

# Drug Trafficking and Continental Geoeconomic Control

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In these times of transition toward a different world order, one of the givens in our daily life is the existence of drug trafficking in the world, the region and our country. Media stories about the increasing audacity of organized crime, the discovery of tons of illicit drugs, the destruction of crops and the arrest of traffickers constantly remind us of it.

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As if this were not enough, we also know today that drug trafficking is linked to and corrupts parts of society and what used to be thought of as the “clean” economy, such as financial and stock market operations, direct investment, trade, electoral campaign financing and even alms to the Church. All of this increases and complicates the challenges that governments and societies must face.

For all these reasons, some governments, including those of the United States and Mexico, have classified drug trafficking as a problem of national security, making its solution a priority. By contrast, other Latin American governments view it as related to the lack of economic development, to which they attach more importance.

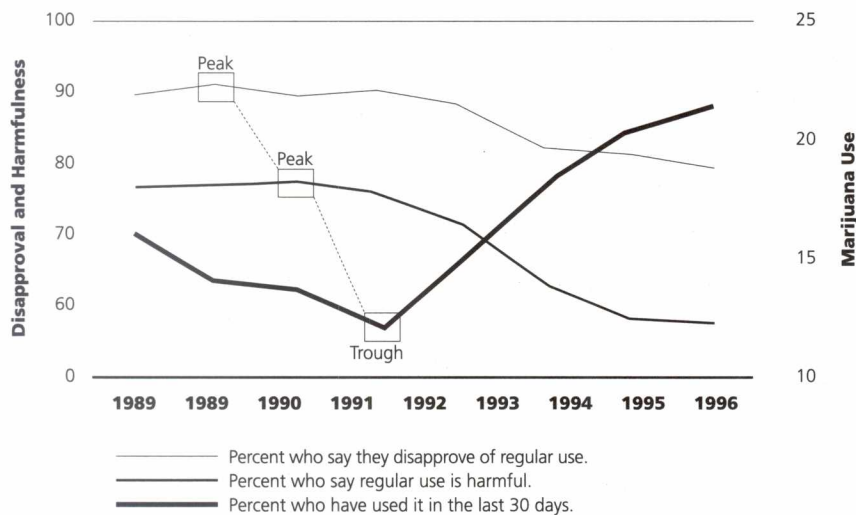
If to this difference in views we add the clear ineffectiveness of policies de-



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Availability of drugs has not been reduced despite long-standing efforts and billions of dollars spent.

### Marijuana: Disapproval and Perceived Harmfulness of Regular Use Compared with Past 30 Day Use Among 12th Graders, 1996



Source: Monitoring the Future Study, University of Michigan, 1996.  
 Taken from: *The National Drug Control Strategy, 1997*.  
 (Washington, D.C.: Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President, 1997), p. 23.

signed to fight drug trafficking,<sup>1</sup> the censorious suggestions published in the U.S. magazine *Science*<sup>2</sup> and made by the Geopolitical Drug Observer,<sup>3</sup> as well as the constant accusations of corruption in Mexico, its “Colombianization”<sup>4</sup> and the growing strength of Mexican crime syndicates, we have the complete picture behind the thinking in this article about the reasons for the proliferation of arguments exaggerating the importance of drug trafficking. With that objective in mind, we should look at the phenomenon from different angles with a geopolitical perspective.

#### THE ECONOMIC ANGLE

Three factors are fundamental in this field:

1. *U.S. efforts to broaden out free trade to all of the Americas.* Despite the clear indifference of U.S. voters, the

Clinton government is eminently interested in broadening out the free trade agreement to include all of the Americas. The essential reason for this is the concrete results of NAFTA for the United States, particularly its flourishing exports, “responsible for one-third of U.S. economic growth since 1993, which has helped to create 13 million new jobs.”<sup>5</sup>

With that aim, more than three years ago President Clinton requested that the U.S. Congress grant him authorization to negotiate free trade on the “fast track,” but the request has been held up by the reluctance of some members of congress, fearful, among other things, of the possibility of engendering run-away shops, job losses, environmental damage and the endemic corruption and chain-reaction financial crises in Latin American countries. Nonetheless, Clinton is convinced of the importance of his country’s leadership in hemisphere-wide

free trade since, as Thomas McLarty, special envoy to the president for Latin America, said in an interview published October 20 in *Time* magazine, “By the year 2010, our exports in this hemisphere are expected to be greater than to the European Union and Japan combined.” For that reason, the United States is making efforts toward creating a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Many Latin Americans are anxious to accompany the United States in this endeavor, be it through NAFTA or a hemisphere-wide agreement. For example, faced with the delay in the approval of the fast track, Chile even seems willing to sign a bilateral treaty. On the other end of the spectrum, Brazil has expressed indifference; it seems to be satisfied with the progress on the Mercosur pact<sup>6</sup> and the possibilities its strong European ties offer.

2. *The dispute between the European Union and the United States for the Mercosur.* This confrontation became clear at the Third Economic Summit of Mercosur last September, when Brazil and Argentina were faced with a dilemma: improve the structures of the regional common market, closing ranks with the European Union (EU) or open the door to the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Both countries would do well to think about the fact that “the EU produces bigger profits: U.S.\$1.2 billion a year compared to U.S.\$910 million in NAFTA.”<sup>7</sup>

3. *The authorization of high-tech U.S. arms sales to Latin America.* The powerful corporations Lockheed-Martin and McDonnell Douglas/Boeing lobbied intensely for six years for the U.S. Congress to lift the ban on this kind of trade.<sup>8</sup> They manufacture F-16 and F-18

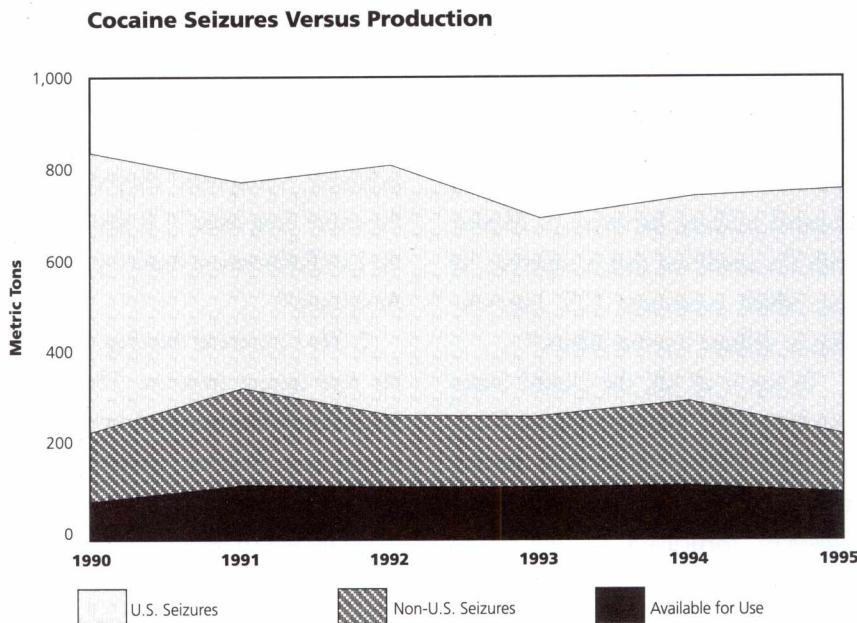
fighters of which Chile, for example, plans to buy 24. Another example is Brazil, which has already announced its purchase of U.S.\$1 billion in equipment to modernize its air fleet. Very probably these purchases will break the delicate current military equilibrium and create pressure in the region to rearm.

This proves that economic interests take precedence and that other very pressing social needs are set aside. To justify lifting the ban on arms sales, U.S. officials argue that aging Latin American air forces need modernizing and that, in addition "the United States risked losing influence if it did not offer its planes, leaving the turf to European companies."<sup>9</sup> To avert possible destabilization and any cause for an arms race, Clinton has offered to analyze and select his buyers, as though the United States still had a monopoly in the field and were not facing ferocious European competitors who also urgently need markets.<sup>10</sup> For some analysts, this decision "invites governments to invert priorities and encourages military establishments to grab a larger slice of the pie for expensive and unnecessary weapons systems."<sup>11</sup>

#### THE ANGLE OF MILITARY AND POLITICAL CONTROL

From the military and policing perspective, three things must be taken into consideration for our analysis of drug trafficking:

1. *The illegal arms trade.* An issue of the first order for Mexico is the copious north-south flow of the illegal conventional arms trade which supplies not only drug traffickers but also organized



Source: National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee, Drug Enforcement Administration, 1996.  
Taken from: *The National Drug Control Strategy, 1997*.  
(Washington, D.C.: Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President, 1997), p. 53.

and unorganized crime, guerrilla organizations, rural "white guards" or vigilante committees and ordinary citizens concerned with the insecurity and violence that reigns today in the country. Despite this, the topic has been relegated to a long list of others at the negotiating tables of the High-Level Contact Group on Drug Trafficking<sup>12</sup> because, in my opinion, in this way the United States is able to disguise its responsibility as the main arms supplier. "Of more than 25,000 illegal guns seized in Mexico since 1994, 90 percent came from the U.S. Many are Army-surplus rifles and bazookas, and some of the choicest hardware ends up in the Arellano stockpiles."<sup>13</sup> This has a boomerang effect, since it also affects the United States. We have only to recall the drug king's threat of firing a missile at McCaffrey during his visit to the southern U.S. border area, or the attacks on U.S. agents from the Mexican side of the border.<sup>14</sup>

2. *The training of military and police personnel in the United States by the Pentagon, the DEA and the FBI.* For a long time now, and increasingly today, thousands of Mexicans have been trained in different military and police tasks in the United States, despite the distrust of U.S. agents, who are reluctant to share information with them.<sup>15</sup> We have thus adopted their logic, strategies and combat techniques, in addition to using their arms. It is worth mentioning that, today, the drug traffickers, with their immense reserves of cash, buy the know-how of U.S. and Israeli mercenaries.<sup>16</sup>

3. *The assignment of increasing numbers of military personnel to the antidrug war.* The United States has fostered the incorporation of Latin American military personnel<sup>17</sup> and the creation of elite forces for the fight against drugs. In the case of Mexico, it supported the creation of the Special Airborne Forces Group (GAFE) supervised by U.S. agen-

cies, as well as other binational border units with limited tasks. In this way, it fosters corruption of the military,<sup>18</sup> and conflicts of interests and jurisdiction. In addition, the United States has sold or donated military hardware to Mexico with the condition that it supervise its use, which constitutes U.S. intervention in delicate internal affairs.<sup>19</sup>

To top it all off, the United States encourages the militarization of Mexican police forces,<sup>20</sup> in order to support military control over any future social blow-ups, particularly because of the great importance it attaches to stability.

THE ANGLE OF CONTINENTAL  
GEOSTRATEGIC CONTROL

Lastly, from the geostrategic perspective, there are three important items to consider:

1. *The Multinational Antinarcotics Center in Panama.* This project has gone

forward because “Washington is behind the idea...not only as a way to keep its interdiction antennas extended into South America, but as a way to galvanize lackluster hemispheric cooperation on the entire drug issue.”<sup>21</sup> It also includes the Law Enforcement Academy for Latin Americans.<sup>22</sup>

2. *The Continental Antidrug Army and the fight against terrorism.* The United States already has the virtual acceptance of several Latin American governments for creating it. However, it still lacks the approval of Mexico, which has traditionally been suspicious of similar measures that it has considered interventionist and a threat to its sovereignty.

3. *The U.S. offer to Argentina of privileged treatment in national security matters.* The United States has offered to give Argentina preferential status on security questions as a “main U.S. ally” in NATO, the status of external member like that of Israel, South Korea and

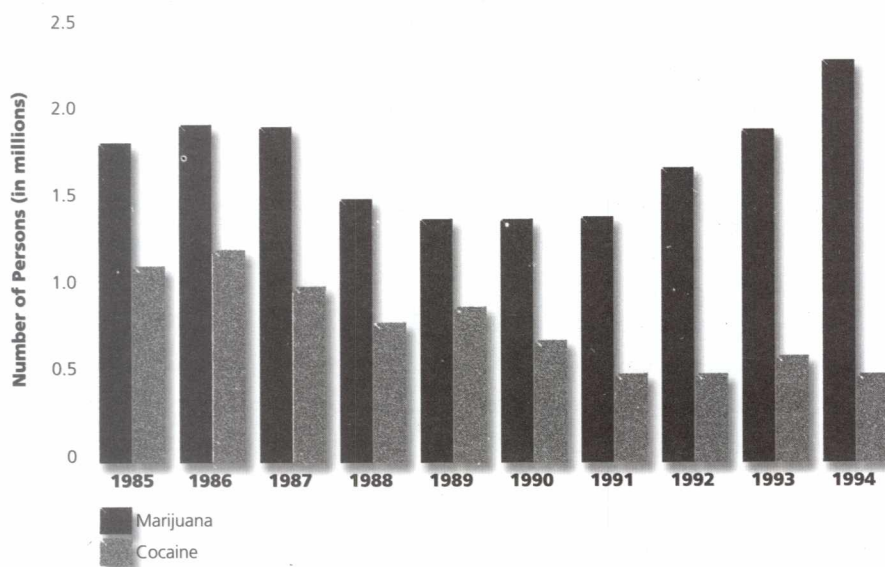
Japan, something which creates disquiet particularly in Brazil and Chile.<sup>23</sup> This is a strategy to create mistrust between the two strong members of Mercosur.<sup>24</sup>

CONCLUSION

The breadth, ubiquity and very nature of U.S. policy against drug trafficking, including its myriad consequences, with its stress on punishment over prevention, make for an exceptional vehicle for intervention. It has all the ingredients of war: arms, military personnel, air, land and sea movement throughout the continent, militarization of police forces, control of the population for the “strategic needs” of national security, etc., with a dynamic, slithery, well-heeled enemy.

It is far from this author’s intention to belittle drug trafficking. However, I have shown here that there is also economic, military and geopolitical data that reveal other, parallel intentions that are perhaps of greater transcendence. These intentions suggest that great caution must be exercised when deciding to participate in U.S. programs against drugs and more creativity put into the negotiations with the U.S. on this issue. This is particularly the case considering that the failure of antidrug policies from the Nixon administration on has been clear for some time. Despite the considerable human and economic resources invested in them, their achievements have been meager. A suspicious mind would tend to think that the insistence on continuing to implement failed measures stems from

**Cocaine and Marijuana First Time Users, 1985-1994**



Source: National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1996.  
Taken from: *The National Drug Control Strategy, 1997.*  
(Washington, D.C.: Office of National Drug Control Policy, Executive Office of the President, 1997), p. 11.

these policies' having real objectives quite different from their explicit ones.

This author is convinced that the omnipresence of drug trafficking, magnified by the media, is an attempt to create a bogeyman similar to the U.S.'s old enemy, communism, to justify disguised interventionist strategies, to convince us of Latin American impotence,

corruption and incapacity vis-à-vis the size of the challenge and to present the acceptance of U.S. aid, strategic leadership and aims as the only possible alternative.

The United States has its own objectives which, I believe, are linked to the challenges to its hegemony stemming from globalization. On that depends

the need to consolidate its economic and geostrategic power over the bloc of the Western Hemisphere in order to confront its European and Asian rivals. Then, perhaps it will be able to maintain its currently challenged global leadership. We must recognize that the United States is addicted, but addicted to power. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Despite long-standing efforts and expenditures of billions of dollars, illegal drugs still flood the United States....They have not materially reduced the availability of drugs." *Drug Control. Long-standing Problems Hinder International U.S. Efforts*, General Accounting Office, GAO/NSIAD-A7-75 Drug Control (Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office, February 1997), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Mexico City's *La Jornada* daily quoted *Science* magazine's October 1997 issue as saying "The U.S.\$34 billion the U.S. invests annually on drug control strategies have failed to reduce the supply and the politicians in charge ignore the scientific evidence that show that prevention and treatment are cost-effective ways of controlling narcotics abuse." See "La evidencia científica no está determinando la política pública sobre drogas," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 8 October 1997, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>This international nongovernmental organization, with its more than 300 scholars and correspondents, denounced "Washington's plans to militarize and control its southern neighbor through a media war that has used leaks to journalists to prefabricate the image of a country in need of permanent legal and military tutelage." *Excelsior* (Mexico City), 26 September 1997, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>This expression is used to put an equal sign between Mexico and Colombia today in terms of violence, political and social instability, crime rates, guerrilla actions, drug trafficker cartel activity, the production and trafficking of drugs, etc. In a recent interview with *Time* magazine, Brian McCaffrey voiced his disagreement with the expression, saying that Mexico did not exhibit Colombia's levels of violence nor its lack of governmental control over large parts of the country, nor was Mexico's economy fundamentally bound up with drugs like Colombia's. *Time*, 20 October 1997, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup>"Traveling on the Fast Track," *Time*, 20 October 1997, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>Trade among the members of Mercosur has increased from U.S.\$5 billion in 1990 to U.S.\$20 billion in 1996. See *Time*, *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup>See "Inicia la 'guerra' por el Mercosur," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 17 October 1997, p. 11A.

<sup>8</sup>The ban dates from the James Carter administration and was motivated by Latin American social instability and dictatorships in the southern part of the hemisphere.

<sup>9</sup>See *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 2 August 1997, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>See "Industries d'armement: Jospin ouvre le feu," in *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1703 (Paris) 26 June to 2 July 1997, p. 64, and "L'Europe peut-elle faire capoter Boeing?" in *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1705, 10-16 July 1997, p. 44. Also, "Clinton Reverses 20-year Ban on Arms Sale," in *Washington Report on the Hemisphere* 17 (no. 15) (27 August 1997): p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>"Clinton's Bad Call in Reassuring Arms Sales," *The Journal of Commerce* (10 October 1997): p. 9a.

<sup>12</sup>This group is a bilateral mechanism created on Mexico's suggestion in 1996 to discuss questions of drug trafficking.

<sup>13</sup>"Fresh Battalions," *Time* (22 September 1997): p. 18. The Arellano brothers are the bosses of the Tijuana cartel, one of the most powerful and aggressive in the world. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>14</sup>"To put out hits on us is a nightmare we never imagined," says a veteran U.S. border agent." *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>"How do you know you're not training a bunch of crooks?" *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>See *La Jornada* (Mexico City) 19 August 1997, p. 41 and *El Paso Times*, 19 August 1997.

<sup>17</sup>In Mexico, 21,000 members of the armed forces,

recently joined by 600 more, already take part in these programs. *Reforma* (Mexico City), 24 September 1997, p. 25A.

<sup>18</sup>The army has been investigating dozens of officers for their links with drug trafficking since the 1980s. See "Drugshocked," in *The Economist* 344 (no. 8029) (9 August 1997): p. 28.

<sup>19</sup>The U.S. has sold Mexico, among other pieces of hardware, 72 helicopters.

<sup>20</sup>Office of National Drug Control Policy, *U.S.-Mexico Counterdrug Cooperation. Report to Congress* (September 1997): p. 29.

<sup>21</sup>See "Panama Drugbusters Welcome," *Time*, *op.cit.*, p. 18. The same article states, "U.S. agents and technology—everything from radar to AWACS surveillance aircraft—would bear much of the burden, with an estimated 2,500 U.S. troops kept on to run and protect the center."

<sup>22</sup>Mexico offered to support the project but pointed out the need to make it more specific. See *El Financiero* (Mexico City), 21 October 1997, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup>See *Excelsior* (Mexico City), 13 October 1997, p. 2A.

<sup>24</sup>This offer to Argentina ratifies what has been said about the incorporation of Eastern European countries: "NATO expansion is a cheap gesture, the perfect policy centerpiece for an Administration sadly lacking in meaningful strategic vision." Sherle R. Schwenninger, "The Case Against NATO. Enlargement: Clinton's Fateful Gamble," *The Nation* 265 (no. 12) (20 October 1997): p. 22. It also clears up who the direct beneficiaries of NATO expansion in Eastern Europe and South America are. "Expansion would only benefit American defense contractors, at the expense of the new members." Daniel T. Plesh and Alistair Millar, "The Marshall Plan Helped People, Not an Industry," *Los Angeles Times* (2 July 1997), p. 7B.