



Violence fuels debate on drugs legalisation

South American countries afflicted by drug-related violence are seeking to promote a global discussion on the legalisation of narcotics. Increasingly, they feel that a prohibition-based strategy places most of the burden on them, rather than on consumer countries, as they suffer from extreme violence caused by competition between drug cartels.

President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia has taken the lead, opening up a debate aimed at finding 'new approaches' and 'market alternatives' in the fight against drugs. His initiative, presented at an annual session in Vienna of the [Commission on Narcotic Drugs](#) in March 2012, was enthusiastically supported by countries including Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

Santos underlined the impact on Colombia of the fight against narcotics in an earlier newspaper [interview](#): 'We have gone through a tremendous experience – dramatic and costly for a society to live through. We have lost our best judges, our best politicians, our best journalists, our best policemen in this fight against drugs and the problem's still there.'

Pointing out that the framework underpinning the drugs debate has not changed for 40 years, Santos is proposing that states consider legalising marijuana and perhaps cocaine, but not heroin or morphine. He suggests that this should be a joint international effort, and is not planning any unilateral action.

Ballooning market

Drug trafficking has arguably inflicted more damage on often fragile democracies in the developing world than any other illegal activity. Cartels use their profits to subvert governments and law-enforcement organisations, sometimes achieving a symbiotic relationship which allows them to pursue their activities largely unobstructed. When such relationships break down, as happened in Colombia in the 1980s with the drug lord [Pablo Escobar](#) or more recently in [Mexico](#), cartels typically respond with extreme violence that can challenge the very survival of the state. Drugs have also played an important role in enabling and perpetuating insurgencies, as in Colombia with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Peru with Sendero Luminoso.

Drug-related violence inevitably has a major impact on civilian populations. In the past three decades Colombia has endured thousands of civilian casualties and seen several million people displaced. Drug-related deaths in the Mexican state of Chihuahua increased by 1,800% between 2007 and 2010. Honduras has the world's highest murder rate. And even [Costa Rica](#), long seen as an island of peace and stability in Central America, has suffered a sharp increase in such violence since the late 2000s.

Although a determined response by states can reduce violence to more manageable proportions, Colombia's experience has shown that such efforts may have a minimal impact on levels of narcotics production. According to the latest United Nations [survey](#), the area of land taken up by coca-leaf cultivation in Colombia in 2010 was subject to a net decrease of only around 11,000 hectares compared to the previous year, even though the authorities had eradicated [104,771ha](#). Moreover, increased coca cultivation in Peru has more than made up for any reduction in supply from Colombia, a manifestation of the so-called '[balloon effect](#)' whereby pressure on cultivation in one region simply displaces it elsewhere.

The same applies to supply routes. The corruption and violence associated with the narcotics trade have become ever more widespread and resistant to disruption, as evidenced by the emergence of [West Africa](#) as a key transit point for cocaine destined for the European market following efforts by Western law-enforcement agencies to close down the direct transatlantic supply route.

Perceived mismatch of efforts

Supplier and transit states which have been pressured by politically more powerful consumer states to take action to reduce the supply of drugs feel that their commitment has not been matched by those consumer countries. For example, Mexico has complained that the United States government has done little to curb [weapons smuggling](#) into Mexico.

Countries such as [Bolivia](#), [Myanmar](#) and [Venezuela](#) are regularly accused of making insufficient efforts to combat the trafficking of drugs for which demand from the developed world continues unabated. Although the US has provided substantial financial assistance and technical support to countries such as Colombia to fight drug trafficking, almost all that money has been directed towards the police and military rather than coming in the form of development aid. It also represents only a tiny fraction of overall US counter-narcotics spending, most of which is directed towards domestic law enforcement.

The Santos initiative drew a predictable response from Washington, with Vice President Joe Biden and other officials [reaffirming](#) their opposition to changes to the status quo. In common with current and former UN officials, as well as many other interest groups, they continue to see prohibition as the most effective tool to combat drug production and consumption – even though they acknowledge that it remains an imperfect mechanism.

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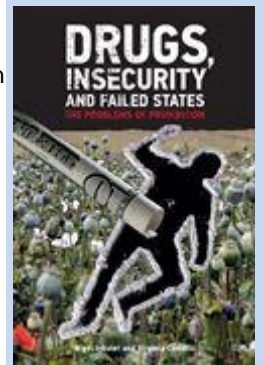
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By Nigel Inkster and Virginia Comolli

The world's wealthiest nations have expended vast blood and treasure in tracking and capturing traffickers, dealers and consumers of narcotics, as well as destroying crops and confiscating shipments. Yet the global trade in illicit drugs is thriving, with no apparent change in the level of consumption despite decades of prohibition.

Hamid Ghodse, president of the International Narcotics Control Board, has [characterised the legalisation debate](#) as an isolated initiative lacking any prospect of implementation within the current control system: 'Some individuals have expressed doubts regarding the effectiveness of the current international drug control conventions and proposed legalization of drugs. However, many arguments presented for legalization are deeply flawed, overlooking the complexity of the drug problem, and there is no better alternative to the present drug control system foreseeable.'

Much of the justification for the status quo is based on the argument that, without prohibition, global levels of drug consumption would be far higher. Comparisons are drawn between cigarettes, smoked by over [one billion](#) people worldwide, and illicit drugs, which are consumed by [210 million](#) people each year. Such arguments, however, may not take into account complex factors influencing the consumption of psychoactive drugs.

Opinions diverge sharply on the issue of whether the cost-benefit equation of the current model can be justified, particularly when the national and human security of fragile and failing states is at stake. For consumer countries, the issue of drugs is seen in terms of public health and law and order, and not as a problem that jeopardises the security of the state. For fragile and sometimes failing producer and transit states affected by high levels of drug-related corruption and violence, the issue has assumed existential proportions.

UN strictures

Underpinning the current drug-policy debate is a framework of UN conventions that emphasises prohibition and requires signatory states to criminalise the production, trafficking and possession of scheduled narcotics. The conventions make no concessions for variations in national or regional circumstances, and strictly limit the scope for the kind of national experimentation which might produce useful empirical evidence for or against the status quo.

At the March meeting in Vienna, Bolivian President Evo Morales proposed decriminalisation of the long-standing Andean Indian custom of chewing coca leaf (a mild stimulant which helps combat altitude sickness and fatigue). This was immediately rejected by the United States. However, some consumer states have taken advantage of their greater degree of flexibility compared to producer states to revise their legislation: Switzerland provides maintenance doses of heroin to addicts; Portugal has decriminalised the possession of all drugs for personal use; and a dozen American states permit the prescription of marijuana for medical purposes. Still, the overall UN position can be encapsulated in the 2009 renewal for a further ten years of a 1998 initiative to create a 'drugs-free world'.

The war on drugs has been discussed outside the UN at regional gatherings and will be tackled on the fringes of upcoming meetings such as the [Summit of the Americas](#) scheduled for April 2012. But even if the debate gathers momentum, it is unlikely that any change will be formalised in the UN context in the near future.

Heroin issues

While violence and corruption related to cocaine trafficking in Latin America have been catalysts for the demand for a global debate, the heroin trade is having a similarly destabilising effect on Afghanistan. It has fuelled high levels of government corruption and warlordism, helping to create the conditions driving the country's long-running insurgency.

Many Afghans regard revenues from opium cultivation as a substitute for the social-welfare systems that their government is unable to provide. In light of this, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been unwilling to eliminate opium cultivation in the country's conflict zones - though some progress has been made in low-conflict areas where there is scope to promote alternative livelihoods.

Amidst pervasive corruption and a culture of impunity, it has proven hard to secure convictions against traffickers who are deeply embedded in Afghanistan's power structures. It is hard to imagine that, following the withdrawal of ISAF combat troops in 2014, levels of opium production in Afghanistan will decline. This is a matter of particular concern to states such as Russia and Iran which have suffered rising levels of heroin addiction.

Looking ahead

A notable characteristic of the drugs debate is the propensity of individuals and organisations advocating legalisation to over-interpret evidence that global opinion is moving in their favour. Such was the case with [Proposition 19](#), a 2010 initiative to legalise marijuana in California; heralded as a potential opening of the floodgates in the US, it was defeated by voters. Even if the legalisation initiative gained traction in the West, any multilateral consensus on liberalising current policy would meet firm opposition from Russia and China.

In this context, the Santos initiative could be considered as less about legalising drugs and more about seeking Washington's continued engagement in the Andean region at a time its strategic focus is shifting towards East Asia.

The decision by some consumer states not to penalise drug consumption so harshly and instead to focus on drug misuse as a public-health issue with greater emphasis on treatment and rehabilitation is widely considered as positive by those who favour legalisation. But it does little to reduce the damage done by the drugs trade in the developing world. Until recently the debate on the illegal drugs trade had been taking

This Adelphi argues that the present enforcement regime is not only failing to win the 'War on Drugs'; it is also igniting and prolonging that conflict on the streets of producer and transit countries, where the supply chain has become interwoven with state institutions and cartels have become embroiled in violence against their rivals and with security forces. [Read more](#)

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place on the margins of much wider discussions about global security and development. The Colombian approach may not deliver results in the near term, but proponents of a change of tactics in the war on drugs will be hoping that Santos's initiative will open the debate to divergent views on drugs and give more weight to empirical research and responsible experimentation.

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