Barack Obama's drug policy: time for change

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Created 2009-04-15 13:43

The United States president has prepared for the fifth Summit of the Americas [1] in Trinidad & Tobago on 17-19 April 2009 by announcing a package of measures that will make easier the movement of people and remittances between the US and Cuba. This may help lift the atmosphere of his meeting with the thirty-three other leaders from across the region, among whom Cuba's is the only absentee. But if Barack Obama truly wanted to make a difference, there is one policy area that more urgently needs his focused attention and brave decision: drugs.

The prospect at this stage is remote. It has not yet dawned on the Obama administration that its decision to wage a "war on drugs" in a new theatre (Mexico) is doomed to the same failure it has experienced everywhere else in the region (in particular, Colombia). It will be a melancholy end to a four-decade effort.

In May 1971, the ill-fated Richard Nixon proclaimed the beginning of this "war". Since then Washington - with wide support among the international community - has comprehensively lost the fight against narcotics inside the United States and worldwide. Between the last failure in Colombia and the coming one in Mexico, the picture is one of unrelieved retreat (see "The global drug war: beyond prohibition [2]", 4 December 2007).

The coercive confrontation against drugs in Colombia has, under any measurable standard - cocaine production, drug availability and purity, the level of drug-related violence, control of narcotics-linked money-laundering, new markets for consumption - been a wholesale disappointment. Plan Colombia, that heavily militarised eight-year effort [2] costing $6 billion, has proved incapable of curtailing the drug phenomenon in this part of the Americas - which extends worldwide.

In the 2000s, Bogota has undertaken a range of actions: forcefully (using chemical agents) eradicating illicit crops over an area approximately two-and-a-half times the state of Delaware, extraditing more than 600 Colombians to the United States, dismantling the traditional big drug cartels (and some of the new, more sophisticated, cellular, less visible, and smaller "boutique" ones). In its own terms, the strategy hasn't worked: the drug problem hasn't been solved, either in the United States or in the immediate region. True, Plan Colombia can be...
regarded as modestly successful as a counterinsurgency initiative, but as a counter-drug stratagem it has been a complete fiasco.

Yet the same rationale that underlies Plan Colombia is now present in Plan Merida, Washington's project for Mexico. The implementation of a new drug crusade in that country will almost certainly have the effect of making Mexico more of a failed state than it is already (see Sergio Aguayo Quezada, "Mexico: a state of failure [2]", 17 February 2009).

The next dialogue

The logic of United States drug policy links domestic and international motives, which are both manifold and sometimes contradictory (see Cornelius Friesendorf, US Foreign Policy and the War on Drugs [3] [Routledge, 2007]). The strategy, supply-driven and highly punitive, has invested immense efforts and monies [3] to reduce the price at the stage of production; improve eradication in order to discourage peasants to cultivate illicit crops; strengthen interdiction in the processing and transit countries in order to decrease the availability and potency of drugs in the US homeland; and enhance seizures at entry-points so as to elevate the domestic price of narcotics and thus deter the entrance of additional potential consumers into the drug market, reducing crime levels as a result.

The outcome has been the opposite of what the US expected and desired. There have been few winners and many losers in a campaign in which Washington now spend [4]s $1,400 every second. US citizens have become less safe, with many more victims; while organised criminal organisations (both domestic and transnational) have become richer and more powerful. The Andean region and west Africa [4] are but two areas where the drug phenomenon has created enormous social, political, ecological and military difficulties (see Emmanuelle Bernard, "Guinea-Bissau: drug boom, lost hope [4]", 13 September 2008). The legacies of the ill-conceived "war on drugs", here and elsewhere, include human-rights abuses, environmental catastrophes, imbalances in civil-military relations, institutional corruption, urban drug-lords' and rural warlords' accumulation of power, and law-enforcement agencies' failures (see Ivan Briscoe, "Lockdown in Vienna: the UN's drugs summit [4]", 23 March 2009).

The Obama administration's extension of the "war of drugs" to Mexico will reinforce these depredations [5] in a country closer to its borders than Colombia. If the United States - Democrats and Republicans alike - want to avoid this fate, it must participate in a new discussion about narcotics in the western hemisphere. The Summit of the Americas in Trinidad & Tobago [6] is an opportunity to initiate a thorough, serious dialogue on drugs and their links to organised crime and citizens' insecurity in the continent. The social, economic and political realities in the Americas are already "narcotised". It is time, after more than three decades of a failed "war on drugs", to start a post-prohibitionist debate. It is not too late to rethink.

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