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Drugs and Conflict: The Impact of US Policy

Tuesday, December 14, 2010

Speakers

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The connection between armed conflict and illegal drugs is not new, but its realization has intensified since the early 1990s. Drugs are a complicating factor in political conflicts. They can impede governments in their efforts to construct political solutions to conflict. Vanda Felbab-Brown from the Brookings Institution, Patrick Ward, Deputy Director for Supply Reduction at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, and Sidney Weintraub from the Center for Strategic & International Studies discussed the role of drugs in armed conflict and the impact of U.S. policy.

The Nexus between Armed Groups and Drugs

Governments used to believe that by fighting the nexus between armed groups and drugs, they were also fighting for peace. The idea was that "if we can stop the drug trafficking, we will contribute to ending the conflict." However, the premise of the narco-insurgency is not fully accurate. There are three problems with this narrative. First, it is very difficult to stop armed groups from benefiting from drug trafficking. Suppression raises the price of the illicit good, so the groups might even welcome it. Second, insurgency groups can easily shift from one form of financing to another. Three, the suppression of illicit crops might increase the legitimacy of armed groups among local populations. Often the framers need money from drug production and many families are dependent on the illegal economy. When the government attempts to suppress drug trafficking, the groups can place themselves as the protectors of the local people. The linchpin of successful counternarcotic campaigns is the capacity to deliver services and protection to the local population. How much support drug traffickers get is a function of several elements: the dependence of the population on illegal economy and the availability of alternative

livelihoods; the labor intensity of the illicit activity ("the more people you can employ, the greater the political capital you can acquire"); the presence of other armed actors; and government responses.

Eradication

While eradication in some places, such United States national parks, makes sense, large-scale eradication is not the proper tool for a big counterinsurgency strategy. Paradoxically, eradication policies can make it more difficult for the government to prevail in a conflict. There are often enormous gaps between eradication and the introduction of alternative livelihoods, which causes severe strains for the local production. "The best policy is not to engage in eradication." A good strategy focuses on interdiction. In this regard, the Obama administration may be credited for taking the progressive stance of avoiding eradication in Afghanistan. "The suspension of eradication is an important enabling element for successful counterinsurgency."

Counter to popular belief, farmers are not always likely to prefer illicit crops because of higher market value. In Afghanistan and Burma, farmers would make more money with legal crops (for example, okra) than with drugs, but distance and the security situation make it difficult to bring the crops to the market. Even when the price is higher for an illicit crop, people are often willing to change, as there are non-monetized values to leaving illicit markets. The state has an important role in promoting alternatives.

Mexico and Colombia

Counternarcotic campaigns in Colombia and Mexico have both benefited from strong political leaders. Colombia has been willing to accept U.S. troops to fight its internal problems, but Mexico has not. While Bogota has launched a unprecedented effort against drug trafficking, Colombia's shipment of drugs has not diminished. However, Colombian groups have taken on a more passive role than the Mexicans. The Colombian drug traffickers ship the drugs up to the Mexican border, where Mexican groups take over.

In Mexico, 'drug cartels' is not an appropriate word. The most important operating factor is that these groups are not cartels – they fight among each other rather than cooperate. The violence is about who gets what part of the business. It is also important to note that in some areas of Mexico, the murder rate is very low, considerably lower than in Brazil, for example. Murder rates are only high in the conflict areas, largely because of the fighting caused by the "cartels." Kidnappings, which primarily affect wealthy Mexicans, are primarily enacted as an income source for "cartels." It is likely that, as the counternarcotics efforts continue, kidnapping occurrences will increase as drug traffickers seek other sources of income. Mexicans often complain that much of the violence is caused by easy access to arms from the United States. However, many other countries could supply Mexico's drug traffickers. American weapons only serve to keep the price of arms low. "Guns are available internationally."

President Calderon's effort to use the army to curb drug trafficking has been largely ineffective. In fact, the increasing number of human rights violations by the armed forces shows the negative impact the war on drugs has had on the Mexican army itself. Disapproval of the counternarcotic effort has increased among Mexicans and is now over 50%.

The Obama Administration's Drug Policy

The Obama administration attempts to pursue a balanced and comprehensive approach to break the cycle of violence and drug use. "The United States has a special responsibility to

decrease demand." The administration's focus is on prevention and early intervention. For example, the 2011 fiscal budget includes a 13% increase in prevention spending. The policy takes into account that most drug users are teenagers who naturally drop out of the market when they become older. However, in the cases where people become addicted, public health tools are appropriate. Internationally, the approach depends on the particular challenges. In particular, the administration focuses on strengthening the rule of law and international cooperation.

International Cooperation

The drug problem cannot be isolated to the United States. The United States is a critical demand market, but there are other countries where demand is on the rise. Cocaine and heroine consumption of has expanded significantly in Russia, China and Latin America. Argentina's per capita consumption is higher than in the United States.

A significant part of the funds that are destabilizing the Western Hemisphere come from drug trafficking. Regional and international cooperation is increasingly necessary. The United States has very good cooperation with Russia and a joint U.S.-Russian working group on drug trafficking. West Africa presents particular challenges as a conduit for drug trafficking in Europe. Counter-drug efforts are particularly difficult in Guinea-Bissau, which has essentially been taken over by drug traffickers. When governance and institutions are weak, training counternarcotics forces might mean supporting future drug traffickers or coup leaders. A successful counternarcotics intervention comes down to host-nation willingness. Consulting with civil society is critical.

Conclusion

There are no easy answers to drug trafficking. While drugs certainly fuel armed conflicts, a strategy that focuses only on combating drugs will not successfully reduce violence or drug use. Experts recognize the need for differentiated policy, which is suitable and appropriate for individual circumstances. Only when people have real alternatives to drug production and trafficking, is there hope for breaking the nexus between large-scale violence and drugs. Many consumption countries have a long way to go in prevention policies.

Resources

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