

A Volatile Brew

Robert Killebrew

Last June a group of men in police SWAT team uniforms stormed a building in Phoenix, Arizona, and killed a suspected drug dealer. But the gunmen wearing police uniforms and firing police weapons weren't cops -- they were members of a Mexican drug gang evening scores with a troublesome dealer in the United States. When the real police arrived, the gang dug in for a shootout. That's increasingly common south of the border, but fortunately it didn't end well for the criminals this time.

The Phoenix incident is just one symptom of the growing unrest across the United States' southern border, where the Mexican government is waging a deadly war against murderous drug cartels. Even further south, a volatile brew consisting of thousands of demobilized former soldiers and guerrillas, state-sponsored terrorists and criminal-terrorist hybrids such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) and the Salvadoran MS-13 gang is threatening the rule of law in Latin America. More ominously, it's moving north. In fact, some of these thugs are already here.

What we're talking about isn't just Mafia-style internecine warfare, or your local neighborhood gang showing off their new 9mms on the corner. The wave of criminality coming our way is a deadly and disciplined mixture of drug-fueled violence and terrorism, and it could erupt in the United States into a 21st-century insurgency not unlike the war now under way in Mexico.

I'm not being alarmist. Our understanding of the international gang picture is shadowy and filled with uncertainties, but it's clear that four trends that have been building for decades are coming together to threaten the peace and security of the places where we live.

First is the enormous growth of every kind of illicit traffic -- in drugs, weapons, cash and human beings, among others -- that has created a global black economy touching virtually every town, city and country in the world. The collapse of the Soviet Union, in particular, released vast entrepreneurial energies and materials for the black-market world. Huge dumps of weapons of all types went up for grabs; borders became porous, particularly in Southern Europe and the Balkans. Impoverished men and women have become human cargo for the sweatshops and red-light districts of the developed world. Weak states have become illegal free-trade zones for moving arms, money and enslaved humans. And the European and North American trade in illegal drugs has generated enormous profits for those skilled and ruthless enough to seize the opportunities the black economy offers.

Second, state-sponsored terrorist groups, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah, have spread beyond the Middle East and Africa into Latin America. Hezbollah has long had a presence in South America, dating back at least to 1994, when the group was implicated in the bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina that killed 85. The election of leftist Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, and his establishment of friendly ties with Iran, gave the movement a state sponsor that could midwife its spread elsewhere in the region with transportation, false identities and dodgy Venezuelan passports.¹ In 2002, the State Department reported active Hezbollah cells in Venezuela. Iran's national airline, IranAir, now offers a weekly direct flight between Tehran and Caracas. In addition, there have been numerous reports that Hezbollah and al-Qaeda have set up fundraising shops together in South America's tri-border area between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, centered on the Paraguayan town of Ciudad del Ester.²

The threat of state-sponsored terrorists to our south is magnified by the third trend - the growth of guerrilla groups turned drug traffickers, such as the FARC, and of transnational gangs like MS-13, the 18th Street gang and others, which threaten the rule of law in some parts of Central America and have also established themselves throughout the United States and Canada, from Oregon to Florida, and in cities ranging in size from Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., to Charlotte, North Carolina and scores of smaller urban areas. Closer to home, law enforcement authorities believe that the Washington, D.C. area and Northern Virginia has the second-largest concentration of MS-13 in the U.S., after Los Angeles.³ The gang traffics in drugs, extortion, kidnapping, theft and anything else that appears profitable. Loosely controlled from El Salvador, it enforces ruthless discipline by beatings and, for serious offenses such as informing, murder, often after unspeakable tortures. In 2005, Northern Virginia gang members were convicted of stabbing to death a pregnant 17-year-old named Brenda Paz after learning she was a federal informant.

Finally, the Mexican drug cartels, which sometimes employ MS-13 and other gangs as muscle, are in a class by themselves. A 2008 report by the Congressional Research Service estimates their criminal earnings to be between \$8 billion to nearly \$25 billion annually, and they are so powerful that they threaten the state's authority to govern.⁴ In 2006, President Felipe Calderon initiated a campaign against them that has led to vicious reprisals. Thousands of Mexican law enforcement officials and civilians have been

¹ This takes care of the (correct) observation that Hezbollah had been in SA previous to Chavez.

² A reviewer asked that this be footnoted. In a previous article I used a piece by LTC Phillip Abbot, writing in *Military Review*, September-October 2004. But any cursory web search using "Ciudad del Este, Hezbollah al-Qaeda" or some similar formulation will turn up many references to Hezbollah's presence there, including testimony by U.S. state department officials.

³ A reviewer asked that some cities be named; this rewrite answers the mail and is smoother.

⁴ CRS report "Mexico's Drug Gangs," Feb 2008, p. 5.

killed, with more than 5,700 deaths in 2008 alone. Outgunned Mexican authorities face vicious attacks from paramilitary gangs armed with the latest weaponry, much of it imported from the United States. Government officials have been assassinated in their offices, cars and homes; last May, gunmen shot and killed Edgar Millan Gomez, the acting head of Mexico's federal police, as he walked into his apartment. Torture and beheadings of police officers -- taking a page from Al Qaeda in Iraq's reign of terror -- are almost daily fare.

The U.S. response to all this at the national level has thus far been limited and grudging, consisting of the \$1.6 billion multiyear Merida Initiative security agreement, negotiated between Calderon and President George W. Bush in 2007. Congress approved it last June, but only after attaching strings that the Mexican government found deeply insulting. Calderon's decision to take on the cartels was an act of great political and personal courage. Should he lose heart or be assassinated himself, we may wind up with a lawless nacre-state on our southern border.

Taken together, these four trends add up to what a military strategist would call an "indirect" assault against the United States. The opposition in this case isn't a foreign army or even insurgents on the Iraqi or Taliban model. Instead, these are brutal criminal-terrorist hybrid networks out for profit, with no regard for national boundaries or governments. Through corruption and fear, they create "ungoverned spaces" where the rule of law is weak or nonexistent; they open the door for anarchy and murder and strike directly at the foundations of civil order, an environment in which terrorism thrives. The cruelest twist is that we are largely arming and funding them ourselves through the North American drug trade, which sends billions of dollars and arms south of the border each year.⁵

Developing an effective national response to this complex, and growing, threat will have to involve all government agencies, not just those normally associated with "traditional" security policy; fortunately, our ongoing experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us the necessity for a "whole of government" approach.⁶ An integrated U.S. strategy could fall generally along these lines:

Because their security is tied so directly to ours, we should assist our southern neighbors, particularly Mexico, in developing or strengthening the institutions they need to protect their own sovereignty and enforce their laws. Congress should provide necessary funding, and rewrite Vietnam-era legislation that still restricts U.S. ambassadors and U.S. regional military commanders from assisting host countries to train and equip police and paramilitary forces.

⁵ I've already given a number for the trade, so this just says "billions."

⁶ I agree with cutting out the rest of the para, and have done so. But I disagree with the reviewer that "most of the people who learned that lesson are now in the private sector." The government doesn't just run on political appointees, and even if that were not so, the present Administration seems to have taken the lessons to heart.

The illegal movement of criminal gang members into the United States touches on U.S. border security and immigration policy. We should continue with enhancements already launched to safeguard our borders and provide funding to assist Mexican border police and the border police of other countries, as secure borders are in everybody's best interests. And we should proceed with comprehensive immigration reform, which the growth of transnational criminal gangs has made a national security issue. The large illegal Latino population in the United States often provides unwilling cover for criminal gangs because people are afraid to go to the police; fear of deportation makes also them easy prey for blackmail, extortion and violence by the same gangs.

Local police forces are the frontlines against MS-13 and other gangs, but they're frequently underfunded, too thin on the ground and often have difficulty coordinating quickly with other jurisdictions. What we need today is a sequel to the Clinton Administration's Community Policing Act of 1993, which put 100,000 new officers on the streets -- many of whom were later let go when federal funding stopped. More police, better training and increased federal help for national data-sharing systems are important priorities.

Finally, this "war" against enemies in our midst should include social policies aimed at reducing drug use, treating those already hooked and reforming a system that warehouses small-time offenders with hardened criminals, virtually guaranteeing that they become thugs themselves. Here, and throughout the Americas, prisons have become "crime universities," and it must be stopped. A national drug treatment program -- last seen in the Nixon Administration -- is an urgent need.

Criminal gangs and terrorists are becoming inextricably linked in the shadowy world of international crime, and it is coming closer to your neighborhood. Given the precedence of the Phoenix incident, and others, Mexican cartels may soon begin assassination attempts against U.S. officials inside the U.S.⁷ We've never seen a challenge quite like this, one that combines overseas threats with enemies in our own neighborhoods. It's past time for forceful, coordinated action at all levels of government to insure the safety of our own citizens and the survival of our friends.

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⁷ This is the near-unanimous opinion of U.S. law enforcement experts to whom I have talked; in fact, a source in LA believes there have already been attempts that were cartel operations. But rather than quote them by name, I'll just make it my own prediction.

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