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Cartel v. Cartel: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency

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As the decade ends, Mexico's criminal insurgency continues. Yet the narco-war in 2010 is not identical to the violence that began three years ago. Mexico's criminal insurgency at the beginning of 2010 is distinguished by three main trends: continuing (though increasingly diffused) violence against the state, increasing militarization of the Mexican state's response, and a growing feeling of defeat among some within Mexican policy circles. Additionally, the conflict has assumed broader transnational dimensions.

On the surface, the conflict has entered into a period of seeming stasis. But it is a bloody stalemate—and the war promises to continue simmering well into this year and beyond. According to the Mexican press, 2009 may have been the bloodiest year of the war, with 7,600 Mexicans perishing in the drug war.¹ Whatever the nature of the conflict, the danger still remains to American interests. As we have noted before, loose talk of a Mexican “failed state” obscures the real problem of a subtler breakdown of government authority and bolstering of the parallel authorities that cartels have already created.

All Against All

The government's strategy, essentially a ‘war of attrition’ is failing. The result of heavy-handed military action is the increasing ‘fractilization’ of the conflict, higher levels of violence, and increasing discontent by the general public and elites. Though the war has largely vanished from the mainstream American press after last summer's panic over the prospect of Mexico as a ‘failed state,’ the violence continues and risks of cross-border spillover remain.

From the beginning, the criminal insurgency was never a unified project.² Cartels fought each other as well as the government for control of crucial drug smuggling routes, the *plazas*.³ The

¹ Arthur Brice, “Deadliest Year in Mexico's War on Drugs,” CNN, 01 January 2010. <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/12/31/mexico.violence/>.

² For a look at some recent example of cartel infighting, see Dane Schiller and Dudley Althaus, “Mexican drug cartels fight military and one another,” *Houston Chronicle*, 16 December 2009, <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6774555.html>.

³ For a summary of the conflict so far, see the previous two pieces by Sullivan and Elkus in *Small Wars Journal*, “State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 19 August 2008. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/08/state-of-siege-mexicos-crimina/> and “Plazas for Profit: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency,” 26 April 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/04/plazas-for-profit-mexicos-crim/>.

fragmented and post-ideological quality of the struggle often confused American commentators used to the idea of a unified and ideological Maoist-type insurgency as the be-all and end-all of insurgency.⁴ Yet the essential character of the insurgency is something that Clausewitz, were he around today and tuning into gangster-promoting *narcocorrido* music pumping out of Tijuana radios, could definitely understand.⁵

The Mexican government under President Felipe Calderón had elected to use force to crush the parallel states built up by cartels. The cartels decided to use force to accomplish the policy of thwarting the Mexican response. Adding to the violence was the internal competition between the cartels themselves for valuable drug-smuggling real estate, aided in part by corrupted sectors of the government that captured by the cartels.⁶ This is the basic genesis of the conflict, although the political and economic issues that contribute to and sustain it go back much further.⁷

Yet as the level of violence increased, the conflict has grown progressively less coherent. Where attacks once mainly focused on the state and other drug smuggling competitors, more and more attacks seem directed at civilian populations and more local in scope and origin. In part, some of this violence is the result of leadership vacuums, local turf wars, and the difficulty of controlling violent and reckless junior henchmen. However, it also seems the inevitable result of the escalation of the conflict, which has ripple effects on lower-order crime and violence. Slums have become war zones, with drug gangs recruiting discontented and impoverished youth to become foot soldiers over turf in such slums as Ciudad Juárez's Barrio Azul.⁸

As the war shifts local and regional power dynamics among cartels, power struggles expand and up-and-comers struggle with established criminal powers. Sadly typical of the low-level violence that increasingly characterizes the conflict was the apparently random death of an El Monte, California educator at the hands of unknown gunmen in the small town of Gomez Palacio.⁹

This piece is the third in an ongoing open-source effort by Sullivan and Elkus to track the strategic and operational dynamics of the Mexican criminal insurgency.

⁴ For a critique of such analytical tendencies, see Frank Hoffman, "Neoclassical Counterinsurgency," *Parameters*, Summary 2007, pp. 71-87. Also see Steven Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007. The works of historian Eric Hobsbawm on "social banditry" are also of interest to the debate.

⁵ Mark T. Clark, "Does Clausewitz Apply to Criminal States and Gangs" in Robert J. Bunker (Ed.), *Criminal States and Criminal Soldiers*, New York: Routledge, 2008 explains how Clausewitz is still supremely relevant in analysis of sub-state violence.

⁶ There has been a substantial literature that has accumulated on the Mexican drug war. We recommend, in particular, David Danelo, "Disorder on the Border" in U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, October 2009, http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY_ID=2055, Hal Brands, *Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counter-Drug Policy*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, May 2009, and Fernando Celaya Pacheco, "Narcoterrorism: How has Narcoterrorism Settled in Mexico?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 32, Issue 12 December 2009, pp. 1021 – 1048.

⁷ For a general history of Mexico that explains the context of political violence and corruption, see Enrique Krauze, *Mexico, Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico 1810- 1996*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

⁸ Alfred Corchado, "Slums are Front Lines in Mexico's Drug War," *Dallas Morning News*, 01 January 2010. http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/world/mexico/stories/DN-barrio_01int.ART.State.Edition2.4b9fac8.html.

⁹ Hector Berrera, "Slain El Monte School-Board Member Bobby Salcedo is Honored, Mourned," *Los Angeles Times*, 04 January 2010, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-el-monte5-2010jan05.0.7990747.story>.

Longtime Latin America watcher Samuel Logan, for example, notes that even *Los Zetas*, the former military unit turned cartel enforcer group, has become larger and less professional.¹⁰

Competition between groups can also be expressed through government action, as cartels have captured lower-level military and law enforcement arms. Journalist Philip Caputo argues provocatively that the Mexican drug war is a civil war between cartels and their government clients rather than the government and the cartels.¹¹ In a way, this is the inevitable result of the government's heavy crackdown, as it throws military and police elements and their families into direct temptation and coercion by cartels. In this manner, the conflict has become even more diffused and dangerous for the average Mexican.

As we emphasize the diffuse character of Mexican violence, we should not overemphasize its random nature. Even as the violence grows progressively more random, the central target for many groups remains the government. The government's goal is to destroy the cartels as political entities within Mexico and to expand state power to the parallel zones of sovereignty dominated by cartels. This is the reason why cartels fight as hard as they do, because they are fighting for their basic livelihood and existence against both the government and their competitors at the same time. They cannot back down.

Counter-Cartel Surges

The main vehicle for government control is the use of federal police and increasingly the military. The thinking of the government is essentially tactical, consisting of "surges" of troops to stabilize or 'pacify' violent areas. Ciudad Juárez, for example, is essentially an occupied city with a garrison of 7,000 soldiers and 2,000 federal police. As a *Wall Street Journal* report details, however, the killings continue unabated. By some estimates, Juárez's 165 deaths per 100,000 residents make it the murder capital of the world. Soldiers patrol but do not stay for long outside of their bases, for fear that extended contact with locals will induce desertions or defections to the higher-paying cartel organizations.¹² Mexican military tactics consist almost exclusively of raiding, hoping to win a war of attrition with the cartels.

Problems that face Mexican military units engaged in drug action are very similar to those encountered in modern counterinsurgencies such as Iraq and Afghanistan: a population too cowed by the enemy to cooperate, enemies hiding among the populace, and hit and run attacks by squad-sized enemy units. Intelligence issues also are a perennial problem. The trend of cartel soldiers engaging in pitched battles with weapons ranging from bazookas to anti-aircraft guns has been a constant of the conflict, Juan David Leal notes in an article for *El Diario*. Cartels also

¹⁰ Samuel Logan, "Los Zetas: Evolution of a Criminal Organization," *ISN Security Watch*, 11 March 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?id=97554&lng=en>.

¹¹ See Philip Caputo, "The Fall of Mexico," *The Atlantic*, December 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200912/mexico-drugs>.

¹² José de Córdoba and Joel Millman, "Mexico Ramps Up Drug War With a Surge on Rio Grande," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 December 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126143123803700665.html>.

routinely attack prisons to liberate arrested prisoners.¹³ They routinely launch grenade attacks on police garrisons and army bases, and aggressively attack patrols with the tenacity of guerrillas.¹⁴

The state of the drug war in Ciudad Juárez is emblematic of the dilemma facing the Mexican state. Consider the impact of the military and the corresponding impact of the conflict on the military. According to the aforementioned *Wall Street Journal* feature:

The chaos in Ciudad Juárez has snared Mexico's army, the country's most respected institution, in what may be a no-win situation. Even as the violence rises, so do allegations of human-rights abuses by the army. The failure to pacify Ciudad Juárez has put Mr. Calderón's antidrug strategy—based largely on using the military to retake control of the country from drug cartels that have corrupted local police and politicians—on embarrassing public display.¹⁵

Counterinsurgency (COIN) approaches are an attractive option for the Mexican state. According to Cordoba and Millman:¹⁶

Some experts say the Mexican army needs to adopt the style of the counter-insurgency tactics used by the U.S. military in the Iraq war. That strategy got American soldiers out of large bases and forced them to interact with the population and get intelligence. 'They have to co-mingle with the locals and find out who's who in the zoo. Find out where the bad guys are, and preempt them,' says a former U.S. military officer with knowledge of the Mexican army. But, the official says, the Mexican army, which is made up of conscripts, isn't trained on how to interact with the community. The result: a lot of patrolling that's good for show but bad for results.

Certainly, COIN has applicability since the Mexican drug war is part 'criminal insurgency' part 'high intensity crime.' However, more is needed. Integrated police, military, and intelligence operations are required, but community policing and conventional crime suppression must be emphasized over military approaches. This is also true in mainstream COIN, but even more critical in counter-drug, counter-gang, and criminal insurgencies.

The complexities of utilizing the military to restore domestic social control require additional research and examination. In Mexico, the reliance on military forces to curb the cartels and their extreme violence has led to accusations of human rights abuses. For example, Amnesty International, citing cases of alleged slayings by the military in the drug war, criticized civilian officials, saying they fail to properly investigate or prosecute crimes by the army. The Mexican army, deployed across Mexico as part of the government's campaign against drug cartels, has been accused of killing prisoners, torturing civilians and capturing suspects illegally.

¹³ Juan David Leal, "Retan narcos a soldados como si fueran otro ejército: analistas," *El Diario*, 09 December 2009. <http://www.diario.com.mx/nota.php?notaid=8414ff5be4872395a7ffc85acc7d1a4>.

¹⁴ "7,724 Slain in Mexico in 2009," *Latin American Herald Tribune*, 02 January 2010. <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=349667&CategoryId=14091>.

¹⁵ José de Cordoba and Joel Millman, "Mexico Ramps Up Drug War With a Surge on Rio Grande."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In its report, *Mexico: Human Rights Violations By The Military*, Amnesty International (AI) accuses the authorities of failing to fully probe allegations of abuses committed by the military, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial and unlawful killings, torture, ill treatment and arbitrary detentions. The AI report says the number of human rights abuse claims in Mexico has more than tripled from the beginning of 2008 through June of this year compared to the previous two years.¹⁷

Human rights are not the only concern. Communities besieged by narco-cartels often are also under siege from street gangs and more mundane criminals. State emphasis on cartel activity that ignores community policing has negative impacts on social stability. The resulting absence of security helps strengthen the hand of the cartels and erode the legitimacy of the state. Mexican authorities are currently recognizing this dilemma; for example, KPBS reports:

"Tijuana Mayor Jorge Ramos has given his police chief a new assignment this year: to focus on common crime. According to Ramos, common criminal activity in Tijuana has increased recently, 'Since we're fighting drug lords in the city. But our main responsibility is to fight the robberies and that kind of crime in the city, so that's going to be our main object this year.' The report notes that '[s]ome crime watchers and people in Tijuana's business sector have complained that Tijuana's police force has left large swaths of the city unprotected while police battle organized crime.'" ¹⁸

The situation in Tijuana highlights the importance of sustaining security and countering crime in conflict zones. After a sweeping review of the military's two-year occupation of Ciudad Juárez, officials concluded that the deployment of thousands of soldiers against drug traffickers has failed to control the violence and crime. As a result, police (albeit trained in urban combat) will soon replace the army as the primary security force. According to Reuters, the Mexican army, "facing accusations of rights abuses, will give federal police control of security in [Ciudad Juárez] the country's most violent drug war city even as cartel killings escalate."¹⁹

The dynamics of *intraconflict* policing demand more than COIN. Full-spectrum policing which uses some COIN approaches, integrates community policing, intelligence-led policing/intelligence preparation for operations to allow complex investigations. Together with corruption control, these form the foundation for the capacity to contain high-intensity violence and managing criminal insurgency. The key is developing an appropriate police capacity that can leverage the military for support rather than relying on the military as the core security force.

¹⁷ Tracy Wilkinson, "Rights group faults Mexico over alleged army abuse," *Los Angeles Times*, 09 December 2009; Amy Isackson, "Amnesty International Urges Mexico To Investigate Tijuana Torture Claims," KPBS News, 08 December 2009, and Mexico: New Reports of Human Rights Violations by the Military, London: Amnesty International, AMR 41/058/2009, December 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/058/2009/en/e1a94ad6-3df1-4724-a545-f0b93f39af69/amr410582009en.pdf>.

¹⁸ Amy Isackson, "Fighting Common Crime A Priority In Tijuana This Year," KPBS News, 05 January 2010, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/jan/05/fighting-common-crime-priority-tij>.

¹⁹ Julian Cardona, "Mexico army hands control to police in drug war city," Reuters, 15 January 2010, <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE60F0DB20100116>.

Unfortunately, Mexico's police do not have the skills. Police reform must be accelerated or the military will increasingly lose their effectiveness.²⁰

Since both existing police and regular military forces are severely challenged and at risk of being co-opted by the cartel gangsters, regular forces are increasingly augmented by specialized units drawn from the Navy. The employment of elite naval forces offers the advantages of higher levels of training, and quicker reaction times. In addition, the Navy is perceived as being more loyal than the increasingly cartel-penetrated Army and police forces. They are being utilized to essentially carry out decapitation raids against high-level cartel figures. This is another element of the attrition strategy.²¹ By targeting high-level figures, the Mexican government seeks to fatally weaken the cartels. Leadership targeting can be part of a counter-cartel strategy, as Colombia in the 1990s demonstrates. But it is not sufficient as the main effort of a counter-cartel strategy.

This has been demonstrated by the effect of the killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva, head of Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO). Navy special forces killed the drug lord to great fanfare and press attention. The drug organization reacted swiftly with brutal reprisals, including the murder of a fallen Mexican Marine's family.²² In this case, *La Jornada* reported:

‘Criminal groups with their firepower and powers of corruption are waging a determined battle to subjugate the country’ according to Mexican President Felipe Calderón. ‘We will not step back from this fight’ and there will be no truce and no quarter to the enemies of our country,’ he said.²³

Just hours after Calderón declared there would be “no quarter and no truce” in the war with criminal organizations, gunmen from a suspected BLO-Zetas commando team killed the mother and four relatives of a Navy Special Forces (Marine) sergeant who died in the raid in Cuernavaca that killed Arturo Beltrán Leyva. The BLO allied with the Zetas in 2008. Needless to say, another member of the BLO swiftly took Leyva's place.²⁴ The Leyva killing has also had effects on a long-running struggle between the Sinaloa Cartel, lead by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, and the Juárez Cartel and its leader, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes. Both are struggling for control over the lucrative Juárez plaza.²⁵

²⁰ See John P. Sullivan, "Police-Military Interaction in Mexico's Drug War," *Air & Space Power Journal-Spanish Edition*, Third Trimester 2009, <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2009/3tri09/sullivaneng.htm> for a discussion of the complexities and challenges of integrating police and military operations countering high intensity crime and criminal insurgency in Mexico.

²¹ Robin Emmett, "Mexico Turns to Navy to Bolster Flagging Drug War," *Reuters*, 18 December 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5BH4CF20091218>.

²² Elizabeth Malkin, "Revenge in Drug War Chills Mexico," 22 December 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/23/world/americas/23mexico.html?_r=1.

²³ Víctor Ballinas, "‘Ni tregua ni cuartel para los enemigos de la patria’, advierte Felipe Calderón," *La Jornada*, 22 December 2009, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/12/22/index.php?section=politica&article=006n1pol>.

²⁴ See "Asume Héctor Beltrán el mando del cártel: Policía Federal," *Noroeste.com*, 04 January 2010. <http://www.noroeste.com.mx/publicaciones.php?id=544822>.

²⁵ Ramon Bracamontes, "No Quick Fix Seen for Drug Battle in Juárez," *El Paso Times*, 27 December 2009. http://www.elpasotimes.com/ci_14074596?source=most_viewed.

The Rise of Mega Cartels?

Megacarteles? The shifting alliances of Mexican drug cartels in face of their war with each other and the state appears to have the potential of resulting in two competing alliances or ‘megacartels.’ According to *Excelsior*, SEDENA (the Mexican intelligence agency) considers this prospect in a report “S1P1.”²⁶ The assessment states that eight drug trafficking organizations in Mexico have united to form two solo groups in order to gain control of drug trafficking and its associated routes in the country. The breakdowns of these alliances were reported as follows: 1) The Sinaloa Cartel headed by Joaquín Guzmán Loera, “El Chapo,” has aligned with La Familia Michoacana, the remnants of the Milenio/Valencia Cartel, and with a faction of the Tijuana Cartel. 2) The second block consists of the Beltrán Leyva organization, the Juárez Cartel, Los Zetas, and the Tijuana Cartel.

The first alliance has been reportedly forged by Sinaloa Cartel leaders Ignacio Coronel Villarreal *aka* Nacho Coronel who reputedly brought La Familia Michoacana and Los Valencia onboard, and Ismael Zambada García *aka* “El Mayo.” Zambada was responsible for negotiations with Teodoro García Simental, “El Teo” (before his arrest).²⁷ The second alliance was reportedly the result of efforts by Arturo and Hector Beltrán Leyva who met with Miguel Trevino Morales to form an alliance with the Gulf Cartel/Los Zetas. This was then approved by Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano *aka* “El Lazca.” The Beltrán Leyva brothers also are alleged to have established the alliance with Vicente Carrillo Fuentes *aka* “El Viceroy.”

In addition to the potential two dimension alliances, the SEDENA report also speculates that the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas are in the process of splitting. According to the report, Los Zetas have become an independent faction of the Gulf Cartel, so much so that among themselves, they no longer identify each other with the letter “Z,” but rather, with the letter “L.”

The potential result of this new alliance formation is accelerated battle between the two megacartels as each of the new groups seeks to decimate the other and take over their respective trafficking routes, plazas, and territories. Higher levels of executions, extreme violence, and terror are likely. The states of Sinaloa, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas are now under the control/influence of the Juárez Cartel, the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), and the Gulf Cartel/Los Zetas. An all out war against the Sinaloa Cartel and their armed group, La Gente Nueva may be germinating.

Add to this the prospect that a US national, “El Tigrillo” a South Texan may be in line to become the next BLO drug king. Edgar Valdez Villarreal, “a 36-year-old U.S. citizen born in South Texas, has gone from high school jock to potential Mexican drug cartel boss — perhaps the only

²⁶ “Se reagrupa hampa en México en dos megacarteles,” *Imagen del Golfo*, 26 January 2010 at <http://www.imagedelgolfo.com.mx/resumen.php?id=151629>.

²⁷ “El Teo,” Teodoro Garcia Simental was arrested Tuesday, 12 January 2010 in La Paz, Baja California. The vacuum created by Garcia's arrest is expected to fuel even more violence. El Teo is accused of dissolving victims in barrels of lye and waging a terror campaign that turned Tijuana into one of Mexico's most dangerous cities. See Martha Mendoza and Elliot Spagat, “Violence expected as Mexican drug lord arrested,” *Washington Post*, 13 January 2010 and Richard Marosi and Ken Ellingwood, “Mexican drug lord Teodoro Garcia Simental, known for his savagery, is captured,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 January 2010 for details on this barbaric leader of one of the Tijuana cartel’s factions.

U.S. citizen to do so," according to the *San Antonio Express-News*.²⁸ Valdez, known as "El Tigrillo" and "La Barbie," was a close confidant of Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO) cartel boss Arturo Beltrán Leyva, who was killed in December. While it's still unclear who will succeed Beltrán Leyva, Houston DEA officials speculate that if Valdez Villarreal takes the reins of BLO it's likely he will renew the feud with Gulf Cartel bosses on the Texas-Mexico border.

The prospects of this protean dynamic—the interaction of violent competition, fragmentation, morphing, and amalgamation—are likely to involve continued extreme violence and barbarization. The cartels and their enforcer gangs will continue to adapt and shift organizational form in an effort to gain and maintain control. This will result in continued attacks against the police and military, each other, and from time-to-time, journalists, judicial officials, politicians, and the public at large.

These conditions, unless countered, will exacerbate the existing "hollowing" of state capacity and fuel the growth of 'parallel polities.' Criminal enclaves will dominate some segments of Mexican states. These will likely be slums (*barrios* and *colonias*) and loosely patrolled border zones. Security sector reform, along with strengthening of the police and democratic institutions within Mexico's states is essential to counter the cartels and the potential human rights abuses that occur when combating them without a complete array of appropriate governmental capabilities.

Some policy elites are wearying of President Calderón's escalation of the drug war. Former officials from the Vicente Fox administration Ruben Aguilar and Jorge Castañeda have written a book titled *El Narco: La Guerra Falida* (Narco: The Failed War) that harshly attacks the drug war and instead emphasizes a focus on reducing violence overall.²⁹ The publication of the book is significant, and shows the growing controversy surrounding the drug war.

Lastly, the international context of the conflict cannot be ignored. Drug-trafficking in Mexico has repercussions in Central America, the overland route for supply since the interdiction of the Caribbean route. Violence in nations such as Guatemala has sadly become endemic, as drug smuggling issues mesh with local political and social ills. Mexican cartels have expanded their reach throughout Central America, across the Atlantic into West Africa, and as far south as the Southern Cone. They are also present in the US—and not just in border cities. While their criminal reach is broad, the bulk of their warfighting is currently occurring in Mexico. It must be contained there. Although the cartel war is *mainly* a US-Mexico problem, it is not exclusive to either nation; it is a regional security issue.

Conclusion

Future potentials for the conflict are difficult to extrapolate, given the impact of Mexican domestic politics on the conflict. However, if support continues to hold for Calderon's policy,

²⁸ Jason Buch, "South Texan may be the next drug king," *San Antonio Express-News*, 24 January 2010, <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/mexico/82535092.html>.

²⁹ Ken Ellingwood, "Book Takes Mexican Drug War to Task," *Los Angeles Times*, 01 Jan 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-and-world/la-fg-narco-book1-2010jan01,0,6239821.story>

the conflict is likely to continue for the next year on its present course. Law enforcement will continue to be phased out and military approaches, including special forces high-value targeting, will continue to become the main effort of Mexican counter-drug policy. In turn, the competition over cartel real estate will become more hectic and the cartel war will continue to fractalize.

The consequences for US border communities if such a state of affairs continues are a worsening of local crime as cartel violence and competition spirals out of control. Moreover, as we have previously argued, the stability and security of our southern neighbor is a basic national interest.

The current US policy investment in the war is the Merida Initiative. As Hal Brands notes, the military aspects of the Merida Initiative are positive—better equipment, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) abilities, and intelligence sharing will improve the operational proficiency of Mexican striking forces.³⁰ Yet interdiction, arrests, and other tactical issues are not the whole of the problem. Brands also observes that money for anti-corruption initiatives, judicial reform, human rights training for law enforcement, and other societal issues is decidedly absent from the Merida Initiative.³¹ Nor is there anything aimed at poverty alleviation that could stem cartel recruitment. Demand-side reduction in the United States is also absent.³²

United States policy must embrace a different approach. This should include a strategic review of both US counter-narcotics policy and the threat of transnational organized crime. This review must be comprehensive and consider a range of options. This cannot be a unilateral effort; rather, it should be carried out in consultation with the entire US interagency community (military, diplomatic, development, economic, law enforcement, and intelligence), and include state and local officials in both US and Mexican border states. It must also emphasize consultation with regional partners and non-governmental organizations. The second step is to choose a manageable goal.

Finally, police and 'rule of law' reform are key elements in developing a stable, secure society and countering the insidious impact of organized crime, gangs, 'criminal insurgencies,' and corruption. Mexico must continue its efforts to reform its police and justice system, ensuring transparency and effective enforcement that sustains state legitimacy and the security necessary for healthy communities free of crime and violence.

The United States cannot change Mexico overnight, nor would Mexicans allow us to do so if we could. At the same time, Mexico clearly cannot deal with the problem on its own, so some level of assistance is warranted. But it is possible for the US and Mexico in collaboration to cut the cartels down to a size that does not threaten government power. Such a goal could be accomplished through a combination of 'soft' measures such as judicial reform, government institutional development, law enforcement and military capacity building, and emphasis on human rights instruction with, 'hard' measures such as the Mexican Marine direct action missions that Mexico is already embracing.³³

³⁰ Brands, p. 33.

³¹ Brands, p. 36.

³² Brands, p. 37.

³³ Brands, p. 39.

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