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War, “Like War”, or Something Else?

Robert Killebrew

Bob Killebrew, a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, is heading up a major study on the relationships between gangs, the Chavez government, and U.S. national security. What follows is the central question that is evolving from the study – is this war? Or something like war? Opinions are not only welcome – but encouraged; it's Bob Killebrew at bkillebrew@cna.org.

Purveyors of “Fourth Generation War” have suggested that future warfare will have certain characteristics; that it will be decentralized, complex and transnational; it will involve actors from many networks, and that it will involve political, social, military and economic factors.

What, then, do we make of the activities of Venezuela, Iran, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), the Mexican drug cartels and the Latino gangs both destabilizing Central America and operating on our streets today? All are acting from different motives, all are highly organized and, in some cases, networked organizations, and all are, for different reasons, threats to the national security of the United States. And all are connected by the supply of illegal drugs to the U.S. and to other countries.

Consider the case of Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. Until Chavez' election in 1998, Venezuela was a modern, developing South American state with little history of aggression. Today, Chavez is an outspoken opponent of the United States and has entered into military and trade agreements with Iran that are clearly aimed at the U.S. His country is in slow collapse – the currency was just devalued, crime is highest in South America, and the state's coffers are empty from financing revolutionary activities around the region. He is sponsoring an anti-U.S. “Bolivarian Revolution” in South and Central America that is opening Iranian doors – in ways similar to those opened in Venezuela – in Bolivia, Brazil and Nicaragua. Iranian advisors are serving with the Venezuelan army, and direct flights operate between Tehran and Caracas, carrying unknown persons and cargo. Venezuelan passports are widely available. The Venezuelan bank Banco Internacional de Desarrollo has been sanctioned for helping Iran avoid international sanctions; Iranian-owned and controlled factories have been established in remote parts of Venezuela and are suspected of producing munitions. Although oil production is falling, his government is broke and there is no apparent threat from anywhere, Chavez' government has entered trade deals with Russia to purchase billions in arms – surface-to-air missiles, tanks, aircraft and other hardware, ostensibly to guard against a U.S. invasion.

Additionally, Chavez is also sheltering the FARC, which, though losing the revolutionary war with Columbia, continues to be the world's largest producer of cocaine. Venezuela's role in protecting FARC, aggressively opposing Columbia and U.S. support for Columbia's antidrug war, and its own role in facilitating the shipment of FARC's cocaine north toward to the U.S. and east, to West Africa, makes Venezuela a slowly disintegrating narco-state as well as a political and military opponent of the U.S. and its allies.

Or consider the Mexican drug cartels. Organized along family and feudal lines, the cartels receive cocaine from FARC and transship it across Mexico using channels that move not only drugs, but also illegal immigrants and other contraband materiel, into the United States. Within its own country, the Mexican government is fighting a courageous war against the cartels that thus far has claimed at least 14,000 lives in the past three years; the city of Juarez, across from El Paso, had over 2500 murders last year. The outcome – whether Mexico will be able to reestablish law and order, or rather establish law and order, period – is very much in doubt, and may depend more on whether the cartels can settle differences between them than the government's campaign. The man behind the government's attempt to reestablish law and order, pro-U.S. President Felipe Calderon, is serving a single six-year term and the political outlines of the next election are not yet clear. Given an understandable amount of war-weariness on the part of voters, the cartels' entrenched and violent history against the State and Chavez' past history of meddling in the politics of other states, the chance that the U.S. might someday have a hostile Mexico on its southern border is now not as farfetched as it once was. That would be a huge score for Hugo and his Iranian allies.

The Mexican cartels now operate inside the United States, distributing marijuana and meth produced in Mexico, and cocaine produced by the FARC in Columbia and protected by Venezuela, to both local and Latino drug gangs operating on the streets of America's towns and cities. Newspaper reports indicated that some cartels are stockpiling weapons – pistols, automatic rifles, grenade launchers, bulletproof vests – inside the United States. Big-city and smaller police departments around the U.S. are struggling with violent Latino gangs from Central America who control drug distribution in cities from Los Angeles to Denver to Washington, D.C. Organizations like MS-13 and the 18th Street Gangs operate at a level of violence and intimidation not seen by even our homegrown gangs; beatings and murder enforce discipline among thugs who shelter inside immigrant populations wary of police, but who are also preyed upon. And both the cartels and the Latino gangs are aggressively spreading across the country, just as across the Atlantic the FARC's cocaine is also spreading northward through West Africa, destroying weaker states as it spreads.

If this is a war – if this is a war – then we are losing. On the positive side, both Venezuela and Iran are ruled by shaky regimes; Venezuela is in slow economic collapse and its allies in South and Central America are following the same broken, socialist model to economic ruin. The government of Iran's authority is being challenged in the streets. Mexico is fighting a valiant war, and Columbia is a qualified success story – “qualified” until the FARC is destroyed. Police and other law enforcement authorities in the U.S. are vigorously prosecuting the cartels and gangs, and there are local successes.

On the downside, though, even bankrupt and broken governments tend to have staying power – the Soviet Union, after all, lingered for decades on the strength of oppression and habit. Chavez is a putatively democratically elected leader, and so are his allies – however they manipulated the process, the elections have been recognized, so his “Bolivarian Revolution” and its Iranian support will continue, which means that Iranian Republican Guard “commercial” companies will continue to spread across Central and South America. Venezuelan support will keep FARC alive and producing cocaine. The cartels will probably still be vicious, viable and pushing FARC-supplied cocaine (and other drugs) by the time the Mexican elections roll around; in fact, they may have settled their own internal wars and be willing to do a back-scratching deal with the president who follows Calderon; you back off, we’ll just do business as usual – pushing drugs and people across the border, but perhaps with less murder, kidnapping, extortion and general lawlessness inside Mexico.

Inside the U.S., though, the forecast is for growth of the cartels and gang “cultures,” the wide and constantly shifting networks of Latino gangs and their local counterparts. The cartels have only recently arrived in the U.S. in force – within the part year or two – and their influence, like the Latino gangs, is spreading. Corruption and intimidation of government officials – their MO in Mexico – is now beginning inside the U.S. along the southern border.

Of course, the single greatest source of support for the FARC, cartels and gangs is the American appetite for illegal drugs – it is the U.S. drug market that draws these thugs and finances their operations to the tune of about \$60B a year. So any effective strategy has got to deal with the financial incentives of the drug trade and domestic issues – law enforcement, treatment, prison reform, legalization – as a strategic issue allied with actions overseas. As Pogo said, we have met the enemy and he is us.

If this is a war, our responses thus far have been effective in some areas – for example, helping Columbia back from the brink of collapse – and not in others. Some have had unintended consequences, as when we successfully tightened down on the Caribbean drug routes and the traffic shifted to overland routes through Mexico, which caused the rise of the modern-day cartels. If this is a war, we are fighting with some success at the tactical level, with some at the operational level – closing down the Caribbean routes, for example – but little at the strategic level. Venezuela has combined both narco-trafficking and alliances with hostile states to produce a multifaceted threat that we have not yet acknowledged.

So the question remains – is this a war? Or just a collection of unrelated events. If it is a war, although it may not be expedient to label it so, can military analysis be applied to a center of gravity, decisive points and lines of operation and so forth? How does the U.S. and its allies meet a challenge like this more effectively, both now and in the future – because mitigating these threats will take years, and will probably not be resolved by military force alone, or even partially. Without predicting the determination of an enemy center of gravity, the use of the Services in this particular case will probably not be the main effort, or even the secondary effort unless integrated into other parts of national strategy. Of these questions, only one thing seems fairly certain – what we’re doing now isn’t working, and unless we solve the narco-state challenges posed by Venezuela and its criminal allies, we’re going to be increasingly vulnerable to our South.

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