



On the Question of the War on Drugs

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Introduction

Allow me to set the scene. It is 17 June 1971 and U.S. President Richard M. Nixon announced his ‘War on Drugs’ initiative. Drug abuse, said the president, was ‘Public enemy number one.’ The Organization of American States (OAS) followed suit by declaring its own campaign against narcotics and other illegal drugs. This set into motion a regional effort to tackle the hemispheric drug-trafficking and drug-use problem.



Drug-related murder in El Salvador. Source: <https://time.com/3966900/el-salvador-gangs-violence/>

The War on Drugs was a response to a special era of tension and sensitivity. In 1971 the U.S. was engaged in the Vietnam War, which caused a great divide among international and domestic public support. U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were especially susceptible to drug addiction. Civilian use of illicit drugs also was rising dramatically.

¹ Mrkonjić, E. (2021). “41 Surprising War on Drugs Statistics [The 2021 Edition].” *The High Court*. <https://thehighcourt.co/war-on-drugs-statistics/>.

Many OAS countries were inundated by the rise of drug cartels and corrupted by their money.

Fifty-three years later, the drug problem remains devastating. Resolution—an end to the War on Drugs—remains elusive. According to a prominent review, the United States alone has spent USD 1 trillion USD to fight the war on drugs. Its annual budget increased 31 times since the 1970s, from USD 100 million to now USD 15.1 billion, but still 80 percent of all opiates are consumed by U.S. residents.¹ But the problem has mostly gotten worse. According to the latest data available:

- The global estimate of people who injected drugs in 2021 was 13.2 million, 18 per cent higher than in 2020.
- In 2021, 5.3 per cent of 15-16 year-olds worldwide (13.5 million individuals) had used cannabis in the past year.
- The world is currently experiencing a prolonged surge in both supply and demand of cocaine.
- In the United States, a leading problem country, in 2021, following a year-on-year trend of increase, there were more than 80,000 opioid overdose deaths. Most of those deaths, 70,000, were attributed to a pharmaceutical or synthetic opioids (primarily fentanyl).
- Women constitute approximately 30 per cent of all those who died from an overdose and of those attributed to opioids in the United States.²

² *World Drug Report 2023*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, June 2023, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html>



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- In 2022 nearly 110,000 people died in the United States alone of some form of illegal drug use.³

Even in 1971, support for the War on Drugs was not universal. Many OAS Member States feared losing control to forces beyond their influence. Many questioned whether the War on Drugs was a promising solution. In 2023-24, with the problem further from solution than ever, these questions are as important as ever.

Do OAS members need to forge deeper integration to confront their continentally shared drug problem? While the U.S. has used its influence in the Americas to garner support for its anti-drug platform, many OAS members have taken a more critical stance towards the War on Drugs. These countries favor rethinking policies damaging the short-and-long term effects on the societies where implemented. These divergent paths splintered the Western hemisphere, so it is difficult to find widely accepted solutions.

Background

The War on Drugs was a policy initiative from the United States, with implications for many other OAS Member States. The War on Drugs was a coordinated national effort, aimed to stop illegal drug use, distribution and trade. In the United States it relied on dramatically increasing prison sentences for drug dealers and users. The crackdown was controversial from the start, but many OAS Member States welcomed US assistance to fight drug interests and preserve the power of the state. The policy also has been criticized for as ineffective in its goal to curb the drug crisis. Despite these criticisms, the War on

Drugs still exists today, albeit at varying levels of enforcement.⁴

For the Member States of the OAS, the sudden declaration from Washington was a challenge, an opportunity and a threat. The oldest regional organization in the world, the OAS goes back to the Nineteenth Century. In its current form, it was established in 1948 in Bogotá, Colombia, with the signing of the Charter of the OAS. It was created to coalesce the American Republics through a web of shared institutions, establishing the inter-American system. With the U.S leadership at the time, the OAS and its other 18 original members was created to promote regional cooperation to solve systemic issues in the Americas.

By 1971, the OAS expanded from the 19 original members to 24 members. Today, it includes 35 independent states of the Americas, with permanent observer status to 70 states and the European Union. The OAS has undergone changes, starting with the Protocols of Buenos Aires (1967), Cartagena de Indias (1985), Managua (1993) and Washington (1992). Each of these protocols lays a foundation for how disputes such as drug-abuse and trafficking are handled by the OAS.⁵

From 1971 on, the U.S. and other OAS countries attempted to implement a menu of options to fix rampant drug use and sales. At first, countries like the U.S. imposed austere measures aimed at eradicating the problem. Once countries began realizing that this issue was not going to be completely solved, they began adopting more moderate solutions.

Nevertheless, it goes without saying that there has been great debate among OAS countries as to which is the best pathway for these countries to collectively take, so that the drug issue can be

³ Jamie Smyth, 'et al., The global network behind the fentanyl crisis', *Financial Times*, 8 November 2023, <https://ig.ft.com/fentanyl-crisis/>

⁴ 'War on Drugs', *History.com*, n.d., <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/the-war-on-drugs>.)

⁵ 'OAS: Who We Are', *oas.org*, n.d. https://www.oas.org/en/about/who_we_are.asp.)

regionally improved. Feelings that the U.S. manipulated the region with its War on Drugs persists among many OAS members. Many OAS countries see U.S. drug policies as too drastic and unaccommodating to adopt in their domains.

Others see the U.S. anti-drug effort as a show of Great Power chauvinism. They have criticized it as a cover for some of the country's complex race relations coming out of the Civil Rights era in the 1960s. For these reasons and more, the OAS has been accused by different stakeholders for aiding U.S. hegemony.



Mexican troops during a gun battle in 2007. Mexico's drug war claims nearly 50,000 lives each year. Source: Wikipedia.

This begs a question: do OAS members need to forge deeper integration to confront their continentally shared drug problem? A follow-up question tied into the former is: Can the OAS serve as a viable actor in facilitating genuine regional cooperation that helps make real progress in the hemispheric drug issue? Finding suitable answers to these questions is crucial.

It is important for the OAS to carve a viable pathway for regional integration that moves the fight against drugs forward, not back. Otherwise, countries will continue to promote the wrong policies and remain distant and cold on matters

stressing more regional cooperation. This trend will not bode well in lessening the negative impacts that drugs have in the Americas.

The failure of US-led efforts is felt throughout the Americas region. Five of the world's top drug-trafficking countries are in the OAS: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, and Mexico. The consequences are inescapable. In Puerto Rico, for example 80 percent of murder is attributed to the illegal drug trade.⁶ Many OAS countries have solidified as major drug producers and transit points for drug-smuggling.

Drug-trafficking is a major regional issue, despite attempts to solve it. Regrettably, this illicit trade and War on Drugs solutions, catalyzes for other systemic issues that plague OAS countries. These include mass incarceration, mass violence, gang terror, racism, economic deterioration, rise of other criminal enterprises, and undermining the ability of the state to govern. As a result, U.S.-led strategies to combat the drug trade have not been welcomed by OAS countries as much as one would think.

The OAS is consistently scrutinized for not fostering intra-regional cooperation on the War on Drugs. Yet, the bloc has certainly been instrumental in facilitating consensus-building efforts and positive social change in the region regarding this controversial subject matter.

What can the OAS do in the War on Drugs?

The OAS has evolved over the years, in large part as they struggled to develop effective anti-drug policies. The Protocol of Buenos Aires allowed amendments to the Charter of the OAS. The Cartagena de Indias Protocol established the

⁶ Yagoub, M. (2017). "Caribbean Profile." *Insight Crime*. <https://insightcrime.org/caribbean-organized-crime-news/caribbean/>.



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Permanent Council as the main apparatus to handle the OAS' peaceful settlements of disputes. It is the OAS' function to facilitate peace by "assisting parties in dispute settlements and recommendations for the peaceful settlement of disputes."⁷

Country	Year Joined OAS
Argentina	1948
Antigua and Barbuda	1981
Bahamas	1982
Belize	1991
Barbados	1967
Bolivia	1948
Brazil	1948
Canada	1990
Chile	1948
Colombia	1948
Costa Rica	1948
Cuba*	1948
Dominica	1979
Dominican Republic	1948
Ecuador	1948
El Salvador	1948
Grenada	1975
Guatemala	1948
Guyana	1991
Haiti	1948
Honduras	1948
Jamaica	1969
Mexico	1948
Nicaragua	1948
Panama	1948
Paraguay	1948
Peru	1948
Saint Kitts and Nevis	1984
Saint Lucia	1979
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1981
Suriname	1977

Trinidad and Tobago	1967
United States	1948
Uruguay	1948
Venezuela	1948

*Note: Cuba was suspended from the OAS in 1962 on major vote of the other Member States. Cuba was reinstated in 2009.⁸ At ODUMUNC Cuba is regarded as an active member in the simulation.

In times of strife, the OAS does not enforce compliance amongst its members. It only can seek peaceful solutions through sensibly crafted resolutions and constructive dialogue among the feuding parties. The Managua Protocol improved the OAS' organizational structure by boosting economic cooperation and development between member-states. It created the *Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI)* to replace the less-efficient *Council for Education, Science, and Culture (CIDI)*.⁹ CIDI serves as a forum to discuss policy-level issues, such as drug-trafficking or the elimination of poverty.

The Washington Protocol is another check on the OAS' punitive character. Some states, like Mexico, reiterated their stance that the OAS ought to be committed to strengthening the region's pro-democratic voices and institution, since issues jeopardizing the region's democratic order cannot be solved through the isolation, suspension, or exclusion of its members. Internal conflicts within member states are not to be met with inflexible OAS action.¹⁰

Despite these democratic principles used by the OAS, it has still been accused of promoting the national interests of its more powerful member states. When it comes to the War on Drugs', the OAS has been scrutinized by critics advocating

⁷ OAS. (2023).

⁸ OAS. (2023). "OAS: Member States." https://www.oas.org/en/member_states/.

⁹ Organization of American States (OAS). (1993). Protocol of Amendments to the Charter of the

American States ("Protocol of Managua"). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3de4a67d4.html>.

¹⁰ OAS. (2023).

softer positions on the drug problem. which path it should take in the U.S.’ ‘War on Drugs’ and the drug issue (as a whole) in the Americas. As follows these are alternatives taken, avoided, and potentially for the OAS.

Taken Paths: Since Nixon’s 1971 statement, the OAS Drug Commission has issued yearly reports about alternative pathways towards quelling the regional drug problem. In 2015, OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza noted ‘the problem of prison overcrowding in nearly all the countries of the hemisphere due to drug enforcement mainly through criminal sanctions has generated negative consequences such as overloaded Courts and prisons, and the suffering of thousands of people imprisoned for minor drug offenses.’¹¹



President Nixon announced the War on Drugs, 1971

Critics argue that hardline drug enforcement policies compound the drug issue, driving drug prices up, creating overcrowded prisons, making it difficult for law enforcement authorities to manage the expanding drug networks. The OAS’ CICAD recommended more regional cooperation in investing in “treatment, drug rehabilitation, and recovery support services to

drug-dependent small-scale offenders as an alternative to imprisonment, and in some cases, criminal prosecution.”¹²

In 1989, the OAS voted, 20 to 1 (the United States), to censure U.S. military interventions in the hemisphere, as they relate to the War on Drugs. This was a response to outrage over the U.S. invasion to remove the drug kingpin and Panamanian dictator, Manuel Noriega. This resentment prompted certain countries, like Peru, to suspend cooperation with U.S. anti-drug efforts.¹³

Untaken Paths: The OAS considered but did not oppose U.S. leadership on drug issues. It cannot guarantee absolute compliance from its members to refuse the implementation of destructive drug enforcing measures in their countries, based on the Washington Protocol.

The OAS cannot overstep its boundaries by punishing Member States for introducing their own domestic options. The OAS did not put a comprehensive plan of action together to offset critical errors that exacerbated the drug problems. It accepted many flawed plans, which at times augmented isolation, suspensions, and exclusion and created cultural disharmony among some of the OAS member states.

Potential Alternatives: The alternative for the OAS is reformation of the OAS Charter to make it easier for it to intervene in matters where its members intensify regional crises, due to their unwillingness to comply with OAS recommendations and/or their national preference to solve the issues through uncooperative and socially dangerous means. This could include granting the OAS permission to take control of dire situations to avoid spillover effects into other member countries. This increased role for the OAS would need

¹¹ OAS. (2023).

¹² OAS. (2023).

¹³ Goshko, John M., and Michael Isikoff. (1989).

“OAS Votes to Censure U.S. for Intervention.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/05/16/oas-a-troubled-forum-on-panama/f27bf5cb-3b78-4c6c-9b8c-8b41ded105e4/>.



increased cooperation to assess the implications of actions taken by specific OAS members.

Positions of some OAS Member States (circa 1971)

Central America: Northern Triangle countries (Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala) saw Central America emerge as a distinctive crime and illicit transnational trade hub. During this period, *maras* (violent gangs) became the main culprit of transporting drug and violence across the U.S.-Mexican border and contributed to the rise of crime in cities like Los Angeles.¹⁴ To manage the Northern Triangle drug explosion the U.S. tailored its immigration policies for mass deportation.

In Nicaragua, the U.S. moved for military intervention to end the drug problem. In the 1980s, Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega struck a transit deal with Pablo Escobar, the Colombia drug king, essentially making the Central American nation a narco-state. Washington got regional support for anti-Nicaraguan government Contra rebels.¹⁵ These actions failed, but the OAS could not stop the U.S. Nor did the OAS address the concerns made by weaker countries where drug-trafficking presents a major dilemma.

Colombia: Despite these rising tensions, the War on Drugs helped turn Colombia into a major battleground. Since the *Medellin*

Massacre in 1975, Colombia became a major U.S. ally in the campaign.¹⁶ Colombia welcomed U.S. aid and joint plans-of-action to confront drug crime. Such efforts included blocking Pablo Escobar's election to the Colombian Congress in March 1982 (after Escobar doled out money to Catholic priests and Medellin slums to garner their electoral support); ratification of a U.S.-Colombian extradition treaty in 1981; and USD 1.3 billion in U.S. military aid in 2000 to reduce cocaine produced in Colombia by aerial spraying of coca crops with herbicides, and training the Colombian military's combat helicopter fleet.¹⁷ Despite such cooperation among OAS members to tackle mutual drug challenges, these policies also cause divisions within the OAS.

Jamaica: Illustrating a different path, Jamaica explored drug policies at the national level, rather than becoming reliant on the U.S. involvement. Authorities in Jamaica advocated for more lenient laws, ending mandatory criminal sentencing for cannabis.¹⁸ This policy contributed to drug-trafficking involving the Caribbean island, but Jamaica saw it as a better fit than stricter moves seen in the U.S. A similar independent stance has been advocated for Mexico, after rifts in its relations with the United States over the issue.

Mexico: U.S. President Nixon allocated much of his USD 20 billion drug budget to thwart Mexico's booming drug market. According to figures gathered by U.S. authorities, at its height, this accounted for 10 percent of Mexico's

¹⁴ Noria Research. (2013). "The Downward Spiral of the Northern Triangle in Central America." <https://noria-research.com/central-america-stuck-in-traffic-the-downward-spiral-of-the-northern-triangle-in-central-america>.

¹⁵ Peralta, E. (2014). "Nicaragua Follows Its Own Path in Dealing with Drug Traffickers." *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/10/26/357791551/nicaragua-follows-its-own-path-in-dealing-with-drug-traffickers>.

¹⁶ After Colombian police seized 600 kilos of cocaine—the largest seizure for many decades—from

a small plane, in November 1975, drug traffickers responded by killing 40 people over the course of a weekend. This event symbolizes the power wielded by Colombia's cocaine industry, which is headquartered in the city of Medellin. (NPR, 2007).

¹⁷ NPR. (2007).

¹⁸ Nahas, G.G. (2001). "Critique of a study on ganja in Jamaica." *UNODC*. 17. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin_1985-01-01_4_page004.html.



economy, a USD 25 billion a year profit. This transnational illicit trade accounted for 90 percent of illicit drugs found in the U.S..¹⁹ Mexico's domestic drug war caused the deaths of 600,000 Mexicans..²⁰ This leaves each country with no choice but to coordinate their anti-drug efforts to confront the problem. However, this has caused a strain in U.S.-Mexican relations, as opposed to helping to solve the problems.

For instance, in 1992-93, President Clinton increased the legal trade in goods across the U.S.-Mexican border, making it more difficult for U.S. Customs and Mexican drug agencies to identify narcotics moving across the border. Meanwhile, Mexico set new rules limiting U.S. government agents in Mexico, denied them diplomatic immunity, prohibited them from carrying weapons, and designated their presence to only select locations throughout the country..²¹ These initiatives, showed the OAS unable to manage.

Mexico, in the words of one observer, 'sees certain drug problems like the explosion of fentanyl into the global drug market as a U.S. problem, not a Mexican one.' Mexico argues that the cartel community's ability to bribe U.S. officials and buy weapons from the U.S. is the real problem..²²

Panama: President George H.W. Bush's decision in 1989 to invade Panama in December 1989, culminating in the overthrow of Panamanian President Noriega, was a driving force for OAS members to take a more cautious approach on the War on Drugs in their own countries..²³

United States: In the Nixon years, the U.S. established the *Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention* (SAODAP) and the *Drug Enforcement Agency* (DEA). The DEA became the nation's leading agency facilitating the coordinated efforts of the other agencies to stamp out drugs. As Nixon affirmed, "in order to defeat the enemy it is necessary to wage an all-out offensive."²⁴ Other motives were involved. In a 1994 interview, Nixon's advisor, John Ehrlichman, was quoted:

We knew that we could not make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities... Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did..²⁵

This legitimated the *Controlled Substance Act* (CSA). For the first time, marijuana was classified as a Schedule 1 Drug like heroin, LSD, and MDMA

¹⁹ Puyana, J.C., et al. (2017). "Drugs, Violence, and Trauma in Mexico and the U.S." *National Library of Medicine*: 5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5768117>.

²⁰ Mrkonjić, E. (2023).

²¹ NPR. (2007). "The Forgotten War on Drugs." <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9252490>.

²² Dilanian, K. (2023). "Drug war cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico is at its lowest point in

decades. What went wrong?" *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/no-cooperation-us-mexico-drug-war-rena75093>.

²³ NPR. (2007).

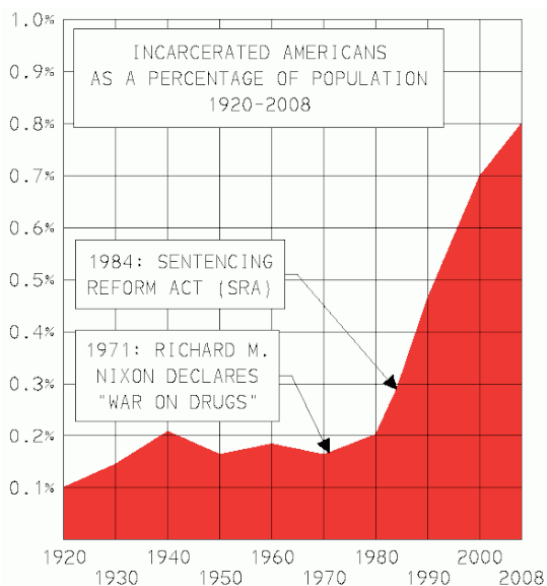
²⁴ Mann, Brian. (2021). "After 50 Years of the War on Drugs, 'What Good is it Doing for Us?'" NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/17/1006495476>.

²⁵ History.com. (2023).

(ecstasy).²⁶ This policy was pushed forward throughout the decades following Nixon’s declaration.

During the Carter era, there was a hiatus, stressing for the decriminalization and more humane alternatives to mass incarceration. But in the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan re-accelerated the War on Drugs, adding First Lady, Nancy Reagan’s ‘*Just Say No*’ campaign.²⁷ The Reagan administration also succeeded in having Congress pass the *Anti-Drug Abuse Act* (ADAA) in 1986.²⁸ This contributed to mass incarcerations for non-violent drug offenses, with over 500,000 people imprisoned for drug-related offenses.²⁹

In the Obama era, between 2009 and 2013, some 40 states took steps to introduce fairer drug laws to reduce penalties and imprisonments. This even led to the legalization of marijuana in certain states. Federally, the Obama administration’s efforts to scale-back the ‘War on Drugs’ coincided with Congress passage of the *Fair Sentencing Act* (FSA) in 2010, that finally reduced the long-standing discrepancy between crack and powder cocaine offenses.³⁰ Regardless of these improvements, the U.S. still has acted unilaterally, over the years, since the implementation of its ‘War on Drugs’ campaign. These unilateral and bilateral behaviors impact the entire hemisphere, with little OAS oversight.



Prison population in the U.S., 1920-2008, showing the effect of the War on Drugs. Source: Wikipedia

Regional Outlook for The War on Drugs

Fast forward to the current state of the OAS. The organization has grown from 24 countries in 1971 to 35 in 2023 with the entry of Antigua and Barbuda (1981), Bahamas (1982), Belize (1991), Canada (1990), Dominica (1979), Grenada (1975), Guyana (1991), Saint Kitts and Nevis (1984), Saint Lucia (1979), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (1981), and Suriname (1977).³¹ Many members have reservations about solutions to the region’s drug problem. There is a mutual understanding that the world and region are not going to become drug-free. Therefore, more practical solutions must be

²⁶ History.com. (2023).

²⁷ History.com. (2023).

²⁸ Legalized mandatory prison sentences for certain drug offenses that perpetuated criticisms of having racist undertones (History.com., 2023.)

²⁹ Mrkonjić, E. (2023).

³⁰ Mrkonjić, E. (2023).

³¹ OAS. (2023).

offered to mitigate the negative impacts on societies in the Americas.

This has resulted in OAS members taking more liberal approaches towards handling their drug dilemma. In turn, this creates a new format for the OAS to bridge together comprehensive plans to promote continental solidarity and mutual respect for sovereignty relating to this touchy issue. Major themes for adaptation include:

1. Together: OAS countries understand that the drug problem is a symptom of broader insecurity issues. They should work together to reform and reinforce domestic institutions, so it is easier for governments to “control organized crime and the violence and corruption it generates.

2. Pathways: If prohibition and criminal sanctions are causing more harm than good, OAS states can experiment with alternative legal and regulatory regimes, starting with cannabis, and reallocate resources from controlling drugs and drug users to preventing and treating problematic use.

3. Resilience: Social and economic aspects of the War on Drugs can lead to violence and worse addiction. Thus, their response might better focus on empowering communities by improving public safety, health, education, employment, through bottom-up programs.³²

If the OAS can promote cooperation among its member s, there may be progress in the fight against drugs. The OAS’ Executive Secretary of CICAD foresees a brighter forecast in regional cooperation against drugs. This could

³² Patrick, Stewart M., (2013). “Winds of Change in the War on Drugs: An OAS Report That Won’t Gather Dust.” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

happen by limiting the historically free flow of drugs in the region.³³



OAS headquarters, Washington, D.C.

Current Activity

Canada: With Canada as an OAS member, Canada can serve as an integral mediator or ally for the United States, Mexico, and other OAS member states to help settle disputes in their fights against illegal drugs.

Canada’s current War on Drugs approach is more adaptable for other OAS members to mimic. Rather than ramping up the harsh aspects of its ‘War on Drugs’, Canada’s government under Prime Minister Trudeau administration shifted away from criminalization and introduced supervised injection clinics. Further, it has laid the groundwork to expand access to prescription heroin and decriminalization of marijuana.³⁴ Canada’s national suicide rate has seen a sharp decline and local authorities have been more effective in coordinating their resources to fight dangerous areas of drug-based violence as its penal system decriminalized minor drug offenses.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/winds-change-war-drugs-oas-report-wont-gather-dust>.

³³ OAS. (2023).

³⁴ Denvir, D. (2017).



Central America: Countries like Honduras and Nicaragua remain sensitive to foreign intervention in their anti-drug policies. The same applies to Guatemala, Haiti, and even Panama. In Nicaragua, the Ortega government's unilateral crackdown and strong stance against the drug cartels transforming the country into a police state. Managua has opted to handle its drug situation through hardline measures that deeply infringe on basic human rights. These actions have been unchallenged in the OAS. In an interview, President Ortega chided accusations against how the country handles its drug problem,

Nicaragua seizes tons of cocaine each year. If the world wanted to fix the drug problem, the U.S. should look to its own people first. We are the ones dealing with all the dead people and all the fighting, yet the consumers, the ones that provoke the phenomenon, are the ones who also decide who is doing a good job.³⁵

This puts the OAS and its members in a difficult position. What does it want from Nicaragua, democratization and human rights, or the War on Drugs? As more states seek for more regional cooperation certain complications exist that can set back these efforts.

United States: There is interest in the United States in moving beyond the War on Drugs, but the issue is very sensitive and controversial. From 1990 to 2021, an ideological shift occurred as 73 percent of U.S. people in favor of a mandatory death sentence for major drug traffickers' changed to become 67 percent thinking the focal point of the drug problem should be treatment instead of persecution.³⁶

This push in drug policy shift coincided in the Obama era's softer stance towards the reformation of state laws decriminalizing drugs, like marijuana or reducing drug-related prison sentences. However, during the Trump presidency onwards, the U.S. austere history with its War on Drugs was back.³⁷

Emerging Narco-trafficking States (Argentina?): Much depends on integration of the OAS members' drug policies, especially in drug-trafficking hotspots like Argentina. The Argentine city of Rosario has become a haven for some of Colombia's drug cartels driven out of the country throughout the last three decades. It is also the base of transnational crime organizations, like the *Los Monos* (The Monkeys), becoming a drug trafficking hub to neighboring Bolivia and Paraguay. Buenos Aires is becoming a giant consumer market, a major part of the region's drug problem.³⁸

Some Possible Proposals for OAS Action

For the OAS and its members to settle disputes concerning how to best manage the hemisphere's growing drug crisis, these are specific proposals for the OAS to adopt.

Do Nothing! Authorize the Member States to regulate the problem themselves, where countries act unilaterally or cooperatively of their own accord. The benefit of this policy is that OAS would not be seen as an instrument of U.S. hegemony, that constantly sides with U.S. actions. However, a downside of this approach is that in situations where states break from this approach and execute obtrusive methods, then

³⁵ Peralta, E., (2014).

³⁶ Mrkonjić, E., (2021).

³⁷ Denvir, D. (2017). "Canada Figured Out How to Win the Drug War." *Slate*.
<https://dan.thedigradio.com/post/176220224696/canada-figured-out-how-to-win-the-drug-war>.

³⁸ Salomon, J., (2019). "Argentina's Piñero Prison Becoming Increasing Organized Crime Hotspot." *InSight Crime*.
<https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/argentina-pinero-prison-crime-hotspot/>.



the OAS can be seen as a useless agency, with no real legitimacy if it chooses not to intervene.

Favors: OAS members for whom national sovereignty is weak or sensitive, worried about their powerful neighbors, such as Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela.

Against: Member States who need cooperation from their neighbors to deal with their own drug problems, such as Argentina, Central American states, Ecuador, Mexico, United States.

Create an OAS para-military taskforce for stability missions in member countries with high-rate drug problems. This second approach can help the hemisphere pool its resources together to combat transnational crime organizations from country-to-country. Limits will be placed on the OAS' military presence, but allowing for this scenario takes pressure off the U.S. and its agencies being seen as militaristic villains with a checkered past of botched military interventions. It also takes the pressure off certain states (in poor economic conditions) from having to allocate its resources for protecting its borders and then mismanaging the situation. The negative side of this policy is that some countries will not comply to this increased OAS presence, because they have more faith in their own domestic agencies to handle the issue, even if they are not all that equipped to do so.

Favors: Brazil, Canada, Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Against: Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.

Institute an OAS-wide experiment; each country picks one city where all illegal drugs will be decriminalized. According to a study by American Progress, just legalizing marijuana would save USD 7.7 billion a year in enforcement costs in the U.S.³⁹ This would free

up revenue to invest in prevention/treatment initiatives and will make drug enforcement agencies more proficient in increasing their resources to combat the drug trade. If implemented in each OAS country, this will strip drug cartels of their power and simultaneously lower the demand/usage of drugs, because its prohibition is what makes drugs a high-demand commodity.

In Canada, cities like Montreal have initiated their own legalization experiments. Drugs still must be regulated, like in the Netherlands. If OAS members feel like this strategy is working, they can push to legalize certain drugs in more of their countries. A shortcoming of this policy might be how diversified transnational crime organizations have become. Therefore, if drugs are openly decriminalized across the Americas, cartels can shift their interests towards other illicit businesses such as prostitution. In these cases, similar issues that stem from the drug trade, like the perpetuation of mass violence and exploitation can occur with prostitution. Therefore, OAS members might have to be more inclined to decriminalize other illicit vices.

Favors: Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Jamaica,

Against: Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, United States.

Treat illegal drugs as a public health issue, stressing health-risks, or prevention and treatment. This would trade prosecution for treatment, possibly accepting a dramatic surge in illicit drug use for a reduction in over-all harm; more people will become addicted, but hopefully fewer will die. Some countries might be ready for such a step. A major problem is domestic politics in other Member States, especially popular disapproval in more conservative countries, which might make such an option impossible for many.

³⁹ Mrkonjić, E., (2021).



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This also would improve the ability of the OAS to function. It would help reduce a basic source of tensions between OAS members. In the 21st century, Cuba, Honduras, and Venezuela have been suspended from taking part in OAS meetings. In Venezuela's case, it abstained from being included in OAS discussions. A problem with this strategy is that it repudiates the OAS long-agreed pathways. However, this challenge might be minimized if this initiative also included global institutions like WHO to observe this approach and offer constructive feedback that might help settle any disputes that may arise. Failure to implement this strategy could result in the OAS members looking towards China's increased role in the region to foster these efforts, instead. Making it less of a regional initiative in the process.

Favors: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela.

Against: El Salvador, Haiti, United States.

Conclusion

All in all, the harsher tones seen in War on Drugs policies have put the OAS in a precarious position. As the region's largest regional organization, that urges deeper hemispheric cooperation from its members to resolving its systemic issues, illicit drug-use and trafficking, is a paralyzing issue, a barrier to action on this issue and others.

The OAS could continue with the War on Drugs, it could follow a path of silence, which might make many Member States happy, or they could agree to actively support new policies. Distrust among its sovereign Member States remains a major barrier in finding common ground on this matter. Perhaps the OAS can realize this situation in its consensus building to address the hemispheric drug situation. If the OAS makes succeeds, it's Member States are happy. Maybe they agree to more of the same. Maybe they vote to do nothing but leave each other alone. And maybe they start substantive change on the region's drug problem, yielding enduring results.



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