

From Kandahar to Jalisco: Lessons Learned from the Global War on Terrorism for U.S. Efforts to Degrade Latin America's Cartels

By Brian Michael Jenkins

As Operation Inherent Resolve—the 12-year campaign against the Islamic State—comes to an end this fall, the focus of U.S. counterterrorism strategy has already shifted to destroying Latin America's drug cartels. Islamist-jihadi terrorist groups have dominated the attention of the U.S. military since the 9/11 attacks 25 years ago. The Global War on Terrorism that followed proved to be a complicated endeavor involving a constellation of separate, but overlapping, asymmetrical, irregular conflicts that included conventional, counterterrorist, and counterinsurgency campaigns, special and covert operations, and law enforcement activities carried out in multiple places under varying circumstances. It challenged U.S. intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, and military capabilities and can teach us lessons—and warn us of dangers—in what promises to be an even more complicated campaign against the hemisphere's drug traffic.

The 2026 U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy makes eliminating drug cartels from the Western Hemisphere the nation's highest priority. This is not new territory. It follows decades of law enforcement, diplomatic, and military campaigns to address the threats to U.S. security posed by international terrorism and the transnational drug traffic.

In 1971, President Nixon declared drug abuse as “public enemy number one,” launching a campaign that aimed at interdicting the foreign drug supply while treating domestic addiction. The media called it the “war on drugs,” although it did not involve U.S. military operations. It later turned into a continuing national effort involving law enforcement and support for foreign military operations against drug cartels in Latin America and Asia.

As U.S. consumption of illegal drugs more than doubled during the 1970s, U.S. efforts to reduce drug production at the source intensified, especially in Mexico, which in the 1970s supplied 70-90 percent of the high potency marijuana¹ and 75 percent of the heroin² consumed in the U.S. market. This led to increasing U.S. pressure on the Mexican government, which in 1976 launched Operation Condor, a joint effort by the Mexican police and Mexican army, supported by the United States, to destroy cannabis and opium plantations and arrest farmers and traffickers.³

U.S. efforts against Mexico's drug cartels escalated in 1985 when the Guadalajara Cartel kidnapped and murdered a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agent. In response, the Reagan administration gradually shut down the southern border, exerting tremendous economic pressure on Mexico to identify and apprehend the cartel

leaders responsible. Two of the cartel leaders were apprehended later that year.⁴ One evaded arrest until 1989.⁵ As of 2026, two remain in prison—one in Mexico, one in the United States. The third served a 40-year sentence and was released in 2025.

The 2026 Counterterrorism Strategy coincides with another anniversary. Thirty years have passed since President Clinton signed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act that enabled the U.S. government to formally designate and impose sanctions on “Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” Initially, the United States approached terrorism as an international phenomenon and sought to prohibit certain tactics and targeting through international conventions.⁶ It did not see the U.S. mission as taking on the world's terrorist groups. The 1996 act focused counterterrorism efforts more on directly targeting the groups. The United States designated al-Qa`ida as a foreign terrorist organization in October 1999, after bombing it in an attempt to kill Usama bin Ladin who had directed the group's attacks on the American embassies in Africa.

The Trump administration made the war on drugs part of the war on terrorism in 2025 when the State Department added six Mexican cartels and two other criminal groups to the list of foreign terrorist organizations. Two more groups in Mexico were added in 2026.

This year also marks the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the U.S. declaration of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Although the GWOT label was retired in 2013, the counterterrorist campaign has not ended. U.S. forces continue to carry out targeted military strikes on terrorist leaders and networks and are involved in worldwide counterterrorism training missions and support operations. The 2026 Counterterrorism Strategy addresses still active al-Qa`ida and Islamic State fronts as “Legacy Islamist Terrorists,” although it positions them as a second priority after the cartels.

As the United States pivots to action against Latin America's drug cartels, what lessons might be learned from America's long experience in combating the jihadi groups that have commanded U.S. attention for the past quarter-century? While the circumstances differ significantly, the campaigns against al-Qa`ida and its Taliban

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*A burned taxi, allegedly set on fire by organized crime groups in response to an operation targeting the leader of the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*, is seen on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border in Tijuana, Mexico, on February 22, 2026.
(Guillermo Arias/AFP via Getty Images)*

allies, its affiliates, and its successors are instructive. They also offer some cautionary notes.

The purpose of this article is not to challenge the idea that the United States could push harder to break the grip the drug cartels and other criminal groups have on a number of Latin American countries. Given the unarguable devastation caused by drugs, visible on American streets and across communities, millions of Americans—including this author—would support a more effective campaign. Rather, it considers the application of lessons learned from the GWOT to the current campaign against the cartels.

The essay proceeds in four parts. Part I looks at the strategic approach. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* does not lay out a specific course of action for going after Latin America's drug traffickers. However, an overall approach can be discerned from the document, public pronouncements, and recent U.S. actions. Part II examines the broad similarities between the GWOT and a campaign against the cartels—and points out the important differences. Part III goes deeper and catalogues specific lessons from the GWOT and discusses how each might—or might not—apply to the campaign against the cartels. Part IV offers some final observations.

Part I: How Does the United States Intend to Go After the Cartels?

The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* “prioritizes the neutralization of hemispheric terror threats by incapacitating cartel operations until these groups are incapable of bringing their drugs, their members, and their trafficked victims into the United States.”

The commander of the U.S. Southern Command, General Francis Donovan, expanded on the approach in an August video: “We will locate, close with, and destroy these threats ... We will apply total systemic friction to these organizations ... We are now changing the game.”⁷ “Friction” is a Clausewitzian term. In contemporary military terminology, it means intentionally creating resistance across an adversary's entire network.

While many aspects of the strategy against the drug cartels are familiar, the 2026 strategy is new in elevating a direct U.S. military role. The tone of the document is more bellicose, reflecting the tenor of public discourse in the current political climate. It communicates greater readiness to use U.S. military force against the cartels. The biggest change, however, is reframing the effort as a continuation of the Global War on Terrorism rather than the continuation of a long-running—and clearly not successful—campaign against the illicit trafficking of drugs into the United States.

This change was previewed when President Trump, on his very first day in office, designated various drug cartels and criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).⁸ This had a subtle, but significant effect. It could thereby allow the U.S. government to employ tactics and weapons it has deployed against terrorists, including unilateral military action and targeted killings outside of immediate conflict zones. U.S. policy to counter the drug traffic has been slowly moving in a military direction for decades. If fully implemented as advertised, however, the new approach would represent a sharp break with the past.

The United States has stopped and boarded vessels on the high

seas, seizing cargos and arresting smugglers. The United States has contracted private pilots to fly crop eradication missions.⁹ The United States has supported police and military operations against traffickers with training, equipment, and intelligence, coming close to directing specific operations. U.S. personnel have been present at raids, arrests, and interrogations of suspected growers and traffickers.¹⁰

But until recently, the United States has stopped just short of direct, kinetic U.S. military engagement with the drug traffickers. This changed in 2025 when the United States began bombing boats and crews suspected of smuggling drugs. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* formalizes the change as a new strategy, and it underscores the contrast with the past. The rules of engagement are now the rules of the GWOT.¹¹

The change is not merely rhetorical. New organizational structures are being created to implement the strategy. In August 2026, the U.S. Southern Command created a new headquarters, Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere, to coordinate operations against the region's drug cartels, although official announcements suggest that this would be done in cooperation with regional allies.¹²

Military strikes on drug facilities. Attacking cocaine laboratories and other facilities associated with illicit narcotics production has been a part of efforts to counter drug trafficking for decades. U.S. Army personnel and DEA agents supported the destruction of labs in Bolivia and Peru in the 1980s and 1990s, and in Colombia in the early 2000s. In those cases, the actual destruction was carried out by local forces. Between 2017 and 2019, the United States used American airpower to directly attack heroin and methamphetamine labs in Afghanistan as part of its efforts to cut off Taliban sources of revenue.¹³ Afghan drug kingpins were also apprehended and brought to trial in the United States. The operations in Afghanistan were viewed as part of the GWOT, not part of the global campaign against drug trafficking. The campaign ended when the United States initiated peace talks with the Taliban.¹⁴

Direct U.S. attacks on drug facilities are now very much part of the proposed strategy against Western Hemisphere cartels. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* calls attention to Operation Midnight Hammer, a June 22, 2025, U.S. air and naval strike on key Iranian nuclear facilities as an example of greater American willingness to use its military power to achieve national security objectives.¹⁵ President Trump has raised the idea of direct U.S. attacks on drug facilities in Mexico reportedly in 2020 and again in 2025.¹⁶

In August 2025, the president signed an executive order directing the U.S. military to take action against the cartels, and in November 2025, he proposed U.S. military involvement to help take out Mexico's cartels—the president of Mexico rejected the proposal.¹⁷ There were no immediate attacks on drug processing labs, but in September 2025, the United States began sinking rather than stopping and boarding suspected drug boats in the Caribbean. And on December 28, 2025, the president said that the United States had destroyed a drug boat-loading facility in Venezuela.¹⁸

Interdiction. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* mentions "interdiction" only once, and then in the context of targeting the Russian shadow fleet. However, the document refers to the "dozens of strikes by the Department of War against cartel drug boats, resulting in a more than 90% decrease in maritime drug smuggling into the United States." For decades, the United States

has attempted to reduce smuggling by interdicting boats suspected of carrying drugs. In recent years, the U.S. Coast Guard, often working with British, Canadian, and Dutch naval vessels,¹⁹ carried out hundreds of stops and seizures a year in the Caribbean, 73 percent of which resulted in significant seizures and arrests.²⁰ The difference now is that in addition to law enforcement operations, the United States is conducting direct military attacks to sink suspected vessels. (The attacks have caused some European allies to pull back on intelligence sharing.²¹)

Targeted killings. During the GWOT, targeted killings became a major component of U.S. efforts against al-Qa`ida, Islamic State, and their affiliates. Framing drug cartels as terrorist organizations facilitates applying the same tactic to cartel kingpins and gang leaders. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* does not specifically mention direct action to capture or kill cartel leaders, but President Trump has publicly stated that the United States provided critical intelligence support to the February 2026 operation that resulted in the death of the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel,²² although Mexico stated that U.S. personnel played no physical role in the actual operation.²³

In June 2026, however, President Trump announced that a U.S. missile strike killed the leader of the Tren de Aragua gang in an operation coordinated with the Venezuelan military. The president said the gang leader's death was retribution for violent crimes committed by gang members illegally in the United States.²⁴

President Trump concludes his foreword to the *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* with the warning, "If you hurt Americans, or are planning to hurt Americans, 'We Will Find You and We Will Kill You.'" The threat recalls President Reagan's 1985 warning to terrorists after U.S. fighter aircraft intercepted a civilian airliner carrying terrorists who had hijacked a cruise ship in the Mediterranean and murdered an American citizen. "You can run, but you can't hide."²⁵ (Reagan credited prizefighter Joe Louis as the original source of the quote.)

Targeting drug traffickers is not a new idea. In 2009, the Pentagon added 50 Taliban-connected drug traffickers to the "kill or capture" priority target list.²⁶ It is not known how many of these named traffickers were ultimately killed or captured—the Pentagon treated Afghanistan as a war zone and did not report detailed statistics. Both the Obama and Trump administrations extensively used targeted killings as a counterterrorist tactic.

U.S. involvement in targeting killings of drug traffickers goes back to efforts to kill or capture Medellín Cartel leader Pablo Escobar in Colombia. In an attempt to force Colombia to cancel its extradition treaty with the United States, Escobar led a terrorist campaign targeting both Colombian officials and U.S. targets in Colombia, which included a car bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in 1984 and the sabotage of a Colombian commercial airliner in 1989—two U.S. nationals were among the 109 passengers killed in the crash. The United States provided direct intelligence support to the Colombian police operation that resulted in Escobar's death in 1993.²⁷

Removal of complicit state leaders. The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* mentions the 2026 Operation Absolute Resolve that resulted in the capture and removal of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro—described in the *2026 Strategy* as a "narco-terrorist outlaw." Maduro is in the United States where he currently faces drug trafficking charges. The event is offered as a demonstration of U.S. determination and military prowess.

Immediately after the removal of Maduro, President Trump publicly warned Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who he described as “an illegal drug leader,”²⁸ that “he’ll be next.”²⁹ The two presidents patched things up in a subsequent phone call. A new president of Colombia has since taken office, and joined Shield of the Americas, a U.S.-led military and political coalition aimed at sharing intelligence and coordinating operations against the hemisphere’s drug cartels and transnational gangs.

The removal of Maduro has a historical precedent. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush ordered a military operation to invade Panama and arrest its *de facto* ruler, General Manuel Noriega. Noriega, who earlier had been indicted in the United States on drug trafficking charges, was the target of continuing U.S. efforts to remove him. Events in December 1989 triggered the invasion. The Panamanian government declared that a state of war existed with the United States. The following day, Panamanian forces killed a U.S. Marine officer and wounded another on their way to dinner in Panama City. In a separate incident, a U.S. Navy officer was arrested and beaten by his captors. Protecting the lives of American citizens was given as the first reason for the invasion, followed by defending democracy and combating drug trafficking.³⁰

The U.S. Assistant Attorney who wrote the legal opinion arguing that President Trump had the constitutional authority to order the extraordinary rendition of President Maduro in 2026 relied on an earlier legal opinion written in 1989 by William Barr, then an Assistant Attorney General, arguing that President Bush had the authority to order the invasion of Panama and arrest of Noriega.³¹

Interruption and preemption. President Trump signed an executive order in December 2025 that designated fentanyl and its precursor chemicals as weapons of mass destruction.³² This designation does not change the U.S. criminal code. However, although the penalties for drug trafficking are already high, if U.S. courts accept that “illicit fentanyl is closer to a chemical weapon than a narcotic,” as President Trump has asserted, it theoretically could apply the higher criminal penalties more broadly.

The executive order also reframes the threat posed by drugs as a matter of national security as opposed to law enforcement, thereby justifying military action. The U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was in part based on the rationale that it was necessary to remove Saddam Hussein in order to prevent Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction. Although the executive order has not explicitly made this point, the United States theoretically could now make a similar case that, in accord with the 2002 “Bush Doctrine,”³³ the United States can take unilateral, pre-emptive military action or wage preventive war to prevent terrorists (a category that now explicitly includes drug cartels) or rogue states (such as Venezuela under Maduro) from acquiring or using weapons of mass destruction (which the United States has declared now includes fentanyl and its precursor chemicals).

The executive order, coupled with the FTO designations, could also expand the range of defendants facing criminal prosecution or civil liability. The penalties for drug trafficking are severe, ranging from five years to life, depending on the substance, quantity, and number of previous convictions. The penalty for material support to a designated terrorist organization ranges up to 20 years. However, many low-level drug traffickers facing light sentences could now potentially face harsher material support sentences.

Companies that knowingly do business with cartel companies that engage in a variety of legitimate businesses from avocado

exporting to transportation could find themselves charged with providing material support to terrorists. Under the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act,³⁴ they could theoretically also be held liable for harm done to U.S. citizens injured by the cartel/terrorist actions. Would this extend to victims of drug addiction?

No U.S. “boots on the ground.” The 2026 *Counterterrorism Strategy* emphasizes that the United States will not repeat the failed “forever wars” of past administrations. It could be inferred from this that the United States envisions limiting direct military involvement to one-off U.S. strikes on facilities, joint operations to capture cartel leaders, and unilateral targeted killings, while avoiding large-scale military deployments and anything that resembles counterinsurgent operations or nation-building.

However, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced recently that Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras had agreed to allow the United States to carry out joint military operations against criminal groups on their soil, following the example of Ecuador where a small number of U.S. Special Forces are embedded in Ecuadorian units.³⁵ It is “boots on the ground” similar to current U.S. deployments in Africa, but still short of deploying independent U.S. combat units as the United States did in Afghanistan and Iraq.

An anti-cartel coalition. To expand cooperation throughout the hemisphere, the United States has created a new alliance. On March 7, 2026, President Trump announced the creation of the Shield of the Americas, a U.S.-led military and political coalition aimed at sharing intelligence and coordinating operations against the hemisphere’s drug cartels and transnational gangs. Its operational arm is the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition (ACCC or AC3), which is located at the headquarters of the U.S. Southern Command in Doral, Florida. “The heart of our agreement,” said President Trump, “is a commitment to using lethal military force to destroy the sinister cartels and terrorist networks.”³⁶

The Shield of the Americas builds on previous U.S. efforts to create effective international and hemisphere alliances against drug trafficking organizations. These include the 1988 UN Anti-Drug Convention, the 1990 Cartagena and 1992 San Antonio Summits, the Summit of the Americas, U.S. support for Colombia’s operations against the cartels, and the later U.S. partnership with Mexico in the 2007 Mérida Initiative.

The Shield of Americas currently has 19 members, including Colombia, which joined the alliance on August 12, 2026. Notably absent are Mexico, a major producer of illicit drugs whose cartels increasingly dominate the global drug traffic, and Brazil, a major depot for the transshipment of illicit drugs.³⁷ The two countries account for more than half of Latin America’s total population and approximately 60 percent of Latin America’s combined GDP. Canada, a number of the island nations, and European countries that administer territories in the Caribbean have not joined the Shield of the Americas.

The “Donroe Doctrine.” While the Shield of the Americas elicits the cooperation of Latin American countries in taking on the cartels, Washington has made it clear the United States will not hesitate to act unilaterally to defend its interests throughout the Western Hemisphere. To justify the military to capture Maduro, President Trump invoked the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, warning European powers not to meddle in American affairs. He referred to it as the “Donroe Doctrine.”³⁸

Part II: Similarities and Differences

As every infantry officer learns at Fort Benning, the right answer to almost every question is, ‘It depends on the situation and the terrain.’ Drug cartels use terrorist tactics to intimidate governments and to terrorize politicians, police, the local population, and each other. Calling them terrorists is not inappropriate. However, they differ from traditional terrorist groups in that their motives are not political but profit oriented. The political and social terrain in Latin America is also very different from the main theaters of the GWOT. Part II examines the similarities, and more importantly, the differences between these two challenges.

A diverse collection of organizations and roles. Both the GWOT and the war against the cartels involve global networks. Latin America’s cartels and criminal gangs may comprise an even more complex and diverse collection of global and local actors. The term *cartel* is used in the 2026 *Counterterrorism Strategy* (and here) as a generic label for all criminal groups involved in drug trafficking, but the term can be misleading. The criminal enterprises engaged in drug trafficking and related criminal activities number in the hundreds, ranging from local gangs to large criminal conglomerates under centralized command. Enterprises operating in some countries produce, process, and traffic drugs through family clans and crime groups, but do not resemble Mexico’s cartels.³⁹

Other countries are involved as *entrepôts* in the global drug traffic. Paraguay, for example, is South America’s largest marijuana producer and distributor, but it is also a major hub for cocaine (as well as arms and tobacco) smuggling.⁴⁰ According to the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index, “reports indicate a significant rise in money laundering” in Paraguay.⁴¹ Taking advantage of endemic corruption, some criminal kingpins and corrupt politicians view the tri-border area as a financial services center for transnational organized crime⁴² where cartels, terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, mafias, and corrupt bankers can come together to do business. The point here is that combating the drug traffic will be different and more complicated than attacking drug traffickers and drug labs.

Cartels and drug-trafficking gangs seek safe havens in areas with weak or no government control. They compete with each other to dominate territory and populations where they engage in a variety of criminal as well as legitimate business activities. Some provide various forms of social assistance, but none have sought to directly govern territory and populations as the Islamic State, or al-Nusra’s successor Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, did in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Hamas in Gaza. These are (or were) terrorist proto-states with governing structures and even a measure of political recognition.

The cartels are motivated by profit, not by ideology or religious belief. They do not proselytize, although they bask in the narcoculture that has arisen around them. Their politics are limited to self-protection. Their violence, even when it deliberately creates atrocities, is not just performative, but also pragmatic. It is intended to dominate or expand market space, deter interference by officials, protect turf against rival criminal enterprises, engage in extortion, and ensure loyalty and obedience.⁴³

Illicit drug producers and traffickers could attempt to survive assaults by laying low, increasing operational security, or escalating violence to deter continued operations. The question is whether a protracted assault will bring about their collapse and extinction or instead transform criminal syndicates into more cohesive political insurgencies capable of contesting central government authority.

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Some terrorist groups have ascended to proto-states. Can criminal cartels seize central power or become regional states-within-states? Or might they evolve from criminal gangs into permanent, politically powerful undergrounds that co-exist with state power?

Integration in local economies. Both terrorist and criminal organizations are economic predators. Terrorist groups rob banks, kidnap for ransom, run protection rackets, and take over legitimate businesses—some engage in drug production and trafficking. Cartels also engage in criminal activities, but the drug traffic is more integrated into local economies. They extract wealth, but they also bring in money and jobs that would be lost if the cartels were destroyed.⁴⁴ Revenues from the cultivation, processing, and transport of illicit drugs rarely account for more than a few percentage points of national GDPs, even in the major drug-producing countries. Drug production and trafficking is estimated to account for about 4.2 percent of Colombia’s economy⁴⁵ and, depending on the source, between six-tenths of a percent and 1.6 percent of Mexico’s GDP.⁴⁶

However, it can be a source of income in impoverished rural areas—a more lucrative cash crop for subsistence farmers, a source of jobs for youth with few other options, and for some willing to gamble their lives for a shot at unimagined wealth and notoriety. The livelihood of more than three million people in Mexico depends on the drug traffic.⁴⁷ This also means that destroying cartels can be economically disruptive and destabilizing, leaving behind economic voids, social disruption, political instability, and higher levels of violence.

A different social and political terrain. Although many Latin American countries have long histories of political violence, government institutions tend to be more durable than those in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Lebanon, Libya, and West Africa—the major battlegrounds of the GWOT. They are not fragile states.

Latin American countries have been independent for more than 200 years. Most Latin American nations are functioning—although, in some cases, flawed—democracies challenged by corruption and weak legal systems. Some have political systems that combine democratic practices with authoritarian elements.⁴⁸ Only two countries—Cuba and Nicaragua—are outright dictatorships. National borders have changed little since the wars of the 19th century, when the biggest change was the U.S. annexation of more than half of Mexico in 1848.

High levels of violent crime in drug producing countries. It is a paradox that some of the most economically advanced countries in Latin America are also some of the most violent countries in the world. Four Latin American countries—Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica—are members of the Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD). Three more—Argentina, Brazil, and Peru—are in the formal accession process. Economic progress has not always diminished criminal violence.

Colombia in 2025 had a homicide rate of 26 per 100,000; Brazil, 19; Costa Rica, 17; Mexico, 15; and Peru, 11. (By way of contrast, Haiti had a rate of 68 per 100,000 and Ecuador, 51.⁴⁹) The global homicide rate is about 5.6 per 100,000; the current U.S. rate is 4.1 per 100,000.

Past assaults on cartels resulted in soaring homicide rates. Mexico's murder rate more than doubled during the first five years of President Calderón's war on the cartels, reaching 24 homicides per 100,000 in 2011. In the state of Chihuahua, it increased to 131 per 100,000.⁵⁰

That was then; this is now. Perhaps the most important difference between the GWOT and a future military campaign against the drug cartels is the passage of a quarter century. The world today is different from the world that existed on that fateful day in 2001.

The United States was then seen by many—especially in Washington—as the world's sole superpower. Its reputation for military mastery, although battered in Vietnam, had been at least partially restored by the successful mini-invasion of Panama, the First Gulf War, and reasonable success in the Balkans. The United States is still the world's dominant military power, capable of extraordinary military feats. But it faces an array of challenges that did not exist in 2001.

In 2001, Russia, although presided over by President Putin, had not yet embarked upon its revanchist crusade. Instead, it was battling Chechen separatists. U.S.-Russian relations reached a high point immediately after 9/11. Russia today is an aggressive adversary attempting to roll back neighboring democracies. The war with Ukraine has transformed Russia into a wartime economy and placed it at the forefront of drone warfare modernization.

There were tensions with China in 2001, but China supported the GWOT and U.S.-China economic cooperation improved as the United States granted China normal trade relations. It was not until after the ascension of Xi Jinping in 2013 that China embarked upon its aggressive military buildup in the South China Sea and returned to a more belligerent posture toward Taiwan with President Xi instructing China's military to be ready to invade the island by 2027.⁵¹

NATO was a more unified alliance in 2001, and former communist bloc countries were anxious to join the alliance by demonstrating their willingness to support U.S. military efforts in the GWOT. American attitudes toward Western allies have changed as have allies' attitudes toward America. The United States cannot anticipate the degree of international support it had, at least initially, in the GWOT. Both Russia and China will see strategic benefits from the diversion of U.S. military attention to military operations in the Western Hemisphere.

The U.S. fiscal situation in 2001 was also different. After several years of budget surpluses, the U.S. national debt was under \$6 trillion, roughly 32 percent of the GDP. Today, the gross national debt of the U.S. exceeds \$40 trillion and is close to 100 percent of GDP.⁵²

Attitudes in the United States also have changed. Politically, the United States is more polarized now than it was 25 years ago. Bipartisan agreement appears only in opposition to U.S. involvement in forever wars. The American public shows little

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patience for even comparatively shorter conflicts, especially as it faces economic difficulties at home.

The rise of social media early in the century has made national unity more difficult to achieve while creating vulnerabilities that hostile information operations can readily exploit. Trust in the federal government over the past 25 years declined from 51 percent in 2001 to 17 percent in December 2025.⁵³ Today's national leadership must anticipate a deeply fractured, suspicious public.

Part III: Observations and Lessons Learned from the GWOT that Could Apply to the Cartel Fight

What can the Global War on Terrorism, which dominated U.S. national security concerns for much of the past quarter century, teach us that might apply to possible military operations against drug cartels? This third part of the essay catalogues lessons learned—certainly not all—during the GWOT, and how they may apply to a military campaign against the hemisphere's drug cartels.

Before we address the lessons derived from the GWOT itself, which began just nine days after the 9/11 attacks, it is necessary to set the scene with two observations regarding the initial environment. The first is that the “Global War on Terrorism” was not an American initiative; it was an American response to a terrorist attack unprecedented in scale.

The nation reeled in shock on the morning of 9/11. Tens of thousands were feared to have been killed. That figure declined as more people were discovered to have successfully evacuated from the twin towers before they collapsed, but at the time of President Bush's speech to Congress on September 20, more than 4,000 people were still missing or presumed dead.

Intelligence officials had been worried about what al-Qa`ida might be up to, but there had been no public warning. Americans did not know how many more 9/11-scale attacks were on the way. The number of bomb threats soared and had to be taken more seriously. National Guardsmen were deployed at airports, transit hubs, bridges, and tunnels. Discussions of imminent terrorist attacks and alarming scenarios filled the airwaves. Terrorist scenarios deemed far-fetched the day before 9/11 became operative presumptions the day after. No threat could be dismissed. The public demanded and supported action.

The longer-term and more broadly distributed harms from narcoterrorism have not had the same effect. Public health authorities can correctly point to more than a million deaths from drug overdoses and the destruction of families caused by addiction in the past quarter century—the mathematical equivalent of more than a dozen World Trade Center attacks every year. It is a sad statistic, not an event. There is no 9/11 to galvanize the nation,

already weary of war. In 2001, the country was instantly united in grief and anger. It is deeply divided today.

The second observation is how the effort was framed. Calling it a “war” was appropriate in some respects, but it also created confusion and unrealistic expectations. Why it was a war was often misunderstood. In an essay published five days after 9/11 by the *San Diego Union Tribune*, a paper with a large military audience, I wrote:

We have crossed a threshold ... Previous terrorist attacks on the United States were tragedies, but they were remote and somehow seemed tolerable -- the price America paid for being a superpower in a hostile, violent world. We denounced terrorism, we threatened, we arrested some terrorists, we imposed sanctions on state sponsors. And on a few occasions, we responded with a single calibrated military attack. Then life returned to normal. We slept.

*Now, we are going to war -- “war” in bold print, in italics, underlined to distinguish it from our previous wars on terrorism.*⁵⁴

But what made it war? Clearly, it would require a national effort, a whole-of-government approach. Previous terrorist attacks had already shown al-Qa`ida to be an organization capable of large-scale operations. The 9/11 attack confirmed al-Qa`ida’s determination, audacity, and capability. Immediate military action was required to disrupt its central command and disperse its camps.

The argument for calling it a war was not just about words. It was about the necessity of a fundamental change in thinking. In responding to past terrorist attacks, the United States had carried out a single retaliatory attack to demonstrate that going after the United States would have costs. The response to the 9/11 attacks could not be a single attack. It had to be a continuing campaign aimed not at deterrence, but at the destruction of capability.

Finally, like many Vietnam veterans, I carried some personal baggage. If the country was going to put young soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen in harm’s way, we owed it to them to demonstrate that they had the nation’s support, expressed through its elected officials—the equivalent of a declaration of war.

The word war prompted criticism. How could war be waged on terrorism—a tactic? In fact, that was not the case. The Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by Congress on September 18, authorized the president to “use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons.”⁵⁵ It defined the enemy broadly—nations, organizations, persons—but it was not against a tactic.

Some instead argued that *war* meant a narrow focus on military operations. However, from the beginning, government officials from President Bush down understood that while military operations would be an essential component of the effort, the GWOT would involve intelligence, law enforcement, military operations, and diplomacy. The biggest challenge turned out to be intelligence.

A major problem of perception in 2001 was that many Americans view war as a finite undertaking, with a precise beginning and a precise end. This is still the case. The 9/11 attacks provided a precise beginning, but a precise end to the GWOT—an armistice,

capitulation by the enemy, a peace treaty ending hostilities—seemed unlikely. I do not think anyone at that time envisioned Usama bin Ladin signing a surrender document on the decks of a U.S. battleship.

President Trump has not *declared* war on the cartels. However, in a confidential memorandum to Congress in October 2025, he reportedly “declared that the United States is in ‘armed conflict’ with drug cartels and will treat their members as ‘unlawful combatants.’”⁵⁶ International law allows countries in armed conflict to kill or detain enemy fighters without trial.

The declaration changes the legal framework for dealing with the drug traffic.⁵⁷ The president did not specifically name which organizations the United States is in armed conflict with, but it presumably includes the cartels and gangs designated as foreign terrorist organizations. And he did not seek—and seems unlikely to seek—a congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force, which, absent some significant violent action by drug traffickers, he would not likely get.

As with the GWOT, military operations against the hemisphere’s drug cartels are unlikely to reach a clear-cut ending. Clear, achievable objectives will have to be defined for whatever military task the United States assumes. Or the United States must accept that victory in the military sense is unachievable, but that efforts to combat the drug traffic must nonetheless continue. If that is the case, the mode and level of effort must be sustainable.

Lessons Learned: Changing Expectations and Goals

1. The goals of the GWOT were continuously redefined. The GWOT did not start out to be what it became. In hindsight, its trajectory proved unpredictable. Initially, the GWOT was envisioned as a narrowly defined campaign against those responsible for 9/11 and those who harbored them, but the mission quickly expanded.

In his first State of the Union speech in January 2002, President Bush introduced the term “Axis of Evil” to describe regimes sponsoring terror and pursuing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). He named three countries: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The United States had already designated the three as sponsors of terrorism. All three were suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction.

The elision of 9/11 and weapons of mass destruction reflected American apprehension. Between the rise of contemporary terrorism in the 1970s and the 9/11 attacks, terrorists had escalated their attacks by two orders of magnitude, from killing tens in their bloodiest attacks in the 1970s to killing thousands on 9/11. Extrapolating to future threats, officials feared that terrorists would further escalate to attacks causing tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of casualties, a level of violence that could only be achieved with the use of WMD.

The fears were understandable. Al-Qa`ida was known to have made attempts to acquire fissile material in the 1990s, and in an interview two months after 9/11, Usama bin Ladin claimed to have chemical and nuclear weapons.<sup>58</sup> Documents and other material found in al-Qa`ida training camps confirmed the group’s interest in WMD,⁵⁹ although they also revealed its limited capabilities.⁶⁰

Given concerns about Iraq’s WMD program and interpretations of Saddam’s ties to terror organizations, taking down Saddam Hussein became part of the GWOT.

Meanwhile, the list of terrorist groups targeted in the GWOT also expanded. In 2002, when asked whether the GWOT would

include going after Hezbollah, the Deputy Secretary of State responded affirmatively: Hezbollah had American blood on its hands. The United States would take it down ... the United States would take down *all* terrorist groups, one after another.⁶¹ It was the high point of American hubris. Nemesis struck back.

America's invasion of Iraq in 2003 provoked a fierce resistance and reinvigorated al-Qa`ida, creating a new challenge for the GWOT. Additional U.S. troop deployments and the enlistment of Iraqi tribal fighters ultimately suppressed the insurgency, but that diverted resources from a growing Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. By 2008, the situation had reached a dire state. A U.S. troop surge in 2009 temporarily stabilized the conflict, but did not reverse its trajectory, leading to a bloody stalemate.

In 2011, the United States faced new challenges in Libya and Syria where the Arab Spring had led to civil war and growing terrorism. Determined not to send American ground forces into Libya, the United States contributed to the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime with air and naval power. In Syria, the United States supported selected rebel formations, but with more experienced fighters and ample resources, Islamists increasingly dominated the rebellion.

The rapid expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its sweep across Syria and Iraq in 2014 made it the greater threat. U.S. policy pivoted from bringing down Assad to defeating the newly created Islamic State. Washington assembled an international coalition to assist the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an assemblage of armed groups comprised mostly of Kurdish fighters who would do the fighting on the ground supported by coalition airpower. Several thousand U.S. forces were also deployed to support SDF operations. Five years of hard fighting with heavy casualties borne by the SDF ultimately dismantled the Islamic State.

In sum, the original goals of the GWOT expanded from routing the Taliban and destroying al-Qa`ida, which saw temporary success. The United States expanded the scope of its campaign to bringing down *all* terrorist organizations, but that ambition was interrupted when the United States pivoted to eliminating the threat that rogue states or terrorist organizations might acquire weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, U.S. goals were also expanded to include nation-building and democracy promotion.

A deteriorating situation in Iraq required U.S. additional resources, but then the United States had to turn back to Afghanistan to halt an advance by Taliban insurgents. It then had to intervene in Iraq and Syria again to crush the Islamic State. By the time the last Islamic State stronghold fell in Syria, Americans had tired of the war. Withdrawal became the paramount U.S. goal.

These shifts resulted from America's overconfidence, the unforeseen consequences of U.S. actions, external events that altered strategic calculations, the emergence of new threats, and shifts in American attitudes and policy. From the invasion of Afghanistan to the capture of Baghdad, the United States had the strategic initiative. After that, we mostly reacted to events.

Taking down Latin America's drug cartels and gangs will take years. It will likely transcend several presidential terms. The geographic scale of the hemispheric battleground and the dimensions and diversity of the drug traffic suggest a multifront, multidimensional, multi-year campaign. As opportunities arise and as unforeseen events occur, priorities will necessarily shift. Flexibility is not drift, but it is important that the United States has agreed-upon, clearly articulated, and achievable long-term

“By designating Latin America’s drug cartels and criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations and describing military efforts to destroy them as part of the current counterterrorism strategy, the United States is portraying the anticipated campaign as a continuation of the GWOT, addressing a new set of foes.”

objectives to guide its efforts to counter cartels.

2. The GWOT was an exceptionally long campaign. Officially, the Global War on Terrorism lasted 11 years and eight months, from the 9/11 attacks on September 11, 2001, until May 23, 2013, when President Obama declared “Beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless ‘global war on terror,’ but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America.”⁶² The administration decreed that henceforth U.S. military efforts against terrorists would be referred to as Overseas Contingency Operations.

The GWOT was actually a series of long wars, including in Afghanistan (2001-2021), combat operations against Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, Iraq (2003-2011) and later against affiliated Islamic State networks active in the country, and Operation Inherent Resolve (2014-2026).^a It is likely that contingency operations against terrorist organizations in Africa and Asia will continue beyond in the years ahead. The Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal continues to be awarded.

Some would argue that current hostilities against Iran, although strategically different in many respects, are part of a long arc of hostilities that began with Iranian-sponsored acts of terrorism beginning in 1979, persisting through the identification of Iran as a member of the Axis of Evil after 9/11, and continuing today. The conflict in Iran may also be viewed as the continuation of counter-proliferation efforts that led to overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the attempt to bring down the Iranian-supported Assad regime Syria, and most recently U.S. attacks on sites associated with Iran's nuclear program.

The military campaign against the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks, their successors, their affiliates, their allies, and the acolytes they inspire abroad has lasted a quarter of a century, five administrations, and four presidents.

By designating Latin America's drug cartels and criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations and describing military efforts to destroy them as part of the current counterterrorism strategy, the United States is portraying the anticipated campaign as a continuation of the GWOT, addressing a new set of foes. That gives relevance to learning lessons from the GWOT thus far.

a The complete list of defined operations/Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) during the GWOT is much longer than what is mentioned here. For more, see “Defense Casualty Analysis System,” U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.

Looking at future U.S. military action against the hemisphere's drug traffickers as a new phase of the "War on Drugs" initiated 55 years ago makes it equally important to review that effort's even longer history for applicable lessons. (My article in *CTC Sentinel* a year ago was a first cut at outlining some of these lessons and related implications.⁶³)

Americans are a practical people who understandably oppose "forever wars." But forever or very long military contests are not exceptional. What may be exceptional is the American notion of finite wars.

The Cold War was a continuing contest that comprised a series of armed conflicts on different battlefields. Some of these conflicts, like the Korean War and the Vietnam War, directly engaged U.S. forces. Others were fought entirely through allies and proxies. The shooting wars punctuated a continuing intelligence, political, and information war that lasted four decades. With a hiatus in the 1990s and early 2000s, President Putin's determination to recover Soviet territory and again dominate former Soviet satellites is seen by some as a renewal of the Cold War.⁶⁴ Actually, Putin's own writings reach back further to imperial Russian history and the conquests of previous tsars.⁶⁵

Contemporary warfare in the form of information warfare, cyber warfare, espionage, sabotage, economic warfare, and cognitive warfare is incessant and may be endless. Efforts against ordinary and organized crime do not cease. No one expects the FBI or police departments to one day announce that we have defeated crime and can demobilize.

But while law enforcement is widely viewed as a necessary and enduring task, military hostilities are subject to different calculations based upon perceptions of the threat, casualties, and visible results or lack of progress. Active hostilities start a clock running. If they are forced upon by existential threats or serious attacks on the United States, like 9/11, they prompt unity and elicit support, although it is fragile. It is difficult to sustain national cohesion and public support for prolonged military interventions to achieve distant or uncertain goals or in complex political situations.⁶⁶

Existential wars forced upon us may provoke fewer domestic objections, suggesting caution in initiating wars of choice. Confining military involvement to short engagements avoids portrayal as a quagmire, which was part of the 2026 *Counterterrorism Strategy's* goal of high intensity but short campaigns aimed at the five most dangerous jihadi groups. However, sudden, brief applications of military power may have limited strategic effect. As a result of its experience in Afghanistan and other conflicts in the post-9/11 period, the United States has learned that destruction of the enemy force does not always translate into defeat of the enemy, who can continue the contest in other ways.

Increased efforts to significantly disrupt the drug traffic and reduce the pernicious effects of highly addictive drugs on American society are likely to be supported, but a military campaign against the hemisphere's cartels seems unlikely to be quickly concluded. To achieve transformational results, the effort must be sustainable over a long time span. But in order to mitigate the U.S. public's distaste for prolonged military campaigns, visible progress will be necessary.

Lessons Learned: Organizational Change

3. The GWOT required the United States to reorganize its national security structure and procedures as well as its

intelligence collection and sharing. There were dramatic changes in intelligence collection and analysis, homeland security, and law enforcement during the GWOT. American diplomacy faced new challenges. It had to enlist international support, incentivize intelligence sharing, and gain law enforcement cooperation far beyond America's traditional allies.

U.S. armed forces and the CIA would both be involved in overt and covert operations, sometimes side by side. The United States could draw on prior experience from the Vietnam War and earlier counterinsurgency support operations abroad, although by 2001, the post-Vietnam War reduction in force and deliberate shift in strategy away from irregular warfare had eliminated much of the institutional knowledge. Meanwhile, the passage of time and retirements had wiped out much of the historical memory.

Further reductions came with the so-called "peace dividend" at the end of the Cold War. This included significant reductions in the CIA's clandestine services during that period. These were exacerbated by new guidelines that restricted the employment of sources with poor human rights records. Lack of local cultural knowledge and language capabilities were chronic problems in the military and other federal agencies involved in counterterrorism. The military interventions of the 1990s, and often overlooked experience in going after Colombia's drug cartels in the 1990s, gave the United States more recent experience in dealing with unconventional warfare, but much had to be learned again.

The nature of the terrorist threat allowed no distinction between the front line and the home front. Terrorists made no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. This required the seamless merging of foreign and domestic intelligence and preparing for terrorist-caused disasters at home. Aviation security, border protection, vetting foreign travelers and immigrants, and domestic intelligence collection all became components of national security. They had to improve and be better coordinated while maintaining fundamental civil liberties.

The GWOT also required a reconfiguration of intelligence collection and sharing. The *Congressional Joint Inquiry into the Intelligence Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001* and the *9/11 Commission Report* catalogued a number of failures, including outdated Cold War mentalities, the lack of priority given to terrorist threats, analytical failures, and most famously, a "failure to connect the dots." This led to the most profound reorganization of U.S. intelligence since the National Security Act of 1947.

The CIA's budget was significantly increased after the 9/11 attacks. Barriers to intelligence sharing were lowered. Congress created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to better coordinate the multiple federal agencies involved in intelligence collection; previously, the Director of the CIA served as the Director of National Intelligence. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) was created to receive intelligence from all sources, and to assemble, analyze, integrate, and pass it on quickly for action.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created to improve coordination of domestic agencies involved in security and response to natural and man-made disasters, and to act as a bridge between federal intelligence agencies and local police. DHS also encouraged the creation of fusion centers—state-owned entities to collate local and federal intelligence. The 80 fusion centers (FCs) were also connected to the National Network of Fusion Centers.

Fearing that it might be replaced by a new domestic intelligence

agency, the FBI rapidly implemented changes. It elevated counterterrorism and counterintelligence to the top of its priorities. It established a Directorate of Intelligence, which, along with its Counterterrorism Division (CTD) and Counterintelligence Division (CD), was placed under a newly created National Security Branch. (A Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate was later added.) It created a Counterterrorism Analysis Branch and increased the number of Joint Terrorist Task Forces (JTTFs) to enhance cooperation between the Bureau and police. It also embedded Field Intelligence Groups into each of its field offices to manage and coordinate local intelligence.⁶⁷

While U.S. military forces were dismantling the ability of foreign terrorists to mount new attacks, these changes to intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination were intended to ensure that the United States would not again be caught off guard in preventing a major terrorist attack on American soil. Some worked better than others.

Over the years, many came to see the ODNI as a needless bureaucratic layer that added little to intelligence analysis and called for its abolition.⁶⁸ The NCTC worked well as hub for analyzing and disseminating intelligence to state and local police departments, but it was limited in handling intelligence pertaining to domestic terrorist threats, which remained the purview of the FBI and FCs.

Relying on undercover operations, U.S. law enforcement was successful in uncovering and disrupting more than 80 percent of jihadi plots in the United States.⁶⁹ This became more difficult as terrorist operations increasingly involved lone operators inspired by jihadi digital content but otherwise unconnected with any organization. There were some civil rights objections to sting operations, alleging that they led to prosecution of aspirations that defendants had no capability of fulfilling.⁷⁰ Prosecutors responded that defendants were prosecuted on the basis of intent, not capability,⁷¹ as is consistent with U.S. law. Police undercover operations were designed to demonstrate, sometimes on video, that suspects were willing to press the button setting off what they believed was a real bomb that would cause mass casualties.

Local police frequently complained that cooperation with the FBI was a one-way street. Fusion centers had mixed results. Some were highly effective, others far less so.⁷² Little information came up through Homeland Security channels. Lateral communications between fusion centers hardly existed.⁷³

Some of the GWOT's experience and legacy will prove useful in going after the cartels. However, in the view of the author, U.S. officials should not see what the United States has now as the prototype. The cartels and drug traffic to the United States differ significantly from the GWOT, and planners must be prepared, as they were in 2001, to make fundamental changes. The counterterrorist infrastructure will provide a starting point, but a campaign against the hemisphere's drug cartels will also require new configurations of institutions, new protocols for intelligence sharing, and new rules of engagement.

The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* suggests that the war on the cartels will be waged both abroad and domestically, but beyond indicating that illegal alien criminals will be removed, it does not indicate whether the military efforts abroad will be accompanied by an offensive on domestic drug distribution or escalated efforts to reduce consumption. Nonetheless, a military campaign against drug traffickers abroad will require close coordination with domestic law enforcement:

- to monitor the effects of efforts aimed at interrupting the flow of drugs on the supply and price of drugs in the domestic market and deal with any local increases in violence as a result;
- to discern changes in drug smuggling techniques or routes;
- to prevent traffickers from evading U.S. attacks by relocating synthetic drug production sites to urban locations or in tunnels; and
- to identify and prevent any efforts by cartel operatives to carry out direct attacks in the United States or instigate local gangs to do so.

This will require an efficient two-way sharing of intelligence, allowing immediate feedback to support effects-based operations abroad and informing local law enforcement of any intelligence about cartel operations in the United States.

At a practical level, the campaign against drug cartels will require close coordination of efforts by the Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Treasury, and Homeland Security, and the Intelligence Community; specifically, the CIA, DEA, FBI, OFAC, FinCEN, Coast Guard, and CBP. Military planners will depend on intelligence from an array of sources, not all of whom will be accustomed to working under military command. The bureaucratic contests may exceed the pushing and shoving seen during the GWOT. Given the financial motivation of narcoterror organizations, the intelligence infrastructure created during the GWOT to counter terrorist financing provides a solid foundation for intelligence efforts focused on countering the drug cartels, but new challenges will arise. The cartels have enormous experience in moving large volumes of cash. They also may more easily resort to huge bribes to conceal and facilitate their operations. Revealing the sources of terrorist financing could sometimes embarrass political donors, but the beneficiaries of huge bribes from drug cartels could include high-ranking government officials who can impede investigations. Another challenge is that the vast profits generated by the drug traffic are cycled into the legitimate economy, which provides additional incentives for concealment. The most striking example may be Wachovia Bank's laundering of an estimated \$350 billion for Mexican drug cartels.⁷⁴

Lessons Learned: Execution and Evolutionary Dynamics

4. What began as a global war in name quickly became a truly global contest. President Bush declared the Global War on Terrorism in October 2001. At the time, it was focused primarily on Afghanistan but soon after was expanded to Iraq. But the GWOT became truly global, involving military operations throughout the Middle East, in Western and Southeast Asia, and in Africa as well as covert operations elsewhere. Ultimately, the GWOT and subsequent Overseas Contingency Operations connected with counterterrorism involved military operations in more than 80 countries.⁷⁵

The *2026 Counterterrorism Strategy* envisions actions against the cartels in the Western Hemisphere. Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia are obvious theaters, but other countries are more involved as smuggling routes and sources of ancillary services. That is already a vast theater of operations; however, Latin America's drug cartels have tentacles reaching across Africa into Europe and operatives in the United States. The campaign against the cartels may also involve efforts to cut off the supply of precursor chemical shipments from China and India. It will truly be a global contest.



*A UH-60 Black Hawk gunner is pictured during a resupply flight in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on May 6, 2021.
(Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)*

While it was an understandable and necessary response to 9/11, as it continued over the years, the GWOT evolved into a distraction for the United States, diverting attention and sapping resources from other national security challenges. The war against the cartels, given its global nature, has the potential to evolve into a similar distraction, if not carefully managed. And some U.S. adversaries will attempt to ensure that it does.

5. A global war made allies essential. The United States had allies ready to assist it in 2001. For the first time in its history, NATO immediately invoked Article 5, declaring that the terrorist attacks on the United States would be considered attacks on all. For a while after 9/11, relations with Russia improved, and the attack reduced tensions with China. The United Nations also played a useful role.

Al-Qa`ida itself dispersed its senior leadership cadre to different locations, which necessitated the enlistment of additional allies. In the years following 9/11, its operatives and alumni of its training camps carried out terrorist attacks in Pakistan, India, Tunisia, Yemen, Indonesia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, the Philippines, Egypt, and Jordan. Some of these countries were already allies of the United States, but some of the others may not have seen themselves as active participants in the GWOT until terrorist attacks put them on the frontline. As time passed during the GWOT, the United States came to increasingly view and rely on allies and state partners not simply to avoid deploying large numbers of U.S. troops, but also as a more sustainable form of counterterrorism. Both the Biden and second Trump

administrations emphasized counterterrorism burden-sharing.

The GWOT also required alliances with non-state actors. The United States quickly brought down the Taliban in 2001 with U.S. airpower supporting the Northern Alliance (officially the National United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), an assemblage of Afghan minority groups that opposed the primarily Pashtun Taliban.

In 2002 discussions with Pentagon planners about possible force structure after the fall of the Taliban, I argued against a large U.S. military deployment. I had been invited because of my experience with the Civilian Irregular Defense Force, a tribal army created by U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam. No matter how carefully U.S. forces followed the rules of engagement, direct engagements would mean American soldiers killing Afghans, which in Pashtun culture demands retribution.

Instead, I suggested the development of alliances with local tribes, including Pashtuns, who could be organized by smaller contingents of U.S. Special Forces. In Vietnam, approximately 2,000 U.S. Special Forces were able to train and field an army of nearly 50,000 local soldiers who were effective because they were local.⁷⁶ Seth Jones and Arturo Muñoz at RAND argued along the same lines.⁷⁷ The idea was rejected as U.S. planners feared it would only perpetuate ethnic conflict and local warlordism when the objective of the United States was to create a united nation with a national army.

In the invasion of Iraq, the United States was assisted by local allies that included the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shi`a opposition

groups. Struggling against the Iraqi resistance, the United States in 2006 enlisted and armed Arab Sunni tribes that had been victimized by the brutality of the al-Qa`ida-led resistance. Calling themselves the “Sons of Iraq,” tens of thousands of Sunni tribal soldiers enlisted in the effort, which greatly weakened the resistance movement.

In later operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the United States provided supporting airpower and artillery fire to Kurdish and Arab forces that comprised the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which fought the ground war and bore the brunt of the casualties. During the four-year campaign, the SDF suffered 11,000 dead and 21,000 wounded.⁷⁸

The alliances with non-state actors often proved to be transactional and temporary. When the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the Sunni tribal forces of Anbar province were abandoned and the Shi`a government left behind failed to live up to its promises. Many of these Sunnis became recruits for ISIS and swelled its ranks in 2014.

A campaign against Latin America’s drug cartels will require local government allies to succeed. The United States has sought to develop the Shield of Americas and Americas Counter Cartel Coalition, a military alliance to dismantle the cartels. Nineteen governments have joined.

Enlisting local non-state actors in a way that does not subvert national unity will be more difficult in Latin America. For example, some communities in Mexico have organized their own defense forces (*auto-defensas*) to protect local populations against the depredations of drug traffickers and criminal gangs. The attitude of the Mexican authorities toward the *auto-defensas* ranges from hostility to attempts to coopt them into broader security arrangements.⁷⁹ There have been similar developments in Peru⁸⁰ and Colombia.⁸¹ In some cases, these have been brutally crushed by the traffickers. In other cases, they have been corrupted, becoming predators rather than protectors. In yet other cases, they are the proxies of wealthy landlords who use them to suppress political opponents. Still, we should not rule out arrangements with local non-government forces as potential proxies.

Yet, it should also be remembered that alliances work better as pronouncements and are often strained when military action starts. Even where Latin American governments and public opinion support action against the cartels, maintaining cooperation will remain a prerequisite to success, and will likely be a continuing diplomatic challenge.

6. The GWOT was a complicated endeavor. It involved a constellation of separate, but overlapping, asymmetrical, irregular conflicts that included conventional, counterterrorist, and counterinsurgency efforts, special and covert operations, and law enforcement activities carried out in multiple places under varying circumstances. Nation-building was part of the effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, but was later abandoned as the United States sought to limit its military role and political objectives.

The semantics signaled the change. What was originally framed as a global strategic effort to destroy terrorist organizations worldwide and alter the conditions that led to terrorism became a series of overseas contingency operations, reflecting the continued necessity to respond to imminent threats or disasters, and a greater determination to bound the level of commitment and avoid open-ended engagements. Over time, the campaign became more

dispersed, more kinetic, and more transactional.

A campaign against the drug cartels will inherit America’s continuing reluctance to make long-term commitments. The preference will understandably be to exploit U.S. military capabilities for sophisticated, sharp, intense applications of military power, that inflict physical damage on drug cartel organizations and disrupt operations. However, military success can translate into permanent gain only if the host country is able to take advantage of the disarray created by U.S. action and permanently alter the situation—or if the United States is able to exploit reductions in the supply of drugs to permanently reduce consumption.

The GWOT also mixed law enforcement with war; it got complicated. The United States got tangled up in legal procedures, then stuck with *ad hoc* solutions that turned out to be permanent headaches. What to do with captured combatants was one. Sending them to Guantanamo created new problems. Some U.S. leaders wanted to extend rules of war into the domestic space, arguing that those arrested in the United States should be treated as enemy combatants, not defendants. Two cases, *Rumsfeld v. Hamdi* and *Rumsfeld v. Padilla* went to the Supreme Court, which reached a different decision in each case. In the case of Hamdi, a U.S. citizen captured in Afghanistan, the court upheld the government’s authority to hold him as an enemy combatant, but ruled that he was entitled to be heard by an independent decision maker. In the case of Padilla, a U.S. citizen arrested in Chicago, the Supreme Court rejected it on technical grounds. A lower court ruled in the government’s favor, but before the case could be appealed to the Supreme Court, the administration turned Padilla over to a civilian court for trial.⁸²

A military-led campaign against cartels and other drug traffickers is likely to be even more complicated. The United States will need to establish the status of its opponents, rules of engagement, and handling of captives.

The GWOT combined military operations and law enforcement. More importantly, it was easier to separate them with the military assuming the lead in overseas contingency operations and law enforcement engaged in domestic operations. (Indeed, it became more complicated in practice, particularly regarding how captures, interrogations, and custody changed hands.)

Attacking the cartels is not simply warfare against a different foe. It will require a more integrated effort abroad and a stronger home game in order to maintain support for counter cartel operations both here and overseas.

Lessons Learned: Impacts, Costs, and Outcomes

7. What the GWOT achieved is still being debated. The results are mixed. The invasion of Afghanistan, rapid defeat of the Taliban forces, and dispersal of al-Qa`ida fighters reduced the immediate threat of further al-Qa`ida attacks. The initial assault bought time for efforts to improve intelligence, enlist allies, and make al-Qa`ida’s operating environment more dangerous. The effort decimated al-Qa`ida’s leadership—in the first six months after the invasion, al-Qa`ida lost 16 of its 25 key leaders, the Taliban lost 21 of its top 25 people.<sup>83</sup> The invasion also deprived al-Qa`ida of training camps in a safe sanctuary where it had been able to attract and prepare thousands of recruits, who provided a continuing supply of talent available to the organization’s operational leaders. Even with its command element in hiding or on the run, al-Qa`ida was able to instigate or inspire further terrorist attacks across the globe,

“The most significant similarity will be the challenge in translating military operations into measurable or even visible achievements ... The strategy will require clear objectives and meaningful metrics.”

but these were all pre-9/11 scenarios—bombings, armed assaults, attempts to shoot down or sabotage commercial airliners.

The continuing assault also enabled the United States and its allies to harden targets and improve domestic intelligence collection to thwart foreign-instigated and local terrorist plots. Although these measures made America far safer than it appeared to be in the immediate shadow of 9/11, it took longer for Americans to feel safer.⁸⁴ Success or failure was a matter of perceptions, but the absence of any attack in the United States approximating 9/11 is convincing criterion of success.

Subsequent U.S. operations succeeded in capturing or killing al-Qa`ida leaders, including bin Ladin and then his successor 11 years later. These attacks complicated communications and disrupted command, but the organization has survived through its affiliates, progeny, and supporters abroad.

Books and articles describing our failures began to appear in the early 2000s, some just months after the GWOT began.^b Critics argue that the GWOT did not eliminate the threat. The GWOT inflicted heavy costs on their organizations, but it did not dent their determination. Although currently embedded in local insurgencies in Africa and Asia, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State remain resilient, adaptive, and opportunistic as demonstrated by their ability to exploit the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring in 2011, and local conflicts in Africa where jihadi groups are expanding. We can be sure that the jihadi enterprise will exploit any new events to make a comeback.

U.S. efforts to create functioning democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq have failed. Its removal of tyrants in Iraq and Libya led to chaos. America lost the war in Afghanistan, which is again under an oppressive Taliban government that gives al-Qa`ida sanctuary. Iraq remains divided along ethnic and sectarian lines; pro-Iranian militias remain politically, economically, and militarily powerful.⁸⁵ In Syria, the United States has recognized the de facto government led by the group Washington had designated as a foreign terrorist organization. The United States has abandoned—some would say betrayed⁸⁶—its Kurdish allies in both Iraq and Syria. The civil war rages on in Yemen, where al-Qa`ida continues to operate. Al-Shabaab continues to wage an insurgency in Somalia.

In my view, our biggest failure in the GWOT was not creating durable security arrangements capable of protecting society and ensuring political stability. This failure was illustrated by the rapid

collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces shortly after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the rapid rise of the Islamic State in Iraq after the U.S. departure in 2011. (The same failure was evident in the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, and the reasons are probably the same.)

The United States creates large Western-style, highly centralized armed forces dependent on advanced weapons systems. They are often beyond what the recipient country can afford without continued U.S. assistance or defense contractor support. To a degree this is understandable as the United States wants to support strong democratic nations, avoiding the risks of tribalism or warlordism, but there is a built-in tendency to create clones of the U.S. military. Lobbying by defense contractors adds pressure to equip military assistance recipients with weapons systems that will require continuing technical support.

Lack of government legitimacy, cronyism, and corruption are additional reasons for failure in recipient countries. Ghost soldiers pad payrolls. Corrupt officers make poor commanders. Soldiers lack the will to fight. Due to unrealistic timelines and domestic political reasons, the United States also tends to pull out too fast, too soon, leaving behind fragile structures that create a pernicious sense of abandonment. The rapid collapse of the Afghan national forces was not any more surprising than the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.

Why was it so difficult to translate military power into transformative achievements? While avoiding a broader debate about the limits of military power versus diplomacy in bringing fundamental permanent political change, there were some obvious difficulties.

The political terrain on which the United States fought the GWOT—Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa’s Sahel, and Somalia—had a long history of turmoil. Iron-fisted tyrants could impose order, but these regions were traditionally theaters of continuous or recurring armed conflicts. Autocratic rule alternated with civil war and anarchy. American ambitions to create liberal democracies would require far more resources and more time than the United States was willing to invest, and even then, might not take root.

The social terrain was divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. The absence of trustworthy public institutions preserved tribal loyalties. Ideologies based on religion created hostility toward non-believers, infidels, heretics, apostates. Religious fanaticism created fighters undeterred by death—their duty was to God, their sole constituent. They could be killed but not easily deterred.

Latin American countries have nominally democratic governments, although they have also experienced lengthy periods under dictators and military regimes. They have more developed economies, although in some countries, these have coexisted with insurgencies and powerful drug cartels.

Latin America’s cartels are not driven by fanaticism, but by profit, which can nevertheless be an equally persistent drive. The lure of unimaginable wealth and power, even if only for a brief moment, in societies that offer little material reward can also turn out young men willing to kill and die young. Some of the drug cartels’ *sicarios* are traumatized and desensitized to be psychopaths.

The most significant similarity will be the challenge in translating military operations into measurable or even visible achievements. This relates to the strategic objectives. Is the goal the reduction of the drug traffic, resulting in the reduction of illicit drug consumption in the United States? Or is the goal breaking the

^b Peter Bergen’s just published book, *All the Presidents’ Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America’s War on Terror* (W. W. Norton & Company), is the latest contribution to the corpus of work examining the legacy of the GWOT. Bergen describes inadequate planning, strategic blunders, miscalculations, missed opportunities, and unintended consequences.

growing power that cartels exercise over governments—reversing state capture, while preventing gangs in the United States from expanding their power? The strategy will require clear objectives and meaningful metrics.

8. The GWOT was an expensive undertaking with long-term economic consequences. According to the Costs of War Project, in addition to the human toll, the total U.S. budgetary costs of the GWOT by 2021 surpassed \$8 trillion.⁸⁷ This figure includes the costs of military operations, homeland security, projected obligations for veterans care, and interest on borrowed money.⁸⁸

In contrast to previous wars, the costs were not covered through budget reallocations, increased taxes, or sale of war bonds, but primarily by government borrowing, thereby increasing the national debt. The growth of global capital markets made it easy to borrow money, initially at low rates. There was no politically inconvenient separate war budget. Instead, Congress allocated the money through a continuing series of emergency funding measures outside the normal budgeting process.⁸⁹ Instead of belt-tightening or tax increases that would alienate voters, the national deficit grew.

In 2001, the United States was in a good financial position. The national debt had been significantly reduced. The country actually ran budget surpluses between 1998 and 2001,⁹⁰ which it used to pay down the national debt. U.S. debt represented about 55% of GDP then. Today's publicly held debt represents 123% of GDP, surpassing the percentage just after World War II, but the global economy is very different today.

By avoiding large-scale troop deployments and focusing on limited kinetic strikes and military assistance, the costs of military operations against Latin America's cartels can be kept down. The costs of drug interdiction operations in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific and military operations in Venezuela are in the neighborhood of \$5 billion.⁹¹

If efforts against the cartels avoid large U.S. troop and naval deployments and large-scale use of costly ordnance, the financial costs should be comparatively low. If, however, retaliatory actions by the cartels obliged the United States to commit troops, then costs could increase significantly.

9. The effects of the GWOT on military organization, roles, and readiness were resisted in the military. Many in the military saw counterterrorism as an inappropriate mission for the armed forces. The debacle of the Vietnam War cast a long shadow. American public opinion had turned not only against that war but against the military institution itself. U.S. experience in Lebanon and the grinding wars in Afghanistan and Iraq only intensified the military's aversion to irregular warfare.

In the eyes of many senior officials, the continuing war against terrorism also compromised the ability of the U.S. armed forces to perform other critical missions. It consumed limited resources and imposed heavy burdens on military personnel who faced repeated tours of duty at a time when a revanchist Russia and increasingly aggressive China posed growing threats. The 2018 National Defense Strategy represented a determined effort to pivot away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and focus on great power competition.⁹²

U.S. commanders had to accept that terrorists would continue to pose a threat. By 2018, the United States had already shifted to counterterrorism without counterinsurgency by employing proxies

“We cannot assume that because cartels compete with one another in various ways—sometimes in lethal and bloody ways—for turf, control, or influence, that they will remain divided in the face of broader and sustained offensives.”

and limiting U.S. participation to air support, drone strikes, special operations, and the deployment of small Special Forces contingents to provide training and limited support to various partners.

However, military planners also have to accept the fact that warfare itself is changing. Conventional wars increasingly involve elements of unconventional warfare, special operations, physical and remote sabotage, decapitation, cyber warfare, and terrorist attacks carried out by covert operators and irregular proxy forces. Recent U.S. military operations against Iran illustrate the point. U.S. military operations began with a striking demonstration of precision air attacks, but evolved into countering missile and drone strikes, and covert operations aimed at U.S. allies and civilian shipping.

Many will see U.S. military operations against the cartels as an inappropriate mission. As it was during the GWOT, it could increasingly be seen as a diversion of resources from the military threats we face from Russia or China. Military planners can be expected to limit U.S. involvement to single, precise military strikes, but these also can be politically perilous if there are significant casualties. They require detailed, accurate intelligence and certainty that U.S. operations are not being lured into attacks on civilian targets.

The United States can conduct these kinds of precision operations, but planners must also calculate that cartels can strike back in ways that could undermine local support for continuing anti-cartel efforts. The killing of a cartel leader by Mexican forces with U.S. intelligence support led to retaliatory attacks by cartel gunmen that left scores dead.⁹³ Such incidents may make it difficult for Latin American governments to support continuing U.S.-led counter cartel operations.

10. The GWOT left a trail of ruin and instability. The GWOT involved U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, as well as Yemen, Somalia, the Sahel, and other countries. Afghanistan remains a conflict zone. Iraq is divided and dominated by Iranian proxies. Although not strictly part of the GWOT, the overthrow of Qaddafi left Libya in chaos, which had broader regional consequences in the surrounding countries of Africa. The Syrian civil war and U.S. military involvement, first to support the rebels against Assad and later to destroy ISIS, has left behind devastation, mass displacement of its population, and widespread ruin.

The United States, however, cannot be blamed entirely for the state of affairs. Afghanistan has been in continuous conflict since 1978. Saddam Hussein waged war on Iraq's Shi'a and Kurds, invaded Iran, and then Kuwait. The Assad regime in Syria brutally oppressed its own people.

The surrounding countries have also been conflict zones. Sudan has been engulfed in civil war for 39 of its first 50 years of independence. Lebanon never fully recovered from its civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1991, and the continuing wars between Israel and the Palestinians in the 1970s and 1980s and between Israel and Hezbollah since the 1980s. Yemen has been a theater of separatists and civil wars since the 1960s. Somalia has been at war with itself since the 1970s.

Estimates of total casualties in these conflicts vary widely from hundreds of thousands to millions, depending on methodology. Brown University's Cost of War Project estimates 900,000-940,000 direct deaths (including 432,000 civilians).⁹⁴

Latin America has seen few wars in its modern history, although cartel and gang violence have killed hundreds of thousands. Experience suggests that attacks on cartels provoke violent responses against government and civilian targets. Mexico's war on drugs, which began in 2007 and was supported by the United States, led to levels of violence that were politically unsustainable. Direct military strikes and rapid kinetic operations by the United States may limit the exposure of U.S. forces, but leave local civilian populations (and American ex-pats) exposed to cartel violence.

The successful suppression of the cartels will create economic, social, and political upheavals. It will leave large sectors of the population in specific areas without employment. State economic collapse is not beyond imagination. In pursuing the GWOT, the United States ultimately concluded that nation-building was futile, but some nation *rebuilding* could become necessary to deal with displacement resulting from a more aggressive campaign to destroy drug trafficking organizations. What might Mexico look like as a result of a protracted effort to destroy its cartels? Is a failed state on our southern border tolerable? Will the United States provide security and precisely targeted economic assistance? As discussed above, taking more aggressive action against the cartels is, in general, broadly supported and seen as necessary. But considering these questions about long-term implications would be important if the United States desires to avoid the instability seen in the wake of the GWOT.

Part IV: Some Final Observations

Given the political rhetoric, the publication of the *2026 National Counterterrorism Strategy*, and highly publicized preparations, an increase in military operations against Latin America's cartels is a well telegraphed punch. Cartel leaders are likely to have thought about how this could affect them and what they might do to protect their operations and deter or respond to possible U.S. attacks. Our terrorist foes in the GWOT proved themselves to be resilient and adaptive. The same must be expected of our cartel opponents.

To say it again, drug traffickers are businessmen interested primarily in profit. Continuing, often violent competition among the traffickers, however, has given them considerable experience in the management of organized and often savage violence.

Gruesome murders and mass shootings are carried out by *sicarios*, recruited as young teenagers in impoverished areas and trained to be ruthless killers. Some cartels in Mexico reportedly have recruited regular soldiers, including non-citizen U.S. military veterans who have been deported after serving prison sentences.⁹⁵ Mexico's Los Zetas Cartel began as military deserters recruited by other cartels to enforce their rule. Former Colombian soldiers also have been hired as mercenaries.⁹⁶

These men bring combat experience and tactical skills. With abundant cash, the cartels can also recruit veterans with specialized skills such as drone operators, or more senior officers with intelligence and command experience. ISIS was effective because it combined dedicated jihadi fighters with experienced former officers in Saddam Hussein's army.

A sustained military campaign against the cartels will likely elevate the organizational role of the armed elements. Strategists will emerge, and their influence will increase. Sustained military campaigns against the cartels could also increase unemployment, generate refugees, and further destabilize local governments. Over time, it could transform criminal enterprises into insurgent armies that are even more willing and capable of challenging government authority.

Past wars against cartels in Colombia and Mexico show that a government assault on one cartel prompted its rivals to fight over its market share and territory, increasing the level of violence overall. But we cannot assume that because cartels compete with one another in various ways—sometimes in lethal and bloody ways—for turf, control, or influence, that they will remain divided in the face of broader and sustained offensives.

It is not hard to imagine a competing scenario that envisions cartel and gang leaders contemplating, perhaps even discussing informally how, while remaining business competitors, they might still cooperate against intensified pressure against all of them. Melees among competing gangs will raise the overall level of violence. Coordination will lead to more strategically targeted violence.

Local alliances within countries or even a broader regional alliance of cartels could emerge in response to a geographically broad anti-cartel campaign. The cartels lack a state sponsor such as, for example, Iran, and no state is likely to openly support drug traffickers. That does not preclude states like Russia or Iran itself, working through Hezbollah contacts in South America, from covertly assisting the cartels.⁹⁷ Distracting the United States with an escalating conflict in the Western Hemisphere would fit their strategic agendas. The cartels have their own financial resources—money is not the issue. However, outside actors could provide intelligence about U.S. moves.

The cartels have likely learned a lot by observing our patterns of behavior over the past quarter century. Some ways in which they are likely to adapt might seem easier to foresee, but what they have learned and how they may adapt may also include some surprises. To avoid the kind of miscalculations and unforeseen consequences Peter Bergen describes in his latest book, as mentioned in my earlier *CTC Sentinel* article on confronting the cartels in Mexico, continuous red teaming will be necessary.⁹⁸

U.S. allies in the Shield of the Americas are on the frontline. Insecurity caused by growing crime threatens their societies while state capture by the cartels directly threatens their authority. While this is a security-oriented pact, its members welcome U.S. leadership in the endeavor in order to guarantee broader U.S. political support and economic assistance, as they did when they were threatened by Marxist guerrillas during the Cold War.

Still, they are sovereign countries with their own interests, and they will behave as independent actors. If increased violence begins to threaten national well-being—or their own political survival—they will recalibrate. Or others may replace them. Coalition warfare is always challenging. Holding coalitions together is especially

difficult in long wars. Historically, Latin America does not have a great track record in maintaining political alliances over a long run,⁹⁹ which the war on the cartels promises to be. As in the GWOT, the United States could be dealing with problematic allies.

While some aspects of the forthcoming contest seem familiar, we are heading into uncharted waters. A continuing campaign

involving direct military action against the drug cartels is a worthwhile endeavor, but a significantly different and more complicated one than the GWOT. It is an endeavor that will require unblinking focus, leveraging all elements of national power, and strong, enduring partnerships to fully succeed. **CTC**

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