

WHEN A COUNTER- ~~TERRORISM~~NARCOTIC PARTNER ASKS FOR A DIVORCE

Dana Priest has a fascinating piece ostensibly describing how the administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto has chosen to shift its counter-narcotic approach from the one Felipe Calderón's PAN party had pursued for a decade. About 12 of the article's 60-some paragraphs describe first how, in a scene reminiscent of Bob Woodward's account of Michael Hayden and others briefing Obama on the national security programs they assumed he'd retain after he took over the presidency, the US presented the existing US-Mexican counter-narcotics programs to Peña Nieto's team.

In a crowded conference room, the new attorney general and interior minister sat in silence, not knowing what to expect, next to the new leaders of the army, navy and Mexican intelligence agency.

In front of them at the Dec. 15 meeting were representatives from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the CIA, the FBI, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and other U.S. agencies tasked with helping Mexico destroy the drug cartels that had besieged the country for the past decade.

The Mexicans remained stone-faced as they learned for the first time just how entwined the two countries had become during the battle against narco-traffickers, and how, in the process, the United States had been given near-complete entree to Mexico's territory and the secrets of its citizens,

according to several U.S. officials familiar with the meeting. [my emphasis]

Priest then notes, at the end of the story, that Mexico had ejected the US personnel who had been working in fusion centers in Mexico.

But the Mexican delegation in Washington also informed U.S. authorities that Americans will no longer be allowed to work inside any fusion center, including the one in Monterrey. The DEA agents and retired military contractors there will have to go.

But the guts of the story replicate work Priest did with the Top Secret America series and book (and perhaps, given that the program ostensibly deals with Mexican rather than US security, offers even more detail), laying out precisely what we were doing in Mexico, from drones to electronic surveillance and data analysis to personal direction of raids. She describes a number of approaches here that are presumably replicated in or borrowed from counterterrorism operations, which makes the article an interesting reflection of both.

This description of the way Mexico controls drones, for example, reinforces questions I've had about the Saudi drone base we use to target Yemen.

An agreement was reached that would temporarily give operational control to Mexican authorities during such flights. U.S. pilots sitting in the States would control the planes remotely, but a Mexican military or federal police commander would be able to direct the pilot within the boundaries of a Mexico-designated grid.

Here, though, are two of my favorite details.

[Mexico's intelligence service] CISEN

discovered from a captured videotape and a special analytical group it set up that some of the cartels had hired former members of the U.S.-trained Guatemalan special forces, the Kaibiles, to create sociopathic killers who could behead a man, torture a child or immerse a captive in a vat of acid.

Anxious to counterattack, the CIA proposed electronically emptying the bank accounts of drug kingpins, but was turned down by the Treasury Department and the White House, which feared unleashing chaos in the banking system.

This has been reported elsewhere, but it's important to remember the lethal cartels we're fighting in Mexico arose, in part, out of training we did that is not that different from what Priest describes here. Blowback, baby.

Then there's Treasury's concerns about chaos in the banking system if the US were to mess with drug accounts. We know drug money served as a key revenue source for shaky banks during the financial crisis. And we know the government gave HSBC a wrist-slap rather than indictments after discovering the vast amounts of money laundering it was facilitating. One reason Latin American leaders are increasingly choosing a different approach to combat drugs is that under the current plan, the money ends up in the US, while the violence largely remains in their countries.

There are a few details of Priest's piece that deserve some challenge, though. Priest claims that the first hint that Mexico might shift strategies came in December when they briefed Peña Nieto's security team. That's not true: he had run on shifting the drug war strategy. What they may have discovered at that meeting, however, is that he meant what he said about shifting their strategy (I presume they thought the handover would work as it did between Pervez Musharraf and Asif Zardari, when

the latter claimed he'd shift the partnership with the US but did not).

Also, consider the role of John Brennan. At one point, Priest hinted how central CIA was to this strategy by describing then CIA Chief David Petraeus' high level meetings both in the US and Mexico. But elsewhere in the article, Priest notes that Brennan led the efforts out of the White House.

Deputy national security adviser John O. Brennan, also in charge of counterterrorism operations focused on al-Qaeda, led the U.S. side. His Mexican partner was CISEN director Valdes.

Note too, there are several oblique references to "other agencies" involved in this process, as in the bolded section above. While I expect that Immigration and Customs Enforcement is one of them, I wonder to what extent Priest is avoiding mention of JSOC. A month after the December 2012 meeting she describes, US Northern Command officially stood up what had been a less formal Special Operations Command unit, one that would explicitly focus on drug operations in Mexico.

The Pentagon is stepping up aid for Mexico's bloody drug war with a new U.S.-based special operations headquarters to teach Mexican security forces how to hunt drug cartels the same way special operations teams hunt al-Qaida, according to documents and interviews with multiple U.S. officials.

[snip]

Based at the U.S. Northern Command in Colorado, Special Operations Command-North will build on a commando program that has brought Mexican military, intelligence and law enforcement officials to study U.S. counterterrorist operations, to show them how special operations troops built an interagency network to target al-Qaida mastermind

Osama bin Laden and his followers.

The special operations team within Northcom will be turned into a new headquarters, led by a general instead of a colonel. It was established in a Dec. 31 memo signed by Defence Secretary Leon Panetta. That move gives the group more autonomy and the number of people could eventually quintuple from 30 to 150, meaning the headquarters could expand its training missions with the Mexicans, even though no new money is being assigned to the mission.

The special operations program has already helped Mexican officials set up their own intelligence centre in Mexico City to target criminal networks, patterned after similar centres in war zones built to target al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Iraq, two current U.S. officials said.

While AP describes the purported benefits of this new command, the Hill describes the new command as a political stunt for Obama.

All of which brings us to the issue Priest barely touches. In two short paragraphs, she describes one reason the Mexicans want to shift policies (Peña Nieto's PRI party also has a history of close ties to drug traffickers, so there may be other reasons).

Also unremarked upon was the mounting criticism that success against the cartels' leadership had helped incite more violence than anyone had predicted, more than 60,000 deaths and 25,000 disappearances in the past seven years alone.

Meanwhile, the drug flow into the United States continued unabated. Mexico remains the U.S. market's largest supplier of heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine and the transshipment

point for 95 percent of its cocaine.

That is, the policy implemented by CIA or John Brennan has not only not been working, it's been getting Mexicans killed in even higher numbers than counterterrorism efforts are getting Pakistanis killed, without stemming the flow of drugs. And yet Priest presents this claim unchallenged.

The first important decision was to use the same "high-value target" strategy that had been so successful against al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I suppose some of Priest's sources hoped this article would scare legislators into pushing for the US to retain its access to Mexico (or, alternately, to do the same things with SOCOM forces operating at NorthCom).

But these three paragraphs are the totality of the discussion in this story about efficacy: an admission that the approach is not working, even while claiming that an HVT approach has worked in Iraq and Afghanistan (which it obviously hasn't).

Priest's story provides a dizzying account of all the neat toys and techniques we've shared with Mexico, many of the same toys and techniques we've used in our failed wars elsewhere. Peña Nieto has, for what are probably a mix of superb reasons and less noble ones, announced a shift away from this failed approach (we'll see whether it really is materializing, though Priest's article suggests it has).

Shouldn't this shift be a good time to discuss what "hard-earned cooperation" would look like if it were really effective?