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MEXICO IS A FRIEND, NOT AN ENEMY

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No Threat

On Jan. 31, 2012, the nation's chief of national intelligence, James R. Clapper, provided testimony before the Senate detailing the global threats to U.S. national security.¹ During his remarks he covered numerous threats ranging from terrorism, nuclear proliferation, cyber attacks and counterintelligence penetrations as being among the many challenges faced by our nation, mostly from external sources. When it related to our hemisphere, and more specifically our southern neighbor, the intelligence assessment provided language indicating that Mexico, and violent events transpiring in that country, are not a specific threat to the United States.

Clapper's testimony appears to be an objective and well-balanced review of the security situation facing both nations and goes a long way to dispel the myth that Mexico's drug cartel violence is uncontrollably spilling over and into the United States. While some spillover violence does in fact occur, it is generally confined to the border region, most specifically near the border city pairs, and rarely reaches the interior of the United States in such a manner that should cause alarm or incite fears of threats to national security, when compared to jihadist terrorism or other extremists that publicly proclaim their desire to kill Americans.

No Spillover

Clapper also noted in his testimony that "*U.S. officials and citizens in Mexico* are at increased risk [of being victimized] because of generalized violence," validating the idea that the risk of being affected by cartel violence is largely a result of the voluntary presence of Americans inside of Mexico, especially in the vicinity of transportation corridors or other conflict zones that are being contested by the drug cartels.

On Feb. 8, 2012, the U.S. State Department issued a travel alert in which it stated that "the Mexican government makes considerable effort to protect U.S. citizens and other visitors ... and there is no evidence that Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) have targeted U.S. visitors and residents [in Mexico] based on their nationality." The alert further warns that the

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“TCOs themselves are engaged in a violent struggle to control drug trafficking routes ... as a result, crime and violence are reported to be serious problems throughout the country.”²

There is no doubt that Mexican cartels are also involved in drug transportation and distribution within the United States, but Clapper concluded in this assessment that “we are not likely to see the level of violence that is plaguing Mexico spill across the U.S. border. We assess that traffickers are wary of more effective law enforcement in the United States. Moreover, the factor that drives most of the bloodshed in Mexico—competition for control of trafficking routes and networks of corrupt officials—is not widely applicable to the small retail drug trafficking activities on the U.S. side of the border.”

No “Taxes”

The fundamental difference between what happens in Mexico and what happens in the United States lies with the location of, and the reason for, the violence. This premise explains why the same level of drug-related violence is not rampant in the United States. The reason is that once the drugs are in the United States, there is little to fight over; a drug delivered (inside the United States) is a drug sold. End of story.

The core of the problem in Mexico is related to the desire of the cartels to conquer and dominate the parts of the republic through which drugs enter the country via the Pacific and southern border states; and the points at which they exit the country, at the U.S.-Mexico border as well as points in between. However, the purpose for dominating the territory is to generate revenue from the rights-of-passage, called *piso* or *cuota*, that result from the taxation of traffickers moving drugs along those entry, intermediate, and exit routes.

The violence is a manifestation of the contest for dominance of those routes, ergo: “To the victor go the spoils.” And in this case, the *piso* revenues are a significant portion of income that serve to increase the organizational net worth—enormous sums that are obviously worth the bloody fight among traffickers.

No Violence

A Mexican research group called the Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal (Citizens Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice) reported in January 2012 that Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, ended its three-year reign as the homicide capital of the world and that it had recently dropped to the number two spot in that ranking.³ The findings released at the end of January revealed that drug-related homicides in Mexico had risen to a high of more than 15,000 in 2010 but had dropped to approximately 12,000 as of Oct. 1, 2011. The study reported that San Pedro Sula, Honduras, replaced Ciudad Juarez as the most deadly city in the world as of Dec. 31, 2011.

Those comparisons aside, it is an undisputed fact, and Clapper notes, that most of the violence and killings in Mexico are the result of trafficker-on-trafficker violence, for the reasons noted above. While there is a notable amount of trafficker-on-government violence in Mexico, a significant portion of those activities is usually attributed to retribution by cartel members against corrupt law enforcement or military officials.

Trafficker-on-civilian victimization, the third category of violence within Mexico, is almost always a result of innocent third-party civilians being caught in the crossfire, literally and figuratively.

There is little-to-no similarity between Mexico's homicide statistics and those that are directly related to drug trafficking, or that are committed for any other reason, in the United States. The Citizens Council for Public Safety and Criminal Justice reported that in 2011, New Orleans was the most dangerous city in the United States, coming in 21st in the world with a murder rate of 58 homicides per 100,000 people. Detroit ranked 30th with 48 murders per 100,000 people, St. Louis 43rd with 35 murders per 100,000 people, and Baltimore was in the 48th spot with 31 murders per 100,000 people. When the data is viewed objectively, it is an exaggeration to say that Mexico's drug-related violence is spilling over into the United States.

No Terrorists

While some in the U.S. government have called for designating Mexico's drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations,⁴ a legal definition that would enable the United States to hunt and kill anyone so labeled, Clapper ignores this issue in his testimony and instead more adequately defines the cartels wars as internecine battles between criminal organizations.

Clapper's analysis recognizes that Mexico's government remains committed to fighting the country's drug cartels and has taken concrete steps aimed at strengthening the judicial system through a conversion to an accusatory system and applying the rule of law, an evolutionary process that is slowly taking root in Mexico and that is expected to continue its slow crawl into the new *sexenio*, or six-year presidential term.

To this end, during the administration of President Felipe Calderón, the government of Mexico continued dismantling drug cartel leadership structures and captured or killed more than half of the traffickers on the nation's most wanted list.⁵ Calderón reported in his *Quinto Informe Anual de Gobierno* (Fifth State of the Union Address) that 23 of the 37 "most wanted" traffickers had been arrested or killed by Mexican counter-drug authorities in 2011.⁶ Clapper reiterated in his testimony to the U.S. Senate that since December 2009, Mexican military and police units have killed or captured at least five senior cartel leaders.

Clapper also noted that during the last six years, Mexican federal police and military operations have dismantled several of the longstanding cartels, and that others have degraded and split into a number of independent factions. This has had a debilitating effect on the Mexican drug cartels, giving rise to the *bandas criminales* phenomenon previously seen in Colombia after the defeat of the Medellin and Cali cartels, where the two larger conglomerates fractured and restructured into several dozen smaller groups, ultimately leading to a diminished level of violence in Colombia.

No Fears

The Clapper analysis, which reflects the combined wisdom of the federal law enforcement and military and intelligence community agencies of the United States, should lend further credence to the argument that Mexican drug cartels, and Mexico as a nation, do not represent a threat to our national security interests.

In my opinion, this report is the first objective view of the Mexico drug violence problem that has been generated by our government in recent years. The analysis puts media and political hyperbole aside and accurately paints the drug violence situation as being a conflict fueled solely by criminal greed, as opposed to ideological or insurrectionist motivations directed against U.S. interests, whether they are in Mexico or in the American homeland. The clarity of the statements made by Clapper will undoubtedly go a long way toward diffusing the tensions that could otherwise negatively shape the U.S.-Mexico relationship when Mexico's new government takes office less than one year from now.

Notes

1. James R. Clapper, “Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” January 31, 2012, http://www.dni.gov/testimonies/20120131_testimony_ata.pdf.

2. “Travel Warning,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Mexico, February 8, 2012, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5665.html.

3. Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Publica y la Justicia Penal, “San Pedro Sula (Honduras) la ciudad más violenta del mundo; Juárez, la segunda,” January 11, 2012, <http://seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/biblioteca/finish/5/145/0>.

4. The Committee on Homeland Security’s Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management, “On the Border and in the Line of Fire: U.S. Law Enforcement, Homeland Security and Drug Cartel Violence,” May 11, 2011, <http://homeland.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-%E2%80%9Cborder-and-line-fire-us-law-enforcement-homeland-security-and-drug>.

5. Univision, “Presidente mexicano destaca golpes a capos en informe anual al Congreso,” September 1, 2011, <http://feeds.univision.com/feeds/article/2011-09-01/presidente-mexicano-destaca-golpes-a?refPath=/noticias>.

6. President Felipe Calderón, “Quinto Informe anual de Gobierno,” September 1, 2011, <http://www.informe.gob.mx/informe-de-gobierno/resumen-ejecutivo/estado-de-derecho-y-seguridad>.