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International Security Meeting Summary

Drugs and Organized Crime: Lessons from the Summit of the Americas

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Introduction

This roundtable discussion, held on 25 April 2012 at Chatham House, is part of an International Security project that aims to highlight the significance of drugs and organized crime for domestic and international security agendas. This project assesses the multifaceted and interconnected nature of these challenges, and explores evidence-based policy options for the future. This report highlights the key themes and findings of the event, during which participants discussed recent developments in drugs and organized crime policy following the sixth Summit of the Americas, held in Cartagena in Colombia on 14-15 April 2012, and explored potential implications of the Summit for the future.

Context

Colombia is often considered a success in the 'war on drugs'. Over the last ten years, its cocaine production has decreased by 62% and the crime rate has dropped by 58%. Yet in parallel, production has grown significantly in neighbouring countries, including Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, while drug trafficking and violence have also increased elsewhere – a demonstration of the so-called 'balloon effect'. Further afield almost 50,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence over the last five years in Mexico alone. The US, which is the biggest drugs market in the world, holds 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's incarcerated population. In 1980 approximately 50,000 people were in jail for drug-related offenses in the US; this number has now risen to 500,000, accounting for around half of incarcerations in the US today.

In this context, there is growing recognition that the 'war on drugs', as currently designed and implemented, has failed. After years of political obstacles and strong reluctance for change across the world, recent developments have opened the way for a renewed debate on the effects of the current international drug policy regime.

The sixth Summit of the Americas: A turning point towards reform?

In line with the political leadership demonstrated by former and current political leaders in Latin America, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has been instrumental in putting the issue of drug policy reform on top of the agenda of the Summit, held in his country this year. With a respectful tone towards US President Barack Obama, and as part of a long strategic process, President Santos has been able to use the current momentum behind drug

reform to share his view on how current policy is failing and what more needs to be done. In response, President Obama expressed his willingness to re-examine policies that may be 'doing more harm than good in certain places'. Although he refused to countenance legalization, these remarks seem to open a small gap in the window towards reform and have caused widespread reactions in the field. However what does the future hold for drugs and organized crime policy?

Three main factors were said in discussion to be able to determine the future direction of policy. First, the current crisis in Mexico could serve as a catalyst for change. For example, if Mexico was primarily a drug producer country and Canada its biggest consumer how many casualties would the US, as a transit country, be willing to put up with before calling for change? In this respect public opinions have evolved in the last few years, and this shift informs the dynamic around the debate. For instance, while only 36% of the US population were in favour of the legalization of marijuana use in 2006, the proportion rose to 50% in 2011, this may be linked to the prominence given to the medical uses of marijuana. Second, domestic elections in Mexico and the US could provide a different context for policy reform depending on their outcome and the more popular issues among the electorate. Third, economic and budgetary pressures might serve to act against the costly 'war on drugs' in favour of more efficient measures which focus on aspects including decriminalization, prevention and harm reduction. However, such a change in policy is only likely to follow a cost-benefit, neutral and academic research into these issues. If there is to be change, the case must be made clearly given the emotional and political tensions that currently characterise the debate.

Towards an evidence-based reform?

At the Summit of the Americas, President Santos called for the establishment of a global task force led by experts in order to review the current international policy on drugs, and explore policy options, ranging from a renewed and improved drug war to full legalization. While it was argued that this process is a pragmatic and constructive one that must be welcomed, a number of suggestions were made about enhancing the process and participants highlighted potential caveats:

- Statistics can be, and have been, found for both sides of an argument in drug policy.

- Lessons from one country are not necessarily directly applicable to another country – cultural, institutional and socio-economic and political factors, among others, must be taken into account.
- Values and principles are important – evidence might show that torture and death penalty for drug possession for instance could work in reducing consumption, but the question remains whether these measures fit with the kind of society that people want to promote and live in.
- Since fear and emotions are such important parts of the policy debate on drugs, research should be conducted on where major concerns and sensitivities lie – findings could guide future communication, education and public awareness strategies.
- Political leadership is also needed to move and shape public opinion and attitudes, as illustrated in various countries in Europe over the past few decades (e.g. the Netherlands in the 1970's, Switzerland in the 1990's, Portugal in the 2000's, and Spain or the Czech Republic for example in the 2010's).
- The financial process and the role of financial institutions in money laundering could prove to be one of the important areas to tackle – for example, only 5% of the value of drugs in London is related to the production cost, while 95% lies in the distribution network and financial system.
- More emphasis is needed on prevention, and the drivers of drug consumption, i.e. 'social urbanism' or how governments can help affect the social conditions that lead to drug consumption.
- While governments should promote international coordination and cooperation on these issues, they can also begin their own independent research and experimentations into alternatives at a local, national and regional level, similar to initiatives recently conducted in Portugal and Spain, California or Vancouver.

Conclusion

The policy debate on drugs and organized crime is currently experiencing a number of significant changes. Strategic patience, a constructive evidence-gathering and experimentation process, and political leadership have been highlighted as key factors for future positive developments. This International Security project on Drugs and Organized Crime will continue to inform and

stimulate policy debate on these timely issues. The next workshop will be held on 3 July 2012 and will look into a number of case studies and policy scenarios.