

With the focus on Syria, Mexico burns, by Robert D. Kaplan

The growing economic power south of the border will help rewrite the American story in the 21st century. As it matters more in the long term than almost anywhere except China, more attention should be paid to it, he argues below.

While the foreign policy elite in Washington focuses on the 8,000 deaths in a conflict in Syria - half a world away from the United States - more than 47,000 people have died in drug-related violence since 2006 in Mexico. A deeply troubled state as well as a demographic and economic giant on the United States' southern border, Mexico will affect America's destiny in coming decades more than any state or combination of states in the Middle East. Indeed, Mexico may constitute the world's seventh-largest economy in the near future.

Certainly, while the Mexican violence is largely criminal, Syria is a more clear-cut moral issue, enhanced by its own strategic consequences. A calcified authoritarian regime in Damascus is stamping out dissent with guns and artillery barrages. Moreover, regime change in Syria, which the rebels demand, could deliver a pivotal blow to Iranian influence in the Middle East, an event that would be the best news to U.S. interests in the region in years or even decades.

Nevertheless, the Syrian rebels are divided and hold no territory, and the toppling of pro-Iranian dictator Bashar al Assad might conceivably bring to power an austere Sunni regime equally averse to U.S. interests - if not lead to sectarian chaos. In other words, all military intervention scenarios in Syria are fraught with extreme risk. Precisely for that reason, that the U.S. foreign policy elite has continued for months to feverishly debate Syria, and in many cases advocate armed intervention, while utterly ignoring the vaster panorama of violence next door in Mexico, speaks volumes about Washington's own obsessions and interests, which are not always aligned with the country's geopolitical interests.

Syria matters and matters momentously to U.S. interests, but Mexico ultimately matters more, so one would think that there would be at least some degree of parity in the amount written on these subjects. I am not demanding a switch in news coverage from one country to the other, just a bit more balance. Of course, it is easy for pundits to have a fervently interventionist view on Syria precisely because it is so far away, whereas miscalculation in Mexico on America's part would carry far greater consequences. For example, what if the Mexican drug cartels took revenge on San Diego? Thus, one might even argue that the very noise in the media about Syria, coupled with the relative silence about Mexico, is proof that it is the latter issue that actually is too sensitive for loose talk.

It may also be that cartel-wracked Mexico - at some rude subconscious level - connotes for East

Coast elites a south of the border, 7-Eleven store culture, reminiscent of the crime movie "Traffic," that holds no allure to people focused on ancient civilizations across the ocean. The concerns of Europe and the Middle East certainly seem closer to New York and Washington than does the southwestern United States. Indeed, Latin American bureaus and studies departments simply lack the cachet of Middle East and Asian ones in government and universities. Yet, the fate of Mexico is the hinge on which the United States' cultural and demographic future rests.

U.S. foreign policy emanates from the domestic condition of its society, and nothing will affect its society more than the dramatic movement of Latin history northward. By 2050, as much as a third of the American population could be Hispanic. Mexico and Central America constitute a growing demographic and economic powerhouse with which the United States has an inextricable relationship. In recent years Mexico's economic growth has outpaced that of its northern neighbor. Mexico's population of 111 million plus Central America's of more than 40 million equates to half the population of the United States.

Because of the North American Free Trade Agreement, 85 percent of Mexico's exports go to the United States, even as half of Central America's trade is with the United States. While the median age of Americans is nearly 37, demonstrating the aging tendency of the U.S. population, the median age in Mexico is 25, and in Central America it is much lower (20 in Guatemala and Honduras, for example). In part because of young workers moving northward, the destiny of the United States could be north-south, rather than the east-west, sea-to-shining-sea of continental and patriotic myth. (This will be amplified by the scheduled 2014 widening of the Panama Canal, which will open the Greater Caribbean Basin to megaships from East Asia, leading to the further development of Gulf of Mexico port cities in the United States, from Texas to Florida.)

Since 1940, Mexico's population has increased more than five-fold. Between 1970 and 1995 it nearly doubled. Between 1985 and 2000 it rose by more than a third. Mexico's population is now more than a third that of the United States and growing at a faster rate. And it is northern Mexico that is crucial. That most of the drug-related homicides in this current wave of violence that so much dwarfs Syria's have occurred in only six of Mexico's 32 states, mostly in the north, is a key indicator of how northern Mexico is being distinguished from the rest of the country (though the violence in the city of Veracruz and the regions of Michoacan and Guerrero is also notable). If the military-led offensive to crush the drug cartels launched by conservative President Felipe Calderon falters, as it seems to be doing, and Mexico City goes back to cutting deals with the cartels, then the capital may in a functional sense lose even further control of the north, with concrete implications for the southwestern United States.

One might argue that with massive border controls, a functional and vibrantly nationalist United States can coexist with a dysfunctional and somewhat chaotic northern Mexico. But that is mainly true in the short run. Looking deeper into the 21st century, as Arnold Toynbee notes in *A Study of History* (1946), a border between a highly developed society and a less highly developed one will not attain an equilibrium but will advance in the more backward society's favor. Thus, helping to stabilize Mexico - as limited as the United States' options may be, given the complexity and sensitivity of the relationship - is a more urgent national interest than

stabilizing societies in the Greater Middle East. If Mexico ever does reach coherent First World status, then it will become less of a threat, and the healthy melding of the two societies will quicken to the benefit of both.

Today, helping to thwart drug cartels in rugged and remote terrain in the vicinity of the Mexican frontier and reaching southward from Ciudad Juarez (across the border from El Paso, Texas) means a limited role for the U.S. military and other agencies - working, of course, in full cooperation with the Mexican authorities. (Predator and Global Hawk drones fly deep over Mexico searching for drug production facilities.) But the legal framework for cooperation with Mexico remains problematic in some cases because of strict interpretation of 19th century posse comitatus laws on the U.S. side. While the United States has spent hundreds of billions of dollars to affect historical outcomes in Eurasia, its leaders and foreign policy mandarins are somewhat passive about what is happening to a country with which the United States shares a long land border, that verges on partial chaos in some of its northern sections, and whose population is close to double that of Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

Mexico, in addition to the obvious challenge of China as a rising great power, will help write the American story in the 21st century. Mexico will partly determine what kind of society America will become, and what exactly will be its demographic and geographic character, especially in the Southwest. The U.S. relationship with China will matter more than any other individual bilateral relationship in terms of determining the United States' place in the world, especially in the economically crucial Pacific. If policymakers in Washington calculate U.S. interests properly regarding those two critical countries, then the United States will have power to spare so that its elites can continue to focus on serious moral questions in places that matter less.

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