

Fall 2024 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

Realism and Restraint Advances America's Interests in Latin America

By George Barber

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The new administration of President Donald Trump should not go to war in Mexico to eradicate Mexican drug cartels and stop the flow of fentanyl. The United States would be drawn into a costly and likely unwinnable war that it simply cannot afford at the current moment. The prospect of beginning a new conflict with drug cartels must be considered in the context of other world events. The Administration inherits a dangerous world. Europe's most destructive war since World War II continues in Ukraine. American ally Israel is engaged in destructive conflict with Hamas and Hezbollah, and the possibility of a war with Iran continues to increase. American allies and partners in the Pacific, namely Taiwan, worry about what a belligerent China could mean for their security and prosperity.

In the midst of these escalating conflicts, many Americans advocate a more hawkish and primacist posture from the United States, believing that America should be prepared to use military force in some or all of these conflicts. On top of these flashpoints, many in the Republican Party (GOP), especially those in the incoming Administration, seek to use military force to eliminate Mexican drug cartels. This would bring the United States into a new war, one very close to home. At the same time, many are also calling for an increasingly hawkish and primacist posture toward Latin America, claiming that the United States should invade Mexico to wipe out the drug cartels, pursue a policy of regime change in Venezuela, and ensure that other great powers

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stay out of America's sphere of influence, citing the increased presence of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian activity in the Western Hemisphere. Some prominent individuals who could hold key positions in the Trump Administration and influential members of Congress advocate for war in Mexico to end the scourge of fentanyl and violence that is prevalent south of the border. Tom Homan, the "border czar," has stated that the Administration will wipe the cartels "off the face of the earth."¹ National Security Advisor Mike Waltz recently authored a bill to authorize the use of military force against drug cartels, and other members of Congress have echoed this sentiment.² Vice President J.D. Vance has also vowed to "wage war against Mexican drug cartels."³ It is safe to assume that going to war with Mexican cartels will be a priority of the new administration.

This analysis seeks to articulate why a strategy based on realism and restraint will be the most beneficial to the United States in the years to come with respect to Latin America. It outlines how a restrained foreign policy will address the issues of war with Mexican cartels and in turn, promote American interests vis a vis other great powers. Special attention will be paid to America's relationship with Mexico, its largest trading partner, and Latin America's second most populous country. In addition, it assesses the importance of a realist grand strategy in the context of other events in the world, arguing that while America should not and cannot continue down the primacist path in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, it especially cannot afford to pursue primacy in Latin America on top of its current commitments.

What Are US Interests in Latin America?

The most fundamental question that must be answered is: What is the purpose of the American government and American power? What should be the goal of American foreign policy?

The United States government should promote the safety and security of American citizens while also maintaining the country's sovereignty. America has a long tradition of conducting a foreign policy rooted in realism, despite a few obvious missteps in the last century. It is important to understand that the United States has been and can be a country that practices foreign policy with prudence and restraint, and this

is exactly what is needed to navigate the 21st century. America is a republic, not an empire, and should not seek to subjugate foreign countries or behave in a militant manner abroad. As the United States has done in the past, it should continue to work with states to advance the interests of the American people, independent of that state's internal political leanings.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, when the United States was the lone superpower, it had the luxury of not having to worry as much about potential blowback from its foreign policy decisions. These luxurious circumstances fomented luxury beliefs; namely that the U.S. can act as it pleases, especially in relation to countries or non state actors not seen as conventionally powerful. Because the United States is no longer the lone great power on the planet, it cannot simply act unilaterally without carefully considering the potential consequences.

While this can mean different things for different regions, in the Western Hemisphere the United States must enforce current immigration laws, defend the homeland, and enter into trade agreements that best promote the prosperity of American citizens.

Prevent Other Great Powers from Threatening US Security in the Region

An important aspect of this agenda is ensuring that other great powers do not deploy or build up military assets in the Western Hemisphere in a way that could threaten American security, just as these other great powers, namely Russia and China, seek to establish their own spheres of influence free from foreign encroachment. This idea originates in the Monroe Doctrine and the subsequent Roosevelt Corollary, which many observers default to when thinking about America's role in the Western Hemisphere.

While the United States should protect its security interests and ensure that great powers are not threatening it, it does not have to be overly involved in the internal affairs of Latin American countries. It is important to deny other great powers meaningful access to the Western Hemisphere, not assert control over neighboring states. In short, the United States government does not have an enormous role to play in the affairs of other states in Latin America, provided that they do not infringe on America's security, sovereignty, or prosperity. Today, none of these are

threatened in a serious way.

Resist the Allure of Democracy Promotion by Force

Many in the United States, however, regularly express serious concern about the internal politics of Latin American states, especially when the party in power does not align with one's personal preference or with what is deemed to be within the acceptable realm of policy disagreement. The most prominent example of this is the commentary surrounding authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, or other states. In the mind of many Americans, the United States government should also play the messianic role of democratizing the world, most of all in its own backyard. This worldview is a result of the idea that the wars that America has entered over the last century have been primarily about defending democracy against autocracy. Those who subscribe to this idea believe the world is fundamentally divided between democracies and autocracies, and that democracy writ large must prevail wherever the two conflict. This leads to the conclusion that the United States should use all means necessary to free those suffering under autocratic, and therefore unjust, rule. This includes military force in countries like Venezuela.

This view is misguided. The United States should only act in the interest of the American people abroad, not seek to create a perfect world where every country is a liberal democracy that is aligned with America. On the contrary, the United States should be willing to work with other countries even if they do not share the same form of government or ideology. A key interest of the United States in Latin America should be to promote stability, even if that means thawing relations with an authoritarian government.⁴ The U.S. military is not for charity; it exists to promote the safety and security of American citizens, while also maintaining the country's sovereignty, not to provide foreign citizens with a new government or to promote democracy by force.

Homeland Security and Immigration in the US-Mexico Relationship

Latin America is an important region for the new Administration for many reasons, most of all because of geographic proximity, robust trade relationships, the high levels of immigration into the United States,

as well as the drugs, namely fentanyl, that claim the lives of thousands of Americans each year. Each of these attributes is most emphatic in relation to Mexico, the United States' largest trading partner, with whom it shares a large border where the overwhelming majority of immigrants and fentanyl enter the country. As such, the US-Mexico relationship is critical for the administration's success.

The United States should pursue specific goals in its relationship with Mexico. First, it should ensure that no military threat is able to emanate from Mexico, especially one that infringes on the sovereignty of the United States. An adversarial state deploying military assets to a neighbor of the United States is unacceptable, as it was during the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, there is currently no military threat posed by the Mexican government or any drug cartels. Yes, many fentanyl-related deaths are recorded each year in the United States, but this is not necessarily a military threat that merits a military response.

Second, America should enforce its own immigration law and champion the rule of law at the southern border, ensuring that migrants entering are vetted properly and smugglers are not enriched by ample opportunity to extort those coming into the country. These are the two main priorities for the United States with respect to Mexico, with a strong trading relationship being a close third.

Military Force is Not Necessary to Solve the Fentanyl and Immigration Crises

In recent months and years, many in the Republican Party, and now the second Trump Administration, have called for the United States to declare war on Mexican drug cartels. Frustrated by the high levels of illegal immigration and high numbers of fentanyl-related deaths, congressional Republicans seek to use the heavy hand of the military to correct these problems now that they control the levers of power in Washington.

However, this would be a costly mistake and an overreaction for several reasons. Almost all issues with immigration can be solved by improved enforcement of existing immigration law without the need for military force to be used in Mexico. In fact, a stricter

enforcement of immigration laws could actually weaken the cartels. Deterring economic migrants from coming to the country may deprive cartels of an important source of income. It is also easier for smugglers to operate in the chaotic environment that a porous border creates.

On this issue, Panama presents an important opportunity to better regulate migrant flows. Its new president, Jose Raul Mulino, has vowed to tackle immigration through his country, which will ease migrant flows through Mexico and into the United States. Incentivizing this sort of behavior among Latin American countries is crucial to the Administration's success. In the case of Panama, this is especially true. Countless migrants pass through Panama on the way to the United States. As both countries share an interest in bringing migration under control, collaborating on this issue would be an excellent first step to reducing illegal migration and potentially weakening Mexican cartels.

Reckoning with Trade-Offs and Unintended Consequences

It is vital to analyze this decision in the wider context of America's posture in the world, as well as consider its goals in other regions. While a substantial portion of Republicans want to wind down the war in Ukraine, with President Trump promising to do exactly that on the campaign trail, many key members of Congress and officials in the new administration believe that the United States should maintain costly commitments in other regions of the world. These include continuing to arm Taiwan, as well as going to war with China should Taiwan be invaded. Many also believe that the United States should continue to arm Israel and even go to war with Iran and terrorist groups in the region. Finally, a relatively smaller contingent believes that arms and other assistance should continue to be funneled to Ukraine indefinitely.

On top of all of this, a war in Mexico could further strain American military and financial assets, especially if it escalates or lasts longer than intended, which due to the nature of war, almost certainly would.⁵ Multiple conflicts in different theaters would spell disaster for munitions stocks and America's ability to engage in each conflict. The answer, however, is not necessarily to commence a massive buildup of the military, but rather to soberly analyze

the situation and make prudent decisions about what America can and cannot do.

Another important aspect of the situation that bears mentioning is the growing Chinese footprint in Latin America. While Americans see the need to curtail China's presence in the region in favor of the United States, going to war in Mexico would sow distrust between the United States and Latin American countries, which China would welcome with open arms. Mexican president Claudia Sheinbaum has made it quite clear that Mexico will not tolerate American intervention.⁶ Furthermore, many Latin American countries have made it clear they do not support the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) vis a vis Russia, and are frankly weary of being lectured about the need to align with the United States geopolitically. As Russia and China seek to exploit any rifts between the Global South and Western countries, this could be a golden opportunity to present themselves as an ally and undermine American interests.

US Policymakers Already Have the Tools to Deal with Fentanyl

The United States faces real problems at the southern border, and the issue of immigration was a key plank of President Trump's campaign for the White House, as well as for many other Republicans running for office across the country. As millions of undocumented immigrants have entered the country in the last four years, many have raised concerns about national security threats clandestinely entering the country as well as the erosion of the rule of law. Concerns over fentanyl-related deaths are also paramount to policymakers. In 2022, the DEA seized enough fentanyl to kill every single American citizen,⁷ and 70,000 Americans died in fentanyl-related incidents that same year.⁸

The resulting frustration among elected officials has led them to call for military strikes in Mexico when the best solution is to simply enforce immigration law. New leadership in key executive branch positions can make this happen without major legislation being passed by Congress. On the other hand, using military force in Mexico could end up leading to increased migration north if communities and livelihoods are destroyed, putting more pressure on immigration enforcement.

The immigration issue is also one that Mexico can help with, which will be unlikely if the United States enters the country with a wrecking ball. The United States has important leverage that it can use with regard to Mexico in order to get it to help deter irregular migration. These tools include targeted tariffs, taxing remittances, and simply closing the border itself. The Mexican government clearly desires low barriers to immigration, and raising these barriers can motivate Mexico to address immigration and law enforcement in a way that benefits the United States.

Criminal groups, including drug cartels, also profit from smuggling migrants into the United States. Therefore, increased border security can not only solve the issue of illegal immigration but also indirectly weaken drug cartels financially. Much of the unfavorable view of Mexico in the public mind comes from the high levels of illegal immigration, and much of this can be channeled into support for military action if not handled properly. It is important to differentiate between addressing an open-border immigration policy and advocating military action.

Using Trade as Leverage

Another opportunity the United States has to influence Mexican behavior is refusing to renew the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2026 and choosing to replace it with a new trade agreement. Because the United States and Mexico have tightly-knit economies, this could also present an opportunity to extract concessions from Mexico on the issues of immigration and law enforcement south of the border. American trade with Mexico totaled over \$850 billion in 2022, according to the United States Trade Representative (USTR), with the United States being Mexico's largest trading partner and Mexico being America's second-largest trading partner.⁹ This level of trade creates millions of jobs on both sides of the border across many industries. The first Trump Administration successfully coerced Mexico into enacting additional measures to stem the tide of migrants heading to the southern border by threatening to levy tariffs.¹⁰ Along the same lines, the new Trump Administration could negotiate with the Mexican government to get Mexico to contribute much more substantially to border security and stemming the flow of fentanyl.

While tariffs could be used again, there are also

other options on the table that would be beneficial to Mexico. Renegotiating USMCA will be a crucial opportunity in this regard. Providing economic incentives through a new trade deal to Mexico would be a great opportunity to score a victory on combatting cartels and illegal immigration without disregarding Mexican interests or alienating its people and government. This dynamic is even more pronounced amid the current push, especially among some in the Trump administration, to reindustrialize and nearshore manufacturing. Mexico knows it has great potential to benefit from this arrangement, and the United States could work to see that it does benefit as a potential incentive to get Mexico to provide substantial assistance with stemming illegal immigration and the flow of fentanyl.

This aspect of the U.S.-Mexico relationship has been underexplored when it comes to finding solutions to issues at the southern border. Pursuing this area of negotiation could effectively solve these issues while precluding the outbreak of a costly military conflict. The near-shoring and friendshoring phenomenon can also be used to enlist assistance from other Latin American countries with regard to these issues, albeit probably to a lesser degree due to geographic proximity and the United States and Mexico already sharing such a high volume of trade.

Furthermore, a military conflict could disrupt supply chains and industrial output within Mexico, which could in turn harm American businesses and livelihoods. Companies relying on Mexico for manufacturing or production could face increased costs and risk, which would ultimately harm consumers in both countries with higher prices. Increased migrant flows within Mexico could also destabilize business relationships as Mexicans may need to relocate due to destruction in their communities. Many in this camp would attempt to head north and cross into the United States, which would put further pressure on immigration authorities.

The United States Cannot Afford a Cartel War and Primacy in Other Theaters

Those calling for war in Mexico simultaneously call for greater military presence in other theaters as well. However, the United States has limited resources and

any military or financial assets devoted to one conflict will not be immediately available for another. Amid a \$36 trillion deficit and low munitions stocks, the United States must make tough decisions about what its key priorities are going to be. Being all things to all people is simply not feasible, and foreign policy decisions must be viewed as tradeoffs. The United States has already had to make difficult decisions about whether or not to send specific hardware to Ukraine or to Israel, and this problem only seems to be worsening.

Policymakers must be mindful of the fact that devoting finite resources to what could easily become a quagmire will harm America's ability to project power in other places. Failing to recognize this and subsequently attempting to support Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, as well as attack drug cartels could lead to an erosion of American power as the military simply becomes overstretched and increasingly prone to failure in any of these theaters.

One report from the Marathon Initiative titled "Resourcing the Strategy of Denial" emphasized the need for the United States to significantly increase its production capacity of critical munitions in order to sufficiently supply Taiwan with what it needs to deter a Chinese invasion. As things stand, the United States would struggle to help Taiwan deter an invasion, and a successful attempt to do so would be very costly. The report recommends that the United States urgently stockpile critical munitions and significantly invest in the defense industrial base. This presents a glaring problem for those advocating a war in Mexico, many of whom also see the United States as playing an indispensable role in the defense of Taiwan, not to mention Ukraine and Israel. Because of America's inability to provide for the defense of so many other states, expending finite munitions and military assets would put a nail in the coffin of the dreams of succeeding as world policeman.

Lack of an Achievable Military Objective or End State

A further issue with calls for deploying the military to Mexico is that these plans do not actually have a defined objective or end goal. Some observers say the United States needs to eradicate the cartels or end the flow of fentanyl, without going into specifics. If they mean either of these in the literal sense of

completely eradicating all Mexican drug cartels and stopping all fentanyl from entering the United States, the U.S. military will almost certainly have to engage in a long, arduous, and costly conflict that could simply result in fentanyl entering the country from another source due to the high demand and lucrative profits to be made. And if Mexican cartels were somehow eliminated, they will be able to regroup in neighboring countries or in South America.

If the role of the U.S. military is to stamp out all cartel activity that sends drugs into the country, it will have to assume a very large role throughout the entire hemisphere, one that it is unlikely to feasibly maintain. The lack of a defined objective would facilitate the expansion of the conflict and ultimately set the United States on course for another costly quagmire. As can be seen in Ukraine, getting involved in a conflict with no real objective is not a recipe for success.

Deploying military assets to Mexico to wipe out the drug cartels is also a more difficult task than many anticipate. While the U.S. military is exponentially more powerful than the cartels, it would not simply march in and declare victory after a few short rounds of fighting. The cartels have the advantage of fighting in a vast area with geography that makes it difficult for an attacker to control and deny access to the defender.¹¹ Mexico's geography is a direct contributor to many of the cartels' ability to effectively operate outside of the scope of Mexican law enforcement. The U.S. military would have a difficult time substantially eliminating cartel operations because of this. Unfortunately, this means that the war could escalate as the United States seeks to ensure that its sunk costs are not in vain when success proves difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, the cartels possess somewhat more sophisticated weaponry and training than is often assumed. For example, reports indicate that they are able to deploy unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and surface-to-air missiles to defend themselves if needed.¹² One Mexican official even said the government has confiscated Javelins from the Jalisco Cartel.¹³ The Mexican government has made it clear that it will not support American intervention in the country, further increasing the difficulty of the task at hand, leaving the Americans to play whack-a-mole all alone. If a cartel ceases to operate in one pocket of Mexico, it

would not be fatal to its operations, as the cartel will be able to relocate to another area of the country, or to another state in Central or South America. Just as cartel operations moved from Colombia to Mexico after Colombian cartels were snuffed out, these cartels could easily move back to Colombia or Venezuela and continue shipping their products. As such, enhanced border control would likely lead to a similar outcome in terms of stemming the flow of drugs at a much lower cost financially, militarily, and diplomatically.

War With Mexico Could Engender Blowback

From a political perspective, sinking American resources and political capital into a war in Mexico could prove to be very harmful to Republican in 2026 and 2028. On the heels of a successful 2024 general election in which the Trump-Vance ticket attempted to portray itself as the relatively anti-war option, many voters could feel that they were betrayed on foreign policy if things don't go as smoothly as many expect.¹⁴ While it is true that Trump and Vance did make hawkish comments regarding Mexican drug cartels, Trump stated in his victory speech that he would not start new wars.¹⁵ Failing to live up to this promise could harm voter turnout among loyal conservative voters and spell disaster at the next election.

Furthermore, the political effects of war with Mexico on other Latin American countries could become counterproductive as well. If Mexican cartels simply relocate to other countries, they could have a similarly destabilizing effect on those countries' political processes, just as they have in Mexico. It is also worth considering that Mexico itself could descend into further political instability if fractured cartel groups are vying for control and become even more violent. Without the cooperation of the Mexican government, other leaders and political parties in the region could seek to distance themselves from a U.S. government that unilaterally uses force against its neighbors. This could lead to a rise in anti-American populism and lead to more issues in the medium to long term. Many Latin Americans are wary of America's history with intervening in their countries, and many political figures have ridden this sentiment to win office over the years. Some of the most prevalent examples of American intervention that Latin Americans may cite are Operation Condor, the overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende, American involvement

in the overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, and the Mexican-American war, where the United States acquired vast swathes of valuable territory at Mexico's expense. These events still occupy an important place in the Latin American public's mind, especially for Mexico. Violating Mexico's sovereignty would certainly inflame anti-imperialist rhetoric. Unfavorable political developments would provide further opportunity for China and Russia to strengthen their positions in South America and cast themselves as more reliable and beneficial partners. As previously mentioned, this policy could have counterproductive effects with respect to great power competition.

Instead of solely concentrating on the supply side, the United States should also attempt to look at the root causes of the demand for drugs, which sustains the ability of the cartels to keep turning lucrative profits. Furthermore, it should consider its previous experience with the War on Drugs in Latin America. Many cite America's experience in Colombia as a success when it comes to combatting drug cartels. However, much of the Colombian cartel operations simply moved north to Mexico, and the problem only got worse. In other words, the problem was not solved, as even more drugs poured into the United States, albeit primarily from a separate location.

In the case of going to war with Mexican cartels, there is no guarantee that other cartels, in Mexico or elsewhere, will not simply pick up the slack left from any of the defeated or splintered drug groups. In fact, this is most likely what will happen. This could provoke the United States to deploy its military into other locales in its attempt to stamp out drug activity, giving the military an ever-growing task of chasing drug dealers up and down the continent. Finding innovative ways to decrease the demand in the United States would be the most effective way to harm the cartels, and this should be a priority for any administration. This would be cost-effective and politically popular, even more so if it delivered results and weakened the potential for cartels to make money.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The United States should pursue a strategy based on realism and restraint in the Western Hemisphere, especially when it comes to its relationship with Mexico and the issues present at the southern border.

The United States should not seek to use force to promote democracy in the Western Hemisphere but should seek stability and even be willing to work with authoritarian governments if there is an opportunity to advance American interests. Latin America has an important role to play in U.S. foreign policy, but the United States must be careful to not overcommit to the region. American action in the region should promote stability, economic prosperity, and deny rival great powers military access to strategic land or choke points.

In recent years, problems with immigration and fentanyl have become serious issues for the United States. While it is understandable for one to be frustrated with the current state of affairs, responding to these problems with an invasion of Mexico to wipe out drug cartels will not solve either of these issues. In fact, this could actually worsen the issues of immigration and fentanyl, with more Mexicans deciding to flee north and other groups simply smuggling increased volumes of fentanyl to make up for any diminished cartel activity. Instead, the United States can make significant gains at the southern border by simply strictly enforcing existing law.

This would furthermore be politically popular for the Trump administration, which won the White House on what many voters perceived to be a more anti-war platform than that of Vice President Kamala Harris. Avoiding a new war could be politically popular and bring sustained electoral benefit.

Finally, it is crucial to think about this issue in the context of the wider world. The United States cannot afford to shoulder the burden of defense for dozens of states against great powers such as China and Russia while also launching wars close to home. Even absent any new conflicts, whether or not the U.S. could fulfill its current defense commitments when challenged is still an open question, and some experts are fairly pessimistic about this issue. As a result of this dynamic, now is not the time to fight wars that do not have explicit and narrowly defined objectives that do not advance that national interest, especially when other effective solutions are available at a much lower cost.

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