Rethinking the Global War on Drugs

The Editorial Board

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At the urging of Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia, world leaders met at the United Nations in a special session last week to discuss saner ways to fight the drug trade. They did not get very far toward a shift in approach. Nonetheless, there was a consensus that investing in health care, addiction treatment and alternatives to incarceration would do more to end the drug trade than relying primarily on prohibition and criminalization.

“A war that has been fought for more than 40 years has not been won,” President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia said in an interview. “When you do something for 40 years and it doesn’t work, you need to change it.”

Mr. Santos and the presidents of Mexico and Guatemala argue that the war on drugs, which has been largely directed under terms set by the United States, has had devastating effects on their countries, which are hubs of the cocaine, marijuana and heroin trade. “When two elephants fight, the grass always suffers the most,” President Jimmy Morales of Guatemala said, referring to the drug cartels and American law enforcement agencies.

Since 2014, the three governments and like-minded allies have sought to lay the groundwork for changes to the current approach, which is grounded in three international drug accords adopted between the early 1960s and 1988. Those treaties, which required that signatories outlaw the trade and possession of controlled substances — including marijuana — were conceived at a time when international leaders saw law enforcement as the most effective way to curb drug production and consumption.

Unfortunately, several countries with considerable diplomatic clout, including China and Russia, maintain that criminalization should remain the cornerstone of the fight against drugs.

The Obama administration supported the meeting, and has been relatively receptive to new ideas from neighboring countries. “We are seeing tremendous advances in our understanding of drug dependency and our ability to address substance use disorders as a public health — rather than a strictly criminal justice — challenge,” Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement.

But the United States will need to play a much stronger role in shaping new policies. It is in the untenable position of violating the existing treaties — now that four states have legalized the sale of recreational marijuana — while arguing that they remain a viable framework.
Other countries are charting their own paths. The Canadian government, for instance, recently announced that it will introduce a bill next spring to decriminalize the sale of marijuana. Mexican leaders announced during the meeting that their country intends to legalize medical marijuana and loosen restrictions on the amount of drugs people can possess for personal use.

These new policies could render the existing drug treaties obsolete. Clearly, those accords need to be updated, heeding the experiences and lessons learned by the nations that have paid the highest price in the drug war.