

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Rapporteur Report for CFR Symposium: Organized Crime in the Western Hemisphere  
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The last twenty years have seen a marked increase in U.S. attention to drug trafficking and organized crime. The panel had questions, however, about whether the past two decades' focus on military solutions and criminal prosecution are sufficient to tackle the chimera that is organized crime. Prisons throughout the hemisphere are busting at the seams, but governments have failed to provide alternative livelihoods to both poor urban youth and its rural citizens. Both the supply of and demand for drugs remain high. Nonetheless, the United States has exported its Plan Colombia strategy to Mexico by means of the Mérida Initiative. The panel expressed mixed feelings as to whether the initiative, in its current form, will provide adequate results. The jury is still out as to whether efforts to stabilize Latin America, in particular Colombia and Mexico, will reduce organized crime, both in the long run and across the hemisphere.

First, the panel discussed how organized crime came to be labeled as a national security threat, i.e., beyond a law enforcement problem and worthy of vast State and Defense Department resources. Lee Wolosky, former Director for Transnational Threats on the National Security Council under Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, argued that international organized crime was first recognized as a nation security issue under President Clinton, who saw the growth of organized crime as “the dark side of globalization” and a collateral outcome of the end of the Cold War. In his seminal United Nations speech and pursuant Presidential Decision Directive, PDD 42, President Clinton denounced international organized crime as a menace to U.S. security and instructed his federal bureaucracy to devise a response to the growing threat.

The panel expounded on this “growing threat” in the Western Hemisphere, describing a nexus of various types of organized crime. In addition to drug trafficking, the list includes: human trafficking, alien smuggling, arms trade, transference of nuclear radioactive materials, etc. The panel agreed that in most cases—whatever the type—organized crime's main objective is economic: to earn money; though, they conceded that there are criminal organizations that are ideologically-based. The panel emphasized, however, that non-ideological, criminal organizations ultimately become entangled with terrorists and other ideological actors. The panel explained that as crime organizations develop the infrastructure to move merchandise illicitly, they will inevitably be sought out by other groups, including terrorists, for their logistical services. The panel stressed that “the bad guys” always connect and collaborate to varying degrees. William Wechsler, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Global Threats, commended the US government for improving its strategy on

organized crime, specifically for moving away from a siloed approach to a new paradigm that recognizes the commonalities and links between all types of criminal organizations.

In Colombia and Mexico, two allies and nations of strategic interest to the United States, a nexus of criminal organizations have acutely weakened the basic governance and legitimacy of the states and thus transformed organized crime from a law enforcement issue into a security issue. The Panel focused on the U.S. response to organized crime in these two priority countries. The panel looked back on US efforts in Colombia, revising its “success” story. Wolosky began by noting that the first action taken by Clinton under the PDD 42 framework was a targeted campaign against the Cali Cartel in Colombia, which evolved into Plan Colombia in 2000. Wechsler emphasized that the US’ work in Colombia is not yet finished and it will take at least another decade to deal with the wider and deeper systemic issues that are at play. He underscored, however, that it would be a mistake to overlook the drastic improvements over the past ten years: “I don't want to leave the impression that we are declaring success and that we're dancing in the end zone...But I do want to recognize how far we have come down the field. I think to fail to do so would be to miss a very powerful story that I believe is generally underappreciated and one that also has lessons for the wider discussion we're having in Mexico and around the world.”

Wechsler stressed that Colombia’s security situation has increased appreciably over the past decade: “I was out of the government from the end of the Clinton administration until the beginning of the Obama administration. When I left, over two-thirds of the Colombian people believed that the FARC was going to take over Bogotá and the whole government... The situation today is a night and day difference. When I come back into government, it was amazing to see what had been changed.” Moreover, both Wechsler and David Holiday, Program Officer for Latin America at the Open Society Institute, highlighted improvements made to the justice system. That said, both Wechsler and Holiday indicated that serious problems remain. Wechsler noted that there is still a “tremendous flow of narcotics” and that “the overall of volume of cocaine has not decreased the way that we would have wanted it to.” Moreover, the Colombian government must tackle the human and civil rights violations that have amounted to a “massive problem.”

Wechsler emphasized that there are clear parallels between the security issues in Colombia and Mexico, “everything that's being written now about Mexico I recall reading almost word for word about Colombia a decade ago.” Accordingly, the Panel agreed that United States should take into account the lessons learned in Colombia when shaping its strategy for Mexico. Wechsler remarked that the United States learned two crucial lessons regarding the necessary conditions for a successful U.S. aid package. First, the cooperation of the local government is essential: “this only works when the countries in question want the United States' help. We can't force it on them.” Secondly, in order to execute a mission successfully, the local government must possess strong leadership, especially executive leadership: “you need to have clear, strong leadership...the sort of spine of steel that we've seen from Uribe.” Wechsler sees such leadership in Felipe Calderon, “who has been very steadfast and very clear in his leadership on this issue. So we have a wonderful opportunity.” Wechsler suggests that the US ought to strike while the iron is hot and take advantage of Calderon’s strong leadership, and therefore it is prudent to assist Mexico and work with Mexico to create “a methodical, long-term plan of shared responsibility.” The long-term aspect is crucial, “this is a long-term issue. This issue is not solved in a matter of months or years but in a matter of decades.”

The Panel was in consensus that it will require a good deal of time and money to solve Mexico’s organized crime problems. Moreover, they debated the scope of these problems. The speakers were emphatic that assertions that Mexico is a failed state were exaggerated, Wechsler was resounding on this: “Mexico is not a failed state. It's not going to be a failed state.” Both Holiday and Wechsler

conceded, however, that the problem is grave and that there exist some territories that are not under effective government control, so called “ungoverned spaces.” Holiday referenced estimates that percentages of territory, at “8 percent to much higher,” are controlled by narcotraffickers and affirmed that both the economy and government “are extremely penetrated.” The panel was clear also that Mexico’s problems have and will have an impact on the whole region. Holiday stressed that “whatever we do to resolve the problems in Northern Mexico, unless we have a different approach, we’re just going to push it somewhere else, probably the Caribbean and Central America.” This “balloon effect” remains a critical challenge for the hemisphere. The United States has seen violence spillover across its border (though the panel stated that depictions of the scale of the spillover are inflated). Nonetheless, Wolosky noted that while “local law enforcement and local regulators have primary, frontline responsibilities,” at the same time, they are under-funded by the federal government “and frankly just do not yet have the tools to deal with problems that are international in scope.” The panel agreed that military and police solutions alone will not be able to contain the problem. Wechsler predicted that trade will only expand to West Africa, Europe, and the Middle East over the next ten years.

Recognizing the wide-reaching implications of Mexico’s drug problem and its urgency, the Panel discussed ways that the United States can improve its policy. In terms of security, Wechsler argues that a goal to eliminate organized crime isn’t useful; rather, an overarching objective should be to reduce criminal activity enough that it no longer poses a national security threat. He commends the Colombia tactic, “a classic counterinsurgency strategy to hold and then to build,” phasing in a more integrated approach that combines military and socio-political solutions. Holiday felt that the United States should do more on the socioeconomic front. Both Wechsler and Holiday identify U.S. demand for drugs, especially cocaine and marijuana, as a vital concern, claiming “co-responsibility” for Latin America’s drug problems. Holiday recommends that the United States shift focus away from criminal prosecution and focus on prevention and treatment. Holiday fundamentally questions whether it is possible to break up the cartels without first reducing U.S. cocaine consumption and/or decriminalizing use of marijuana. Wechsler argued that early intervention, especially in transit states, is critical: “[many countries] choose not to address this issue because they see themselves as being just a transit state. I don’t know of any country in the world that has ever remained “just a transit state” ...it becomes a massive internal problem,” Mexico or Guatemala being a case in point. Wechsler and Holiday stressed that a regional approach is necessary to diminish the balloon effect. Holiday blames the lack of “an overall vision” for the spread of organized crime throughout the hemisphere. Holiday counseled that the United States will need to reach out to the South American countries, who are already engaging on issues as a bloc, notably without U.S. participation. Lastly, the panel stressed the need to employ a “whole-of-government” approach. Wolosky emphasized that a range of agencies must engage to address the challenges posed by a variety of non-state actors. In particular, he highlighted the need to strengthen government institutions, “because the reason why we have these problems frequently is because of weak governance in certain states that do not have the ability to fight these organizations that take root on their soil.” Holiday warned that in order to successfully execute a whole-of-government strategy the federal government will need to iron out the turf battles that have impeded the fight against organized crime.