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Plazas for Profit: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency

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In August 2008, we published an essay in *Small Wars Journal* called “State of Siege: Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency.”¹ We were concerned at the lack of attention and policy discussion paid to the growing cartel violence in Mexico, which we called a “criminal insurgency.” Now it is hard to escape discussion of Mexico’s drug war. While we are heartened that security commentators are now focusing on Mexico, we feel that the “failed state” debate is at best a distraction that diverts discussion of the issue and a concrete discussion of the conflict’s political-military dynamics would be more productive. We have updated our earlier assessment to include new events and trends in Mexico’s criminal insurgency, and we will continue to periodically revise our assessment as the dynamics of the conflict evolve.

In broad scope, US policy should focus on helping Mexico rebuild the rule of law while hedging against cartel actions on the border. To do so, the US must engage both informal Mexican governing networks and help construct new cross-border partnerships that can act as policy shops for coordinating policy response and military/law enforcement cooperation against the cartels. At the same time, revamping of domestic security approaches also are needed to guard against overflow of drug war violence.

Overview: Criminal Insurgency and the Plazas

The first precondition of victory in war is to understand what kind of war you are fighting. Mexico is currently wracked by *criminal insurgency*, a frequently misunderstood form of political violence. As Army War College professor Steven Metz notes in his Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monograph *Rethinking Insurgency*, not all insurgencies conform to the classic Leninist or Maoist models. Some insurgents don’t want to take over the government or force it to accede to ideological demands. They want a piece of the state that they can use to develop parallel structures for profit. Inasmuch as they use political violence to accomplish this instrumental goal, they are insurgents—albeit of a criminal variety.²

¹ John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, August 19, 2008, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/08/state-of-siege-mexicos-crimina/>.

² For a sampling of this literature, see John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, “Drugs, Street Cartels, and Warlords,” in Robert Bunker (ed), *Non-State Threats and Future Wars*, London: Frank Cass & Co, 2003. Steve Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007, 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, Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why The Poorest Countries Are Failing And What Can Be Done*

Subversion, infiltration and general capture of governmental, corporate, and societal organs by non-state actors are also strong elements of criminal insurgency. Criminal insurgents' goals are to capture public goods and divert them to their own ends. The purpose of criminal violence within this framework is to overcome state resistance to this subversion of sovereignty and fight off competing claims to public goods by sub and supra-state actors and corrupted state elites. Analysts used to thinking about insurgency through strictly ideological, religious, or classical Maoist models often mistake criminal insurgency for ordinary drug violence, misunderstanding the danger inherent in Mexico's criminal insurgency.

The contested spaces that these criminal insurgents are fighting over are the "plazas"—the corridors for shipment of drugs into the United States. It is clear that the plazas are the vital terrain of the criminal insurgency—and may even constitute certain cartels' centers of gravity. There is also an increasingly regional dimension to this struggle. As STRATFOR analyst Stephen Meiners writes, increased drug trafficking along Central American land routes is widening the operational space into many Central American nations—most of which are even more unprepared than Mexico to handle the surge of crime.³

Is Mexico a failed state? This question should be regarded as a distraction. Absent a few egregious cases such as Somalia, most states usually do not "fail." Rather, states that experience a prolonged shift in their internal dynamics *change* to different forms of sovereignty. While certain forms of sovereignty may be preferable to others, state change is not equivalent to state failure. The heated debate over whether or not Mexico is a failed state obscures the operational and strategic dynamics of the criminal insurgency and possible policy solutions.

Operational Dynamics of Criminal Insurgency

Since 2007, Mexican President Felipe Calderon has deployed the military against the cartels. His strategy consists of direct action raids by general-purpose forces and special operations forces as well as clampdown in many regions where cartel action is strong. At present, around 40,000 Mexican soldiers are engaged in the drug war.⁴ Troops have also been placed in civil law enforcement command roles.⁵

The use of Mexico's military, known in the past for human rights violations, has alienated some civilians and worried human rights groups.⁶ Military force also triggered a bloody eruption of retaliatory cartel violence. Attacks on civilians, decapitations, and other horrific acts of violence are commonplace. The military itself has been targeted for cartel penetration and brutalization. As the main effort against the cartels, the military is the only force that can match cartel firepower and tactical cohesion—and thus a prime target for cartel enforcers. Mexican area

About It, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

³ Stephen Meiners, "Central America: An Emerging Role in the Drug Trade," STRATFOR, March 26, 2009. http://www.stratfor.com/index.php?q=weekly/20090326_central_america_emerging_role_drug_trade

⁴ David Luhnnow and Joel Millman, "Mexican Leader Prepares for Bloodier Drug Wars," *Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123578172247398103.html>

⁵ Marina Montemayor, "Retired general takes over Ciudad Juarez security," Associated Press, March 16, 2009.

⁶ Ken Ellingwood, "Abuse allegations rise against Mexican army," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-mexico-army21-2009mar21.0.7218318.story>

specialist George W. Grayson, a professor at the College of William and Mary, recounts one particularly brutal incident involving the cartel enforcer gang Los Zetas:

“In December 2008, Los Zetas captured and executed eight Army officers and enlisted men in Guerrero, a violence-torn, impoverished southern state where a “dual sovereignty” exists between the elected government and narco-criminals. Pictures of the decapitated cadavers lying side-by-side flashed around the world on television and YouTube. In February 2009, the paramilitaries killed retired Brigadier General Mauro Enrique Tello Quinones. They broke his arms and legs before driving him into the jungle and executing him; his corpse and those of two aides were discovered two days after the mayor of Cancun hired Tello Quinones to form a SWAT team to fight such criminals.”⁷

These gruesome displays, along with less violent psychological operations, have had a negative effect on military morale. Mexican defense officials estimate that 100,000 soldiers have quit to join the cartels over the last seven years.⁸ Cartels have also directed psychological operations utilizing paid front groups to foment anti-military protests, buying off poor Mexicans and putting them in the streets to protest against the government response.⁹ However, some opposition is motivated by legitimate grievances over the harshness and bluntness of the overwhelmingly enemy-centric military response.

Adding to the problem are constitutional limits placed on military forces operating against cartels. Soldiers are barred from performing many aspects of basic police work and can only detain individuals they catch in the commission of the crime. They also must obtain search warrants from police, who often tip off cartels before soldiers can arrest them. These civil-military restraints motivate military law breaking, as soldiers see no other way to accomplish their objectives.¹⁰

As Grayson rightfully notes, the weakness of Mexico’s civilian law enforcement and judicial institutions make reliance on the military unavoidable. Cartels easily outgun most Mexican police on the municipal level, many of whom elect to flee rather than fight a battle that they cannot possibly win. To make matters worse, Mexico’s National Audit Office concluded that a staggering 50 percent of municipal police officers were unfit for service.¹¹ In light of this data, Calderón’s goal of replacing the military with civilian law enforcement by the end of his term in 2012 is overly optimistic.

⁷ George W. Grayson, "Los Zetas and other Mexican Cartels Target Military Personnel," E-Notes, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2009. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200903.grayson.loszetasmilitary.html>

⁸ Marc Lacey, "Mexico Fights Drug War and Itself," New York Times, March 29, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/30/world/americas/30mexico.html?pagewanted=1&r=2&ref=world>

⁹ Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico drug cartels buying public support," Los Angeles Times, March 13, 2009. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-monterrey-drugs-recruits1-2009mar13,0,7828779.story>

¹⁰ Olga R. Rodriguez, "AP IMPACT: With the Mexican army in the war on drugs, a temporary fix to a long-term problem," Associated Press, March 29, 2009.

¹¹ "Study: More Than Half of Mexico's Municipal Cops Unfit for the Job," *Latin American Herald Tribune* (Caracas), March 14, 2009.

Increased American border policing, supply-side crackdowns, and intelligence cooperation have also augmented the Mexican military surge. US arrests have put hundreds of American-based cartel members in jail. Law enforcement agencies have also cracked down on illegal gun transfers, a major source of weaponry for cartels. Thusfar, the Obama administration has allocated \$700 million for a border surge against the cartels.¹² A higher level of cooperation and intensive coordination are necessary to build upon this initial investment. How do we measure the effectiveness of the combined Mexican-American effort? The Mexican government can certainly boast impressive metrics: 60,000 arrested, 32,000 weapons and 4 million bullets, \$320 million in cash, seventy tons of cocaine, and 4,000 tons of marijuana seized.¹³ This is a qualitative improvement over past numbers. But Mexico still manages to supply roughly 90% of America's cocaine, and drug profits remain high at roughly \$60 billion a year.¹⁴ Keep in mind however, that a lack of precise figures means that this number could easily be inaccurate, as other estimates have put the drug metrics at \$10 billion.¹⁵ The criminal insurgency has claimed 6,000 dead in 2008 and at least 1,600 dead since the beginning of this year.¹⁶ The Mexican government also claims that sustained pressure on the cartels has lowered the supply of cocaine, raised its price, and diminished its purity. News reports also indicate that Europe may be eclipsing the United States, as demand for cocaine at twice the price has positioned the Colombians to once again become a prime supplier.¹⁷

The problem with arrest and seizure metrics is that they conflate the ebb and flow of the drug war—which may never end—with the specific issue of the criminal insurgency. Cartel goals have evolved over time to the exercising of “dual sovereignty” over the “plazas” and the purpose of the Mexican government crackdown is to erase that sovereignty. Are the cartels succeeding? If we define the minimum cartel objective as preserving their sovereign autonomy and surviving the government assault, the answer is yes. Sovereignty in Mexico is at times “stratified” as cartels continue to exercise control over numerous contested zones within enclaves of the Mexican state.

The cartels are also engaged in a fierce internal competition over drug transportation routes, the ferocity of which rivals the nominal war with the Mexican government. In fact, most of the drug war dead are casualties of this internal cartel war. It is a testament to the fragility of Mexican law enforcement institutions that Mexican cartels are able to wage war against each other and against the Mexican government at the same time.

Particularly worrying are several changes in cartel operational dynamics since our initial paper. First, there is the prospect of a truce between the two largest cartels—the Gulf and Federation groups. Some open-source news reports reference ongoing negotiations between the two to pool

¹² "US to boost Mexico border defence," BBC, 24 March 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7961670.stm>

¹³ Grayson.

¹⁴ Peter Grant, "Mexico's drug barons and police locked in an increasingly violent battle for supremacy," *The Telegraph*, March 18 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/mexico/5010852/Mexicos-drug-barons-and-police-locked-in-an-increasingly-violent-battle-for-supremacy.html>

¹⁵ Traci Carl, "Progress in Mexico drug war is drenched in blood," Associated Press, Mar 10, 2009.

¹⁶ "Women, Two Men Murdered in Northern Mexico," *Latin American Herald-Tribune* (Caracas), April 9, 2009. <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=331505&categoryId=1409>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

their resources against both their competitors and the government. If these news reports are indeed accurate, this truce would build a combined force of approximately 100,000 cartel enforcers.¹⁸ However, precise information on the size, strength, training standards, and armaments of cartels is hard to find and alliances between cartels and their gang partners shift regularly.

Cartel enforcer gangs are also on the rise as independent organizations. Cartels traditionally have a fluid and complicated relationship with their hired guns, but enforcer gangs are growing fat off their drug profits. They are using these gains to enlarge their organizations into larger networked assemblages. As Sam Logan notes, the most violent enforcer gang, Los Zetas, is morphing into a “Zeta Organization” that acts apart from their traditional overlords in the Gulf Cartel.¹⁹ Zeta’s transition is troubling, since it is one of the most well-armed and lethal enforcer gangs. However, the Zeta advantage is relative as many cartels are steadily increasing their armaments and upgrading their tactical skills.

Los Angeles Times reporters Ken Ellingwood and Tracy Wilkinson report that “Traffickers have escalated their arms race, acquiring military-grade weapons, including hand grenades, grenade launchers, armor-piercing munitions and antitank rockets with firepower far beyond the assault rifles and pistols that have dominated their arsenals.”²⁰ These weapons include .50 caliber Barrett sniper rifles, M203 40-millimeter grenade launchers, light anti-tank weapons (LAWs), and possibly even improvised explosive devices (IEDs).²¹ The new cartel weapons Ellingwood and Wilkinson report go far beyond the usual cartel armaments, and demonstrate that smuggled American guns are only a part of the problem.

Cartels are also learning and practicing traditional squad infantry tactical concepts and engaging in pitched gun battles with Mexican army patrols.²² Greater cohesion and improved weaponry allows them to mix and match their usual mixture of assassination tactics and a limited form of positional engagement. However, their overall techniques, tactics, and procedures remain the same: attack the government and then melt away. And as military personnel continue to desert and join the cartels, drug gangs’ tactical acumen will continue to increase.

Another troubling trend is criminal insurgent radicalization of vulnerable youth on both sides of the border. Radicalization is not something that happens solely in religious or ideological insurgency, and the same dynamics of radicalization observed in Marc Sageman’s pioneering studies are present in street gangs and cartel enforcer units. The good drug gangs provide is a sense of purpose, belonging, and even a quasi-supernatural sensation of invincibility and righteousness—very much like the “bunches of guys” Sageman observes amid diasporas in Europe. Criminal insurgent radicalization can be observed in the cult of personality venerating

¹⁸ Sara A. Carter, “100,000 foot soldiers in Mexican cartels,” *Washington Times*, March 3, 2009.

¹⁹ Samuel Logan, “Los Zetas: Evolution of a Criminal Organization,” *International Relations and Security Network* (ETH Zurich), March 11, 2009.

²⁰ Ken Ellingwood and Tracy Wilkinson, “Drug cartels’ new weaponry means war,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 2009.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

La Santa Muerte (also known as Santísima Muerte), the death saint.²³ Hitmen offer toasts to the death saint with the blood of their enemies, reveling in feelings of invincibility and power.²⁴

Corrections officials have observed that many inmates are increasingly found with Santa Muerte paraphernalia. Portraits of the death saint have also been found in many drug labs.²⁵ Cartels fund many shrines to the death saint in Mexico and use it as a symbol of their power, and Mexican officials have destroyed statues and shrines to Santísima Muerte in cartel-dominated border cities.²⁶ This is unfortunate, as Santa Muerte, despite her grim appearance, is one of Mexico's many folk saints. The hijacking of this otherwise benign religious symbol to use as a tool of cartel radicalization is reminiscent of the usage of folk saints as symbols of war in Africa's many irregular conflicts.

An equally insidious development is the recruiting of child assassins and other young men as hitmen for cartel-affiliated drug gangs on both sides of the border. Cartels and drug gangs are increasingly recruiting "sicaritos," young teens and pre-teens whose youthful bravado and desire to prove their manhood make them excellent cannon fodder.²⁷ Again, there is a gruesome parallel to the usage of child soldiers both inside and outside of the Americas and negative implications for the chances of reintegration of these *sicaritos* back into society.²⁸

Strategic Dynamics of Criminal Insurgency

In order to better understand the strategic dynamics of Mexico's criminal insurgency, we suggest considering the framework of the parallel state. As the Spanish think-tank FRIDE notes, the term "parallel state" is increasingly used in political science circles to describe "the existence of a clandestine nexus between formal political leadership, self-serving factions within the state apparatus, organized crime and/or experts in violence."²⁹ Parallel states often include deeply embedded networks of negative actors who exert power through both covert influence and armed violence. These actors distort official state policy to protect their interests, a dynamic that American and Afghani security chiefs are well aware of in Pakistan. Public goods are diverted towards these actors, making the fulfillment of various state obligations problematic even as the appearance of a legitimate public sector is maintained. A parallel state also involves parallel modes of sovereignty, with multiple competitors to state power existing within a neo-feudal patchwork of the ostensibly solid state.

²³ See Hakim Hazim, "Santísima Muerte: A Troubling Trend in Radicalization," *GroupIntel* Blog, February 23, 2009. <http://www.groupintel.com/2009/02/23/santisma-muerte-a-troubling-trend-in-radicalization/>

²⁴ Jason Buch, "S.A. Native in Squad of Young Hit Men Sentenced to Life in Prison," *San Antonio News*, March 5, 2009. http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/SA_man_among_hit_men_sentenced_to_life.html

²⁵ Tony Kail, *Corrections.com*, "Santísima Muerte: Patron saint of security threat groups," August 9, 2007. <http://www.corrections.com/news/article?articleid=16090>

²⁶ Bruce Daniels, "Who Is 'Santa Muerte'?", *Albuquerque News-Journal*, March 27, 2009, <http://www.abqjournal.com/abqnews/abqnewsseeker-mainmenu-39/11599-940am-who-is-santa-muerte.html>

²⁷ John Burnett, "Mexican Drug Cartels Recruiting Young Men, Boys," NPR, March 24, 2009.

²⁸ See P.W. Singer, *Children at War*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006 and John P. Sullivan, "Child Soldiers: Despair, Barbarization, and Conflict," *Air & Space Power Journal (Spanish Edition)*, March 2008, for a detailed discussion on children in organized armed violence.

²⁹ Ivan Briscoe, "The Proliferation of the 'Parallel State,'" Madrid: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, October 13, 2008, p 2.

The problem of cartels is essentially the problem of multiple “parallel states.” All of the functions of legitimate and sovereign government continue, but substantial public goods are diverted to benefit non-state networks. A criminal-gang nexus has burrowed like a malignant parasite into the superstructure of the state. And for a while, it was progressively tolerated as long as it did not cause trouble for the Mexican state. But obviously with the election of Calderón this implicit understanding could no longer be maintained. The cartel aim is to restore the *status quo ante* and as long as this goal remains limited it has a high chance of success. Should cartels overreach—and there are signs that they may be doing so—they will probably cause their own destruction. The example of Colombia is illustrative. Pablo Escobar’s campaign of terror challenged government control so much that the Colombian government backed a militia called “Los Pepes” that effectively decapitated the cartel leadership.

What is the future of Mexico’s criminal insurgency? More worrying than an unlikely systemic collapse is the slow infection of cartel parallel structures into the superstructure of the Mexican state. As the violent struggle to control the plazas escalates, parallel state embeds itself within deeper and deeper within each contested zone. Success against the cartels is not out of the pale, but uprooting the deep state network that protects the parallel state does not seem likely at this juncture. Further criminalization and the growth of hollow zones are increasingly likely given present trends. Continued military involvement risks increasing corruption of rank-and-file soldiers and the growth of cartel combat power.

What is the nature of the danger to the United States? Now that American federal law enforcement is positioning for border force stabilization missions, we are increasingly thrusting ourselves into the battle for the “plazas.” Will the cartels respond by targeting law enforcement officers and civil servants? It’s hard to tell, as by doing so cartels would bring down the full wrath of the American law enforcement and military on their shoulders. So far, violence in cross-border incursions has mainly targeted civilians involved in the drug trade, although law enforcement officers have been attacked in several incidents, the most famous being the 22nd of June hit in Phoenix, Arizona.³⁰ We see little evidence to believe that cartels have a strategic plan in place to attack law enforcement officials. This may change, however, if cartel power grows or cartels perceive that they can similarly bleed American will at an acceptable cost. Law enforcement intelligence must closely monitor cartel and gang activity to discern their plans and force structure.

The strategic problem of a contested zone on the border also cannot be overlooked. Besides the obvious risk of cross-border infiltration by foreign powers, booming cross-border trade could be imperiled by a fundamentally hollow, lawless, and violent border. The growth of cartel power, the intensity of the growing warfare, and the increasingly transnational context of gang crime signify that Mexico’s criminal insurgency is likely to have ripple effects north of the border

Recommendations

On the purely domestic and tactical level, police must prepare for cartel warfare. Lessons from the Mexican drug war should be incorporated into training scenarios and wargames. Police must be prepared to engage opponents much more heavily armed and operationally adept than the

³⁰ Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, “The Fallout from Phoenix,” STRATFOR, July 2, 2008.

average gangbanger. This does not solely mean beefing up police with advanced weaponry—rather, they must be empowered to perform “full-spectrum policing.” Full spectrum policing covers the range of public order functions ranging from everyday community policing, through gang suppression to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. Police must be able to carry out these missions without sacrificing their relationship to the communities they protect. This is a doctrinal, organizational, and training issue that we have explored in our paper “Postcard from Mumbai: Modern Urban Siege.”³¹

Intelligence and analysis resources must also be devoted to geosocial red-team analysis of cartel aims, structures, and activities in order to develop better information for tactical, operational, and strategic decision-making. Counterinsurgency principles should be carefully blended with traditional community policing and beat management techniques to prevent the growth of parallel cartel-governance structures, deter the smuggling of weaponry across the border, and develop intelligence that can inform strategic decision-making about cartel links to evolving enforcer gangs. Firewalling off the problem behind a giant fence is most emphatically not an option. Many of the cartels, and their affiliated gangs, have large operations well beyond the border regions—Mexican cartels spar with local gangs as far north as Canada.³² On the domestic grand strategic level, a review of drug war strategy should be conducted. Drug policy shifts, however, are unlikely in the short-term, so police, military, and intelligence agencies must work with the policy tools available.

Foreign cooperation and resources with Mexico must be intensified, especially in advisory training of police and military. However, the bulk of this assistance must go towards building up the capabilities of police and helping Mexico root out corruption, rebuild the rule of law, and sustain robust community institutions. It is important to note, that the most promising outcome of the recent cross-border dialogue about the drug wars is an awareness of the need to accept “co-responsibility” for solving the threat. Crucial to this task is the development of network structures. Mexico area expert and network warfare theorist David Ronfeldt, writing in his blog *Apropos of Two Theories*, is emphatic on this point. Both Mexico’s informal *camarilla* elite cliques and the new political structures built since the decline of PRI power are crucial to beating back the cartels. And, as Ronfeldt notes, they also mesh with the emerging military/intelligence, and law enforcement partnerships being constructed on both sides of the Rio Grande.³³

It takes a network to fight a network, and building a genuine Mexican-American networked force structure for counter-netwar requires the construction and strengthening of both formal and informal Mexican-American security networks, partnerships, working groups, and other such structures. There is a risk of cartel infiltration but sound vetting and operational security measures can minimize this danger. The US should do its best to help shape the conditions that enable our southern neighbor to succeed fighting its battle with the brigands. The strategic aim for US-Mexican cooperation should be to minimize cartel activity to a level that does not

³¹See John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Postcard from Mumbai: Modern Urban Siege,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 16, 2009. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/2009/02/postcard-from-mumbai.php>

³² Ibid.

³³ David Ronfeldt, “Why Mexico May NOT Fall Apart,” *Apropos of Two Theories*, March 30, 2009. <http://twotheories.blogspot.com/2009/03/why-mexico-may-not-fall-apart-and-way.html>

threaten legitimate government functioning (and effective control) at all levels of governance—federal, state, and municipal. The larger issues of changing state dynamics, as embodied by parallel states, are not going to go away nor are they easily resolvable by the US. Nevertheless, we can reduce the risk to ourselves and help Mexico contain its cartels, and collectively, limit the potential for criminal insurgency throughout the Western hemisphere.

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