs resulting in a balloon effect where pressure in Mexico displaced DTO activity to other areas in Central America. This balloon effect led DTOs to realize the importance and feasibility of using the rest of Central America, specifically the Northern Triangle, as both a base of operations and a supply route for drugs into the United States and other parts of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Governments in Central America's Northern Triangle face a wicked problem in the form of DTOs, illicit narcotics, and their negative second and third order effects. A wicked problem is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons. These reasons include incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems.<sup>7</sup> A tool that helps

strategic leaders solve wicked problems is helpful and necessary. This paper will apply the concept of operational design to this particularly wicked problem to help strategic leaders better understand the problem and potential solutions to it. The military uses operational design because its focus is on assisting senior leaders to visualize a particular environment, understand the problem requiring a solution, and then developing a broad approach that will achieve the desired end state.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, design helps leaders understand where they are and where they want to go. This analysis then allows for the definition of the problem, or that which is preventing the transition of the current environment to the desired environment. Once this is complete single or multiple approaches are designed to solve the problem.<sup>9</sup>

Analysis of the current strategic environment, relying on the environmental assessment model comprised by Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, Information, Physical Environment, and Time (PMESII-PT) variables will communicate several important points.<sup>10</sup> Of note, this paper will substitute institutions in place of infrastructure because institutions play a much more crucial role in the environment relative this wicked problem. The model will provide evidence to show President Calderon's counter drug effort clearly created a balloon effect in the Northern Triangle. It will demonstrate why the Northern Triangle was so attractive to DTO investment in the first place. Next, it will demonstrate how these negative second and third order balloon effects are destabilizing the democratic governments of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Finally, the analysis will explain why the United States is also such a crucial stakeholder.

Following the current environmental assessment, this paper will provide a brief description of a more desired environment and also a problem statement that depicts why the current environment is not improving. It will then explain why current US policy is inhibiting a transition from the current environment to the desired environment and what policy and strategy course corrections can help solve the problem.

### Political Environment

The political arena in the Northern Triangle sees DTOs battling governments for sovereign control of territory. DTOs seek to gain complete autonomy and control over geographic locations most beneficial to the production and distribution of illicit narcotics. An environment marked by extraordinary murder rates, unprecedented corruption, and the inability of Northern Triangle governments to fulfill the most important of needs of its people by providing security has enabled organized crime to establish de facto sovereignty in large parts of Central America.

In 2009 it was estimated that DTOs controlled 5 of 22 Guatemalan departments and would control 40-50% of the country's territory by 2011.<sup>11</sup> In 2010 a German Development Service report claimed that 30% of peasants in 236 of Guatemala's 334 municipalities had sold their land to drug traffickers over the past several years. In its Peten province five of the eight largest land owners are drug traffickers and 80% of the department is dominated by the Zetas.<sup>12</sup> In 2011, Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina reported that areas in Peten, Alta Verapaz and Izabal provinces belonged to DTOs and related criminal families. To the south, the El Salvadoran government has allegedly lost control of a large part of its Santa Ana department, which constitutes a portion of a drug route into Guatemala, to the Taxis cartel.<sup>13</sup> In Honduras, intelligence

officials claim that the Sinaloa cartel bought the mayor in the town of El Paraiso in the department of Copan enabling them to carry out their operations in plain sight.<sup>14</sup>

In 2012, the Guatemalan Ministry of Government declared 58 municipalities as ungovernable. In several of these areas, citizens prevented police presence if they tried to enforce anti smuggling laws.<sup>15</sup> This led some experts to believe people in certain regions have turned to DTOs to provide services their governments cannot. In Huehuetenango, Guatemala the Sinaloa cartel offers local inhabitants jobs, health care, and sponsors local festivals while at the same time eliminating smaller criminal activity, which in one way improves security for the local populace.<sup>16</sup> In El Salvador some gang members provide services to their communities such as security and water that the government is not providing. In that regard, gangs do not think it unreasonable for them to force people to pay a service tax.<sup>17</sup> The fact that DTOS are able to gain physical control of territory and provide services normally expected from government authorities provides a clear signal that legitimate governments in the Northern Triangle are losing.

### Military Environment

A significant security issue in the region is the use of the armed forces to help combat DTOs and drug related activity. Because of the inability of the police to protect the population all Northern Triangle governments decided to employ their militaries domestically to combat DTOs, gangs, and organized crime. While the domestic employment of military forces meets with occasional success, it also carries with it significant risk in the form of human rights abuses and potential for corruption in the military ranks. In 2011, the Honduran Congress approved a measure permitting the domestic employment of its military in order to combat DTOs and gang activity and bolster a police force tainted by corruption. Honduran Armed Forces now possess full

policing powers which allow them to make arrests, conduct searches, and serve warrants without police presence.<sup>18</sup>

Since 2010 Guatemala's government has declared a state of siege several times and every time the declaration is accompanied by limitations on civil rights and the ever increasing power of military forces to interrogate and arrest without warrants.<sup>19</sup>

Guatemala continues to use its army, notably its Kaibiles Special Forces, to help its weak police force combat crime. However, many in the country are critical of the decision to continue using them. Criticism has grown louder in light of the fact that former Kaibiles helped form the Zetas and continue working with and training their members. Additionally, incidents of human rights abuse and atrocities such as the shooting of civilian demonstrators on October 4, 2012 by soldiers during a joint military / police patrol cause some politicians and activists to fear and mistrust the military's suitability for domestic police work.<sup>20</sup>

In the end, policing by the military might bring limited short term relief to civilian police forces but does not provide a long term solution. This is because military units are too isolated from the people they police. Soldiers live in barracks, patrol in large numbers and consider themselves independent of the populace at large. Community policing requires a police force close to and integrated with the people marked by accountability and high levels of individual interaction.<sup>21</sup>

### Economic Environment

DTOs enjoy a tremendous economic advantage and exploit that advantage in a region marked by poverty. In 2012, poverty rates for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras stood at 47.9%, 54.8%, and 66% respectively.<sup>22</sup> In 2010, the seven Central American countries spent approximately \$4 billion combined to bolster security and

justice.<sup>23</sup> This is a small sum compared to American expenditures, but when considering that Central American tax revenues are some of the lowest in the world one can see the financial burden placed on these governments.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, DTOs collect between an estimated \$25-35 billion dollars annually and use it to train and equip their own security forces and buy powerful protection and influence in the governments of the countries in which they operate.<sup>25</sup>

Monetary payoffs are the most prevalent way for DTOs to corrupt police forces and government institutions in the Northern Triangle. Officers working in the El Salvadoran National Civilian Police (PNC), the Guatemalan National Civilian Police (PNC) and the Honduran National Police (HNP) average between \$400-500, \$480, and \$450 each month respectively.<sup>26</sup> While this monthly income is above the average Northern Triangle monthly minimum wage of \$180, it is not enough to prevent corruption where DTOs can substantially increase a policeman's standard of living in exchange for protection. DTOs use monetary bribes for more than just protection. A director for the Honduran news radio station Radio Uno claims that Honduran police commanders blatantly live outside of their means as a result of payoffs.<sup>27</sup> An investigation concluded Honduran police murdered two college students including the son of the Dean of Honduras' National University. In December of 2011, Leslie Portillo, the widow of General Julian Aristides Gonzalez, claimed she obtained information that a police motorcycle unit executed her husband in 2009, who at the time was the top counter narcotics official in the Honduran government. In December of 2011, the top U.S. diplomat for Latin America, Roberta S. Jacobson, assessed that the average citizen in Latin America had no other hope for justice when police and the courts fail to function.<sup>28</sup>

Corruption targets more than just grass root law enforcement. In February of 2010, Guatemalan officials arrested their country's top police chief and top anti-narcotics intelligence officer. The investigation concluded the two assisted in the killing of five police officers who attempted to steal drugs from a Zeta drug house. In another incident, a local police commander and his men cornered some Zeta operatives and were about to arrest them when the regional police commandant called him and ordered his unit to quit the scene immediately, allowing the criminals to escape. In the Honduran province of Colon, 10 members of its elite Anti-Narcotics Operations Group were caught moving 142 kilograms of cocaine. In El Salvador, officials connected several well placed government officials, including the Director of Police, a high ranking prosecutor and a senator, with a territorial criminal group running drugs.<sup>29</sup>

Corruption is not the only reason for the weakness of the security forces in Central America. From a security standpoint there are simply not enough of them to protect the people. El Salvador employs 20,558 policemen to support a population of six million, Guatemala employs 24,992 policemen to support a population of fourteen million, while Honduras employs 14,491 policemen to support a population of almost eight million. With 185 and 178 police officers per 100,000 people, Honduras and Guatemala maintain the two lowest ratios of police per their respective populations in Central America. The Honduran province of Olancho is larger than El Salvador yet has only 250 policemen and they are not all on duty at the same time. Alta Verapaz in Guatemala is considered a Zetas' headquarters but maintains only 415 policemen on its roster. If DTOs or organized crime families find they cannot buy the police they simply kill them, which leads to increased intimidation for the rest.<sup>30</sup> In addition to low police

manning rosters the governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala recently revealed they cannot afford any new equipment and often rely on equipment dating back to World War II. On the other hand, DTOs like the Zetas continue to upgrade their operators by recruiting government forces. Guatemalan Special Forces called Kaibiles are continuously recruited with some eventually joining the Zetas.<sup>31</sup> While the United States provides some counter drug aid to Central America, the amount is so small as to be almost insignificant compared to the aforementioned DTO financial capability.

Total security, development and economic aid for Central America from 2008-2011 was only \$361.5 million. Mexico on the other hand received more than five times this amount.<sup>32</sup> The greatest US aid disparity comes in the form of funding police reform. In FY 09 for instance, the Departments of State and Defense (DOS and DOD) provided Afghanistan with \$1.6 billion and Mexico with \$327 million in police assistance while providing Guatemala with \$4 million and El Salvador and Honduras with less than \$1 million each.<sup>33</sup> The Northern Triangle needs more financial assistance to improve the most important institution a government can provide its people, which is effective grass roots, community policing.

While government security forces are stretched thinly, DTOs rely on an ever growing source of manpower in the Northern Triangle: gangs. Gangs, namely Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang or Mara-18, are able and willing to take part in a vast array of criminal enterprises. Honduras leads Central America in gang populations with approximately 36,000 members followed by 14,000 in Guatemala and 10,500 in El Salvador.<sup>34</sup> Gangs provide local protection for drug enterprises, sell and distribute narcotics, and at times provide members for specialized training as DTO

operatives or assassins. Additional training and financial resources allow gangs to spread their influence and further challenge the ability of regional states to provide for their people. One of many examples is seen in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa where Mara Salvatrucha collects approximately \$28 million annually by taxing public transportation companies. Additionally, up to 500 schools, which exist in mostly poor neighborhoods, are paying "security taxes".<sup>35</sup>

Corrupt and ineffective police and predatory gangs led businesses and the more affluent to turn to private security companies to provide the security their local and state leaders could not provide but this has also led to increased problems. As of 2007 an estimated 235,000 private security guards worked in Central America which meant a ratio of 611 private guards for every 100,000 civilians compared to roughly 187 policemen per the same population.<sup>36</sup> Today up to 150,000 of the 235,000 guards work in Guatemala. A majority of these private security firms are led by former army intelligence and other high ranking officers many of whom maintain links to organized crime. Exploiting a poorly regulated field, these leaders ensure their organizations are well armed and utilize their previous professional army experiences to collect intelligence via telephonic and email intercept. Well armed and informed private security companies are known to work for illegitimate ends as often as legitimate ones.<sup>37</sup>

### Social Environment

Crime is a major problem influencing the fabric of representative government and ultimately the entire region's social environment. Several indicators prove increased DTO presence in the Northern Triangle and the threat posed to stakeholders there. Perhaps the most significant of these indicators is a highly elevated murder rate in areas with heavy drug trafficking activity. Despite the fact that the countries of the

Northern Triangle have a total population (28 million) approximately one quarter the size of Mexico, their murder rate since 2006 was nearly double that of their northern neighbor. Up to 50,000 drug war related killings occurred in Mexico compared to 90,000 in the Northern Triangle. The 2010 murder rates per 100,000 people in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were 82.1, 66, and 41.4 respectively compared to 18.1 in Mexico and 6.9 internationally.<sup>38</sup>

Vast quantities of drug money contribute to a Central American rule of law that is seen as corrupt and weak. Fewer than 5% of all murders end with a conviction.<sup>39</sup> In Guatemala, the conviction rate is even less, hovering at 2%. 2011 saw a massacre in Guatemala's Peten province on a scale Guatemalans had not experienced since the 1960-1996 Civil War. Twenty seven peasants serving as employees for a local drug leader were murdered and all but one decapitated by the Zetas, a Mexican DTO. The government launched an operation and arrested 140 persons in February but by May all were released due to lack of evidence. It marked a continued rule of law failure and the perception that DTOs can act with impunity in the country.<sup>40</sup>

The best indicator of the perception of weak rule of law within the Northern Triangle comes from polling results. In 2010 Latinobarometro, a private non-profit organization based in Chile, published a survey that included over 20,000 interviews representing samples of the entire population of each of the 18 Latin American countries. Latinobarometro interviewed anywhere from 1000-1200 people from each country. The results confirmed citizen concern with the high levels of crime and frustration relative to the type of government they endorse. From 2004 to 2010, the percentage of people who identified crime as the most important regional problem rose

from 9% to 27%, marking the highest percentage increase since the poll began in 1995. In response to the question of whether a person had been victimized, 71% of El Salvadorans responded in the affirmative, while 33% of Guatemalans and 31% of Hondurans did the same. The three countries placed first, fifth, and seventh out of the eighteen countries.<sup>41</sup>

In its measure of support for democracy, the survey asked participants whether democracy was preferable to any other form of government or under some circumstances an authoritarian government would be preferable to a democratic form or that it did not matter which type they had. Only 46% of Guatemalans claimed that democracy was preferable to any other form of government, while 53% of Hondurans and 59% of El Salvadorans responded the same. Interesting to note is that support for democracy from 2009 to 2010 dropped by 9 percentage points in El Salvador, two points in Honduras but increased by 4 points in Guatemala.<sup>42</sup>

When asked about their opinions about their country's last military government, 38% of Hondurans, 25% of Guatemalans, and 20% of El Salvadorans responded that it was either good or very good. The Northern Triangle represented three of the top six countries in Latin America most complimentary of their last military governments. When asked if they would never support a military government even if the situation became very difficult only 33% of Guatemalans said they would never support it, while 47% of Hondurans and 57% of El Salvadorans responded in kind. Guatemala's percentage was the lowest of any other Latin American country, Honduras' percentage was the third lowest, and that of El Salvador was the sixth lowest.<sup>43</sup> While it is not fair to say that every criminal act committed in the Northern Triangle is related to a DTO or drugs, it is

no coincidence that murder and victimization rates in the region are the highest or some of the highest in the world. The extraordinary level of crime and the inability to deal with it poses significant risk to the legitimacy, social fabric and perhaps even the future of democracy in the Northern Triangle.

### Institutional Environment

Institutions are another reason for concern in the Northern Triangle. Drug related criminal organizations, to varying degrees, continue to penetrate institutions like the police, customs, and jails. They also contribute money to public works projects and to political campaigns. The judicial and executive branches of government are also subject to criminal infiltration and intimidation. In Guatemala, DTOs and crime families sponsor aspiring and practicing lawyers by paying for their education and / or their practices. It is the hope of DTOs that the lawyers they sponsor will one day be in a position to determine which judges sit on the country's highest courts. In 2009, a UN sponsored investigative unit identified and blocked five judges it felt were compromised by relationships with criminal organizations.<sup>44</sup> Even the highest levels of government are not exempt. In Guatemala, "the President has received death threats and had his office bugged, allegedly by drug traffickers."<sup>45</sup> In 2009, the Honduran Security Minister reported that the Zetas sent him threats just in case he planned to take any against them.<sup>46</sup>

Not only are institutional structures in individual countries failing but from a broader regional perspective Central American institutional structures are assessed as ill prepared to combat the security risk posed by DTOs. The first of these is the Central American Parliament, PARLACEN. PARLACEN is a permanent regional organization that exercises parliamentary functions in order to enable regional solidarity. Its

objectives include the integration of Central American countries as well as the shaping of a just Central American society that respects human rights.<sup>47</sup> The problem with PARLACEN is that it maintains no executive powers and so must send recommendations to individual governments for approval. It does not possess the authority to help force consensus on an integrated way to combat drugs. Ordinary citizens perceive its representatives with skepticism because they are immune from criminal prosecution with some linked to DTOs.<sup>48</sup>

Like PARLACEN the Central American Court of Justice is another regional organization that cannot provide meaningful assistance to the counter drug effort. Its mandate is to promote peace and regional unity and it does so mainly by resolving disputes between member countries or between a member country and a legal resident of a member country. It also acts as a consultative body to individual country supreme courts.<sup>49</sup> Thus far there is no indication it is capable of becoming more involved with criminally related prosecution.<sup>50</sup>

While organic Central American regional bodies are assessed as ineffective relative the counter drug effort, a UN sponsored organization called the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) is proving very effective. Acting as an independent international body, CICIG's mandate is to investigate criminal groups which have infiltrated state institutions and fostered a perception of impunity that undermines democratic gains.<sup>51</sup> Operating since January of 2008, CICIG operates under Guatemalan law, in its courts, and follows national criminal procedure. Furthermore, CICIG aims to strengthen Guatemalan public policy and improve judicial institutions.<sup>52</sup> The organization brings with it considerable resources in the form of

dozens of investigators and well trained security guards providing around the clock security. It has met with a great deal of success in Guatemala including the removal of a corrupt attorney general and 2000 police officers. It also helped create a national witness protection program and a police unit, like the US Marshals, for witness security. The program was so effective that Guatemala's President called for an extension of the program's mandate.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in 2010 the Presidents of all three Northern Triangle countries voiced the desire for a Northern Triangle CICIG in order to better combat DTO and organized crime from a regional vice state perspective.<sup>54</sup> Originally, the UN established CIGIG because it determined there was a great need and that the region could not provide this capability on its own. Any regional CIGIG capability would also have to come from the UN but does not as of yet exist.

#### Information Environment

There is cognitive dissonance between the United States and Northern Triangle countries about how to approach the drug problem, creating a strategic communications dilemma that weakens current and future policy adaptation. In February of 2012 Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina openly advocated for the decriminalization of drugs prior to a Central American Drug Policy Summit.<sup>55</sup> After his statement the US sent three high level diplomats in less than a month to Central America to subdue any more support for decriminalization. While it once seemed Salvadoran President Funes and Nicaraguan President Ortega were willing to talk about decriminalization, they, along with President Lobo of Honduras, came out very much opposed to such discussion in a last minute March summit.<sup>56</sup>

This was not the first time Central American leaders called into question the foundational US policies for the war on drugs. In a well written report issued by the

Latin America Commission on Drugs and Democracy in April of 2009, the former Presidents of 12 Central American countries openly stated their belief that current policies were not working and it was time for a very critical look at those policies. It also called for more dialogue on newer, more creative approaches to solving the drug problem, including legalization. Thus far their pleas are falling on deaf ears. For instance, the 2012 US National Drug Control Policy states the legalization of drugs will not be considered.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not decriminalization is the right answer is not the point. What is important is that some of the most important stakeholders relative to this problem do not agree on the way forward and this represents a tension in the current informational and political environments.

#### Physical Environment

The Northern Triangle's maintains a crucial geographically strategic position along a Central and South American drug transit corridor. The importance of this physical location does not go unnoticed by DTOs. The starting point of all cocaine consumed in the United States and this drug transit corridor is Colombia. Because it is nearly impossible to transport large quantities of cocaine overland from Colombia to Panama, DTOs have taken to the sea to move their product. Of all detected shipments from Columbia to Panama, 55% occur on the Atlantic side while 45% occur via the Pacific Ocean.<sup>58</sup> From Panama, the drugs are shipped north to Costa Rica where it is prepared for air, sea, and land transport to Nicaragua. It is estimated that Nicaragua is more of a refueling point on the road north and that illicit transit is limited more to its more isolated coastlines. Drug transit by air into Nicaragua is becoming more prevalent due to the high number of small and isolated airstrips. The volume of drugs which transit El Salvador remains somewhat of an enigma. The government claims that most

of the drugs in the region do not pass through its borders due to a lack of an Atlantic coast. However, several criminal transport organizations are now known to operate in El Salvador. Also crime along valuable transit routes is high relative low civilian populations and drug seizures in the country have increased over the past several years, both of which indicate DTO competition. In addition, authorities have detected methamphetamine ingredient shipments to a port close to neighboring Guatemala.<sup>59</sup>

While it is difficult to determine the magnitude of the drug transit problem in El Salvador, it is somewhat easier to see the problem in Honduras. "According to the United States Government, roughly 65 of the 80 tons of cocaine transported by air toward the United States lands in Honduras, representing 15% of United States bound cocaine flow."<sup>60</sup> Honduras also receives many tons of cocaine via sea lanes trafficked by speed boats and even submarines. While Honduras is an important stop for drugs enroute to the United States, "when it comes to Central American cocaine trafficking, all roads lead to Guatemala."<sup>61</sup> Increased drug shipments to Honduras from South America and Mexican direct action against the DTOs to the north have forced approximately 90% of all U.S. bound cocaine shipments to stop in Guatemala.<sup>62</sup> The country's Pacific and Caribbean coasts enable easy access to speed boats and containerized cargo. Guatemala's numerous airstrips are utilized frequently by various types of aircraft to haul cocaine and it maintains land routes north into Mexico that are trafficable and numerous.<sup>63</sup> Given the fact that Guatemala represents a geo-strategic choke point in major narcotics traffic to the largest drug consuming country in the world, it is easy to understand why the country and its routes into Mexico are considered so

vital to DTOs and subject to their considerable investment. It also indicates that Guatemala is under more pressure from DTOs than any other country.

Evidence of this transit is seen in the form of increased regional drug seizures. The amount of cocaine seized in Central America compared to Mexico went from equal from 2000-2005 to 13 times that of Mexico in 2011. In 2009, Guatemalan authorities discovered an 1,800 acre poppy plantation belonging to a Mexican DTO.<sup>64</sup> It also seized a semi-submersible vessel off its coast carrying 4.9 tons of cocaine.<sup>65</sup> Cocaine seizures in El Salvador have also increased with seizures of 39kg ,108kg, 4,074kg , and 1,354kg from 2005 through 2008 respectively. In 2008 Honduran authorities reported a record seizure of two million tablets of pseudoephedrine, which is a methamphetamine precursor.<sup>66</sup> Local and international law enforcement agents state the increase in drug seizures in the region is the natural second order effect of increased narcotics transit through the area.

The two countries which see the most trafficking are Honduras and Guatemala. In 2009 it was estimated that 200 metric tons passed through Honduras.<sup>67</sup> In March of 2009, the United States Ambassador in Guatemala informed a local newspaper that the country's narcotics transit rate was up to 300 to 400 tons of cocaine each year.<sup>68</sup> Further evidence of the shift in focus from Mexico to Central America came from the United States government when it assessed narcotics transit more closely. It found that the number of drug packages with an initial destination or point of seizure in Central America climbed from 25% in 2000 to 85% in 2011, while the number of shipments to Mexico decreased from 174 in 2000 to 30 in 2011. Initial destination events increased

in other Central American countries as well, including Honduras which saw its incident rate go from 20 in 2000 to 233 in 2011.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to geography, the region's history and existing territorial crime families specializing in narcotics transport, often referred to as transportistas, contributed to increased DTO presence in the Northern Triangle. The civil wars in Central America, lasting from the 1960s and into the 1990s established systems for weapons trafficking, money laundering and other illicit traffic that remain today and are leveraged by DTOs.<sup>70</sup> Over the years transportista groups in the Northern Triangle developed and took advantage of the situation to perfect these systems.

While many smaller groups exist, several territorial groups stand out due to their size and history of drug involvement. Three of the most well known major groups in Guatemala include the Mendozas, the Lorenzanas, and the Chamales. The Mendozas focus on the provinces of Petan and Izabal in the north and on the Honduran border. The Lorenzanas operate in the central highlands and along the Honduran border and the Chamales maintain operations in northern San Marcos on the border with Mexico. The Mendozas and Chamales currently maintain an alliance with the Cartel Pacifico while The Lorenzanas are allied with the Zeta Cartel, which broke away from the Gulf Cartel between two to four years ago.<sup>71</sup> In Honduras the well known Renazco family operates along the Nicaraguan border and in El Salvador the Los Perrones Orientales is the largest transportista organization in the country.<sup>72</sup> DTOs established relationships with these existing crime families because the latter had established transit routes and the right government connections to enable the flow of drugs into the United States and other regions.<sup>73</sup>

## Time Environment

Finally with respect to time, the longer DTOs are allowed to successfully employ a strategy of destabilization and selective territorial sovereignty the higher the risk becomes to democratic governments in the Northern Triangle, whose populations already show a marked weariness for the inability of their governments to care for them. Time is of the essence, and it is currently on the side of the DTOs with regards to current and future policy adaptation.

## The U.S. as a Stakeholder

In addition to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the United States is a vital stakeholder relative to the wicked problem of drugs for several reasons. First, the United States is a world leader and the clear hegemon in the Western Hemisphere. It wields tremendous influence, not only in Central America but worldwide, concerning drug policy and promotes the very democratic values that DTOs in Central America are threatening. Second, this problem directly and indirectly affects the national interests of the U.S. which include security, economic prosperity, human rights and democratic values. From a security standpoint the same DTOs operating in Central America also operate inside the United States in many forms which stress our own law enforcement and judicial systems. Third, the most recent crime, health, and lost productivity cost estimate in 2007 of drug use in the U.S. was approximately \$193 billion dollars.<sup>74</sup> Fourth, many Central American governments point to the continued and enormous U.S. drug consumption as a main source of their drug related problem. The 2010 National Survey on Drug Use indicated that more than 9% of Americans or 22 million people 12 years or older regularly use illegal drugs.<sup>75</sup> According to the United Nations Office on Drug Control's (UNODC) 2011 World Drug Report, the U.S. consumed up to 157 tons of

cocaine representing 36% of world wide consumption, which makes the US the number one cocaine consumer market in the world. Because of its hemispheric and worldwide leadership role, its complicity in the drug problem, and its economic wealth, the U.S. must play the most critical role in helping solve the problem.

### Problem Statement

Holistically speaking, the current strategic environment in the Northern Triangle is destabilizing. The region must embark towards an environment marked by stable democratic governments backed by credible institutions capable of neutralizing the DTOs without the stigma of requiring external support from the international community. Additionally, this environment would make it infeasible for DTOs, when under pressure in one country or region, to successfully shift their enterprises to another. In this case what prevents the transition from an unstable environment to a more stable one is the lack of an integrated, synchronized, and holistic strategy for reducing the consumption of illegal drugs. Thus, the problem statement for U.S. strategic leaders is: *How to develop and implement an integrated, synchronized, and holistic strategy for reducing the consumption of illegal drugs.* The task of crafting a sound policy and strategy belongs chiefly to the U.S. because of its aforementioned influence, drug consumption, and leadership role.

As is often the case with any problem statement, this one is open to criticism and debate. For example, some experts argue that DTOs and territorial crime families and not drug consumption are the biggest problem and so must be defeated. While DTOs are a problem which must eventually be solved, their defeat is not the first and most pressing problem. There is much evidence to support the fact that killing existing cartel leaders or even destroying an entire DTO will not stabilize the environment. DTO

leaders killed by Mexican authorities were quickly replaced often times by even more violent members, and leader deaths or arrests led to fragmentation and an increased number of DTOs.<sup>76</sup> In 2006 President Calderon faced roughly four major DTOs but this number increased to seven shortly after he began his efforts. As the war continued and DTOs fought the government and each other, more fragmentation occurred. Today experts assess that there are between 12 and 20 DTOs in operation and they operate in a more decentralized and sophisticated manner.<sup>77</sup>

The current environment indicates that people and organizations continue to participate in the drug trade because they feel the financial rewards amounting to billions of dollars are greater than the risks they face, including incarceration and death. The one crucial DTO enabler permeating every illicit activity is overwhelming financial capability. Corruption, gang recruitment, and territorial gain are all possible because of the money available to DTOs. To combat DTOs without first attacking their center of gravity, financial wealth, will only lead to the continuation of a counter drug effort many think is failing. Hence, the problem statement's focus on drug consumption must be equated to DTO profits from resultant drug consumption. DTOs earn income from non drug related crimes like kidnapping, armed robbery, resource theft, and human trafficking, however illegal drugs remain their most profitable venture.

While some experts argue DTOs are the problem, others might argue the problem statement is wrong because it calls for only a reduction in drug consumption and not a complete elimination. The absolute elimination of illicit drug use is not a realistic or feasible end. Since 2010, an estimated 230 million people worldwide used drugs at least once and approximately 27 million use drugs regularly.<sup>78</sup> These numbers

are a stunning reminder that users, much like the producers, will continue to use drugs because the perceived gain outweighs the known risks. For example, in 1980 the United States incarcerated approximately 50,000 people for violation of drug laws. By 2007 that number grew to up to nearly 500,000.<sup>79</sup> In 1998 the UN Special Assembly on drugs stated as its goal the complete eradication or substantial reduction in the cultivation of drug crops and a significant demand reduction. By 2009, the consensus was that neither goal was reached as so the target achievement date was pushed until 2019.<sup>80</sup> U.S. counter drug strategists seem to recognize the fact that completely eliminating drug demand is not feasible as articulated in the 2012 U.S. National Drug Control Strategy goal of reducing the rate of drug abuse by fifteen percent from 2010 to 2015.<sup>81</sup>

While developing a sound strategy is critical, what is essential is that any strategy is nested in an effective policy. It is clear that the current U.S. policy has not enabled a strategy that can successfully counter the current illicit drug environment. Analyzing current U.S. policy by looking at each element of national power will highlight current shortcomings regarding the illicit drug environment in the Southern Hemisphere. Recommended policy adjustments along with requisite strategic means will demonstrate how the U.S. can improve the current environment in the Northern Triangle.

#### Diplomacy (External)

Diplomatically, the first U.S. policy shortcoming is its overly focused bilateral approach in the prosecution of its counter drug efforts. For the past several decades U.S. strategic leaders chose to focus counter drug efforts one country at a time instead of hemispherically or even regionally. It is this same bilateral policy approach that caused the balloon effect from the current U.S. supported Mexican drug war shifting into

the Northern Triangle. In the 1980s the U.S. focused its counter drug efforts in Peru and Bolivia, then the world's leaders in coca leaf supply. In the meantime, Colombian coca leaf supply went from 10% of the world's share in 1985 to 90% by 2000. In July 2000, the U.S. under President Clinton started backing Colombia both materially and financially through Plan Colombia. While joint U.S. and Colombian drug eradication efforts met with some reduction success it also eventually forced the problem north where Mexican DTOs assumed the leadership, vacated by significantly weaker Colombian drug cartels, for transiting drugs into the United States.<sup>82</sup>

Currently, the U.S. bilateral drug focus is on Mexico where counter drug aid is five times that of the rest of Central America. Counter drug assistance is provided to Mexico through the Merida Initiative and Beyond Merida programs. The results achieved by President Calderon, listed in the beginning of this paper, did lead to a balloon effect into in the Northern Triangle, where U.S. counter drug assistance is considerably less.<sup>83</sup> In fact, and perhaps most frustratingly and ironically, coca plant cultivation in Peru and Bolivia increased from 2006 to 2010 leading them to be important worldwide suppliers once again.<sup>84</sup>

In order to stop winning partial victories in individual countries that push the problem into still other countries or regions, U.S. policy must take a more holistic and comprehensive approach to how it focuses its attention and how it allocates the resources associated with all the elements of national power. In order to prevent future balloon effects, the United States must take the lead in a hemispheric approach to the drug problem and encourage its allies in the Northern Triangle to do the same. If the U.S. assesses the strategic environment at the hemispheric level, it will identify tensions

and opportunities which it can both mitigate and exploit. This more contemporary approach will set the foundation for applying pressure on DTOs and organized crime families throughout not only the Americas but also the Caribbean where the majority of illicit drugs previously flowed into the United States.

Strategic means are available to the U.S. for implementing this policy recommendation. The first is for the U.S. Congress to implement an assessment which incorporates the proposals of Representative Eliot Engel in his Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission Act of 2009 and Senator Jim Webb and his National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2009. While similarities exist, Rep. Engel's bill focuses more internationally relative to drug policies and programs in the hemisphere and seeks ways to improve them. Sen. Webb's bill focuses more domestically and includes reviews of demand reduction policies.<sup>85</sup> The approval of a commission designed to study the areas of focus of both Rep. Engel and Senator Webb would greatly enable leaders to see the bigger picture as opposed to existing problems on a state by state basis. It would also enable U.S. strategic leaders to better communicate with and enable hemispheric and regional organizations concerning future drug strategies or policy adjustments.

The previously mentioned CICAD, the Western Hemisphere's drug problem policy forum whose members include all of the countries in the Organization of American States (OAS), represents an external means for the U.S. to communicate at the hemispheric level. The U.S. can ensure, in concert with CICAD, that the three regional counter drug programs described below are nested and synchronized in a way that means success in one region will not threaten another. The first of the three

regional programs is The Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which is designed to integrate anti drug and organized crime efforts from the U.S. southern border with Mexico to Panama. The second program is the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) which is designed to do the same in its region.<sup>86</sup> Finally, the program for South America is called the Andean Counterdrug Initiative.<sup>87</sup> While these organizations already exist, the U.S. must ensure to dialogue with other member states vice dictate to them. A 2010 U.S. Congressional Research Service report concluded that officials from almost every Central American government felt the U.S. failed to consult with them sufficiently during CARSI formulation and that as a result the initiative does not portray their specific priorities. Holistic environmental assessment at the strategic level means listening to and accepting the input from other state or even non state actors. Not doing so can lead to an initiative that fails to address the problems it was designed to solve.

#### Diplomacy (Resourcing and Integrating Diplomatic Efforts)

Before it can effectively work with external organizations to promote a broader counter drug vision, the U.S. must first better synchronize and organize its efforts at home. Current U.S. policy interpretation and resource allocation is not as unified or synchronized as it could be, which frustrates attempts at a truly concerted effort both inside and outside its borders. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), under the Department of State (DOS), maintains three primary responsibilities to include producing an annual National Drug Control Strategy, developing a National Drug Control Strategy budget, and for managing the efforts of all the agencies that fall under the strategy.<sup>88</sup> While ONDCP has several responsibilities, it is the DOS, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense (DOD)

that fund the majority of supply reduction counter drug assistance programs.<sup>89</sup> Due to its independent authorities "DOD programs are not necessarily integrated into the policy planning and budgeting process for State Department led counter drug assistance programs."<sup>90</sup> ONDCP's Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 Drug Control Budget highlighted the potential problems with policy integration when it identified 39 departments, their components, and independent agencies with drug control responsibilities.<sup>91</sup> Without the absolute authority to direct all of these agencies, there is no question of a diluted effort.

A potential means for remedying this problem is the proposed Counternarcotics and Citizen Security for the Americas Act of 2010. The bill recommends that the President ensure coordination among various U.S. departments to the point that it would prohibit "U.S. government international counternarcotics or anti-crime foreign assistance-related activity from being implemented without the Secretary of State's approval, under the direction of the President."<sup>92</sup> The passage of this bill would help combine the legal responsibilities of the ONDCP with the absolute resource allocation and policy enforcement authorities not yet resident in the DOS. A combination of responsibility, resources and authority will ensure a much more synchronized and consistent effort on behalf of the United States both internally and externally.

Correcting the noted diplomatic related shortcomings to U.S. policy will improve the environment in the Northern Triangle in several important ways. Politically, a more holistic understanding of the environment will show the U.S. that the Northern Triangle is at serious risk of further destabilization and as such is worthy of a considerable increase in focus, resources, and a whole of government approach. It will also show the U.S. that due to the balloon effect from Mexico, DTOs are increasing their physical

presence in the Northern Triangle and are running operations there. This enables them to continue to make incredible profits placing them at a distinct advantage over weak Northern Triangle governments.

Economically, a more integrated and synchronized U.S. internal approach will enable the most efficient use of scarce financial resources toward the counter drug effort. It will ensure that every dollar is spent supporting a unified set of U.S. strategic ends in the region instead of the different ends of various agencies or departments. This internal synergy will allow for a whole of government approach to assisting governments in the Northern Triangle and in all of Latin America.

The recommendations to fix U.S. diplomatic shortcomings will not change the physical terrain in the Northern Triangle but they will help the U.S. better forecast the geographical - strategic ramifications of any stimulus to the environment in the Northern Triangle or anywhere in Latin America. In other words, they will help the U.S. appreciate the second and third order effects of any effort it undertakes anywhere in the region on the rest of the region. Current bilateral U.S. efforts show a lack of this appreciation.

#### Information

What is crucial in the information domain for changing U.S. counter drug policy is for U.S. strategic leaders to quit ignoring extensive data collected by various agencies informing successful examples of alternative practices. A study of the information available indicates current U.S. policy failed in the past and continues to do so. The fact that the U.S. continues to pursue its current policies indicates either an inability or unwillingness to interpret drug data related to alternative approaches to the problem. These policies overly emphasize supply reduction and the use of the criminal justice

system to deal with drug users. The inability or unwillingness to apply critical and creative thought to the drug problem prevents the U.S. from even considering, let alone discussing, new approaches to solving the problem resulting in poor strategic communications with regional partners.

In order to improve the information domain, enhanced strategic communication efforts are critical for allowing more open and honest dialogue within the region. This requires considerable critical and creative thinking skill. Analysis of the current informational environment shows that leaders in Central and Latin America disagree with the current U.S. focus on supply reduction and its strict prohibition position because it does not address DTO profit or incentive sufficiently. However, disagreement with U.S. policy also resonates from within. In 2011 a Global Commission on Drug Policy report revealed that former Secretary of State George P. Schultz and former Chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve Paul Volker supported Latin American leader calls for a dialogue that would discuss the possibility of limited legalization and more demand reduction efforts.<sup>93</sup> The first step in the direction of policy improvement is for U.S. strategic leaders to do two things. First of all, they must think critically enough to accept the fact that a counter drug effort emphasizing supply reduction and a criminally based response to drug use has failed. Overwhelming amounts of information, some of which is presented in this paper, and provided by numerous private and public organizations acknowledge that unacceptably high levels of drug use remain the norm. This drug use continues to fuel illegal drug profits and incentive. Secondly, U.S. strategic leaders must seriously consider and analyze more creative ways to approach solving drug related problems, including the subject of legalization, which is still a taboo today.

Over the past several years, senior U.S. leaders talked about drugs being more of a health issue rather than a criminal one and have also talked about the importance of demand reduction, however, documented resource allocation paints a different picture. As recently as FY 2009, two thirds of the U.S. drug control budget went toward supply side initiatives. While FY 11 and 12 demand reduction budget allocations are higher than in the past, critics note that they are still less than what was spent in the early 2000s. More recently the FY 12 National Drug Control Budget was allocated 59.3% to 40.7% in favor of supply reduction.<sup>94</sup> Future drug reduction budgets must allocate more money to demand reduction as it is demand that fuels DTO profit and the destabilization it causes.

Statistics also do not support leader public speak concerning the health vs. criminal issue either. When it comes to prison populations at the local, state, and federal level, the U.S. leads the world with a prison population of approximately 2,424,279.<sup>95</sup> "Nonviolent drug offenders now account for about one-fourth of all inmates in the United States, up from less than 10 percent in 1980."<sup>96</sup> This focus on drug user incarceration comes at enormous cost to the U.S. Local, state, and federal corrections spending amounts to \$68 billion annually to accommodate an ever increasing prisoner population.<sup>97</sup> Incarceration also does not reduce one's demand for drugs but has often exacerbated it.

The policy recommendation in this paper is not necessarily for legalizing drugs but for rather for an analysis of the potential benefits it would provide as a strategic means, including a reduction in prison population and financial gain. Legalization study is also recommended due to the fact that several Central American leaders have

already expressed their opinions that limited legalization may help their drug problems. In 2010 approximately 1,638,846 people were arrested on drug charges which equates to one arrest every 19 seconds for the entire year.<sup>98</sup> In 2011 the number of those arrested on non-violent drug charges stood at over 1.5 million. Of that, 757,969 were arrested for violating a marijuana related law and of that 663,032 were arrested for possession only.

Legalizing the recreational use of marijuana would immediately bring relief to law enforcement officers allowing them to focus on more serious crime and it would also help reduce a swelling prison population that is growing increasingly expensive. Legalizing marijuana would also enable its taxation which would enable revenue generation at the state and federal level. In 2010 a senior economics lecturer at Harvard, Jeffrey Miron, released a study he did in which he estimated the legalization of marijuana nationwide would generate almost \$8.7 billion in law enforcement savings. Furthermore, he reported that if taxed at rates comparable to alcohol and tobacco, marijuana tax revenue could amount to another \$8.7 billion.<sup>99</sup> While only an estimate, this \$17 billion would increase with savings in corrections cost and a reduction in marijuana related criminal prosecutions, which amounts to billions as well. Ironically, legalizing small amounts of marijuana could provide the financial means to help fund a variety of other counter drug efforts such as aid to other countries or demand reduction programs that would in the long term reduce drug profits.

These potential benefits would help the U.S. fund a number of supply and demand reduction programs both domestically and in the Western Hemisphere. However, these potential gains must be weighed against the concerns of those who

oppose legalization. The first and primary concern is an increase in consumption. Currently, no scientific evidence exists to prove increased consumption would occur.<sup>100</sup> That said, it is important to note that if an increase in drug consumption occurred it would be all but impossible to reduce it by immediately abolishing already approved legalization legislation.<sup>101</sup> Another controversial issue is how legalization would impact DTOs. Again, a wide array of opinions exist. Some studies conclude that legalization would significantly reduce DTO profit while others conclude DTOs would suffer little impact. While inconclusive, it is another area worthy of serious study.

A final area where the U.S. must apply more critical and creative thinking is towards its firm stance against harm reduction. Harm reduction is defined as "policies, programmes and practices that aim primarily to reduce the adverse health, social, and economic consequences of the use of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs without necessarily reducing drug consumption."<sup>102</sup> While harm reduction does not resonate with U.S. policy makers, it is shown to be successful in numerous other countries. Acceptance of harm reduction options would be tantamount to U.S. leaders admitting that current policies have failed and that eradication of drug consumption is not feasible, clearly positions fraught with political risk. However, analysis sheds light on the costs of not resourcing this policy option to positively affect the current environment.

One of the most well known harm reduction programs is the needle syringe program. Needle syringe programs effectively reduce the spread of diseases, namely HIV and Hepatitis C, and are cost effective.<sup>103</sup> This is important in light of the fact that up to one third of all U.S. AIDs cases, approximately 354,000, were caused by needle sharing.<sup>104</sup> The financial costs to the U.S. are staggering. Monthly AIDs drug treatment

regimens amounting to \$2000 - \$5000 and longer life expectancies equate to more than \$500,000 spent per patient in lifetime cost of treatment (354,000 x \$500,000 totals \$177 billion.) Because many of the people who have HIV or AIDS do not have health insurance or receive Medicaid or Medicare, the U.S. government pays these costs.<sup>105</sup> Needle syringe programs can help mitigate this problem and as of 2010 were in use by 77 countries worldwide.

An example of an effective program exists in Australia. From 1988 to 2000 needle syringe programs there cost the government \$122 million but saved it almost \$2.4 billion. It is also estimated that up to 25,000 HIV and 21,000 hepatitis C infections were prevented.<sup>106</sup> These are significant figures from a country with a population only a fraction of that of the U.S. Despite the existing health care problem associated with drug use and the cost of treating it, the U.S. federal government allocates not a single dollar to any harm reduction programs, which could lead to significant cost savings and make available crucial resources for other programs.

Not only does this stance represent a failure of critical thought in the U.S., but it also helps prevent critical and creative thinking in Central America. Critics of U.S. policy argue that the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the Organization of American States have overly and faithfully reproduced the U.S. prohibitionist stance at the multilateral level. The negative second order effect is that the "the UN's approach to drug control (like that of OAS) severely limits the flexibility of responses from member states because it effectively rules out any possible experimentation with legalization and/or decriminalization."<sup>107</sup> By not using critical and creative thinking towards the drug problem, the U.S. not only limits its own options but also limits the options available to

the governments in the Northern Triangle. These governments are reluctant to go their own way because they fear the U.S. will sanction them and reduce or eliminate counter drug funding. Even after serious consideration of the recommendations made in this paper, if the U.S. still holds to its current counter drug policy, it should allow other countries to experiment with other approaches without fear of censorship or financial punishment. This is not the way the strategic partners communicate effectively in trying to solve a wicked problem.

Like diplomatic policy corrections, making corrections to current U.S. policy relative to the information domain would improve the environment in the Northern Triangle in several ways. Politically, by admitting that its current approach to the war on drugs has not worked and will not succeed in the future will demonstrate an improvement in critical thinking by U.S. political leaders. Furthermore, by opening a dialogue with Latin American leaders that excludes no idea or point of view, the U.S. will show that it is a government willing to listen to more creative solutions to this wicked problem. In so doing, the U.S. will greatly improve its standing and all strategic communication in the region. Even if the U.S. does not completely agree with particular Latin American country policy initiatives, allowing those countries to pursue policies of their choosing without fear of repercussions could lead to positive results and a greater sharing of valuable information throughout the world concerning counter drug efforts.

#### Economic and Military

Implementing new approaches in the counter drug effort would help the U.S. provide the funding necessary to improve the economic, social, military/security and institutional environments in the Northern Triangle. Some or all of the billions of dollars

saved through limited decriminalization, limited legalization, and harm reduction could fund counter drug aid to the Northern Triangle, especially toward the police reform effort. An increased demand reduction focus would, whether over the short or long term, negatively impact DTO profit to the point where eventually governments in the Northern Triangle could deal with DTOs by themselves.

The Drug Free Communities Program (DFC) is a means through which to reduce demand in the U.S. Designed to prevent youth substance abuse this program takes the approach that local drug problems are best handled at the local level. Evaluations of the program show that where the DFC operates youth substance abuse is lower.<sup>108</sup> Despite its successes, only 718 community grantees currently receive approximately \$88 million.<sup>109</sup> A program which holds so much promise in preventing young people from starting drugs needs more resources to expand.

The fact that many other countries already utilize harm reduction programs like needle exchange provide reason enough for U.S. strategic leaders to begin funding even if at an initially small scale. The remaining obstacle to harm reduction support in the U.S. is an outdated and inflexible counter drug policy. Though a long term and indirect effort, the U.S. could use the savings from harm reduction programs to increase funding to demand reduction programs and to also fund aid to the Northern Triangle or anywhere else it feels necessary.

In the short term, a reallocation of current U.S. police reform funding would help improve the police forces in the Northern Triangle. Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are most at risk, yet receive only \$6 million total to aid police forces that are so ineffective and corrupt, they threaten legitimate democratic governance. In the mid to

long term savings provided by more creative counter drug approaches would allow the U.S. to increase its police reform funding to the Northern Triangle. An improvement in police capability would help improve security and reduce crime which would positively affect the current social environment and it would also allow Northern Triangle governments to rely more on their police forces and less on their military to provide basic law enforcement. This again would relieve some of the stress felt by a civilian population policed by its military and help mitigate drug related corruption in the armed forces. In order to help maintain accountability of any increased funding and to ensure governments spent U.S. funded resources appropriately, the U.S. could work through an auditing agency in CARSI, which is the regional security and law enforcement body. This paper does not argue for the Northern Triangle to be the sole recipient of police reform money but rather for the application of aid in such a way that matches the threat to stabilization in the region.

Finally, the institutional environment would also improve through a regional CICIG. The annual operating cost of CICIG in Guatemala is approximately \$20 million of which half is paid by the U.S.<sup>110</sup> The US could either increase its funding for a larger program or solicit increased donations through the UN. Either way, this funding is regarded as an extremely effective institutional reform tool crucial for improving governance and rule of law in the Northern Triangle. Doing so will help improve the confidence of the people in their governments.

### Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues that the aforementioned U.S. policy recommendations articulated through the ways of the elements of national power and their associated strategic means will directly and indirectly assist the governments of the

Northern Triangle in transitioning the currently unstable environment to a more desired one. While no U.S. strategy will ever solve every problem or address every challenge, the policy recommendations here can aid in solving the wicked problem of illicit drug consumption. Diplomatically, a more integrated US domestic effort that aligns supply and demand side reduction policies with resource allocation will enable a holistic hemispheric approach and environmental appreciation. This can then be communicated via an open dialogue with the countries of the Western Hemisphere. The U.S. could promote an open dialogue once it thinks critically and accepts the fact that its counter-drug programs of the past and present are not solving the problem. Creative thinking would enable not only the U.S., but other countries to seriously study programs which might benefit the counter drug effort and implement those with the most potential for gains and least amount of risk. Decriminalization, limited legalization, and demand and harm reduction programs, while potentially risky, show definitive potential for decreased incarceration and financial gain not to mention social and health related advantages. Reducing demand in the largest drug consumer market in the world would reduce DTO drug related income and a decline in incentive would follow. While DTOs could turn to other sources of illegal income like kidnapping and extortion, it is possible that with increased U.S. support in all areas of national power that El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras could eventually deal with DTOs on their own.

Whether these policy and strategy recommendations are feasible, acceptable, and suitable for U.S. strategic leaders depends on how important the political goal of stable and democratic Northern Triangle governments is to the United States. If this aim is important enough it will overcome the financial and ideological obstacles present

in the current environment. One way the U.S. could increase funding in the short term to police reform programs and to CIGIG in the Northern Triangle would be to reallocate drug related funding set aside for Mexico. As mentioned previously, Mexico receives far more aid from the U.S. than does the Northern Triangle. However, the exacerbated drug problem in the region was caused by the DTO displacement from Mexico. As a result the U.S. should allocate greater funding to the Northern Triangle to address the second and third order effects of greater DTO presence. Over the long term, financial savings from limited legalization, decriminalization, demand and harm reduction could provide more financial flexibility.

Ideologically, admitting that former and current policies did and will not work does not equate to an admission of defeat on behalf of US strategic leaders. On the contrary, it would represent a refreshing application of critical thinking and a reappraisal of the strategic environment. It would also provide a renewed energy toward the creative study of alternative approaches. In the end, strategic leaders must understand that any stimulus to the environment anywhere in that environment will cause it to change. The example of U.S. support for Mexico's drug war impacting the Northern Triangle is a perfect example of this. Anticipating what the resultant positive and negative changes will be, where they will resonate in the short and long term, and what actions to take to strive towards a more stable and productive environment is the ever existing challenge faced by strategic leaders.

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