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## Explosive Escalation? Reflections on the Car Bombing in Ciudad Juárez

John P. Sullivan

In an apparently significant acceleration of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP), Mexican cartel violence embraced the car bomb in an attack on Federal police in embattled Ciudad Juárez last Thursday, 15 July 2010. Not only did the attack employ a car bomb (apparently a primitive improvised explosive secreted inside a car not the fully-integrated variant found in Iraq, and the AfPak theatres known as a VBIED), but it also was an ambush that directly targeted police. This TTP is a classic insurgent attack method that promises to be part of Mexico's future engagements in its on-going criminal insurgencies.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Car Bomb in Ciudad Juárez*

News reports claim that four persons were killed in what is described as a well-planned, “bait and wait” trap near a Federal police facility. This attack is the first documented use of a car bomb by drug traffickers or their affiliated gangs since the start of Mexico's counter-cartel offensive. Clearly the use of bombs (ranging from simple IEDs—improvised explosive devices—to the more complex large vehicle bomb—LVB—erstwhile known as a VBIED—vehicle-borne explosive device) portends to dramatically alter the nature of Mexico's drug wars. Until this assault, cartels and their paramilitary gangsters have relied on small arms (including assault weapons such as AK-47 variants known as the ‘*Cuernos de chiva*’ or goat's horn after their magazine), limited use of grenades, and symbolic beheadings to neutralize competing gangster and government security forces.

While barbaric beheadings, bold small arms attacks (active shootings), and the occasional grenade or combined small arms-grenade attack are a challenge to police, the potential specter of urban car bombings — with their attendant casualty generating capacity — poses a threat similar to the darkest days of narco-violence in Colombia or the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. A ‘*narcomensaje*’ or message left at the scene claimed the Juárez Cartel was responsible for the blast, and it threatened further attacks. “We still have car bombs,” said the alleged warning.

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<sup>1</sup> See John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 19 August 2008 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/08/state-of-siege-mexicos-crimina/>; “Plazas for Profit: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 26 April 2009 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/04/plazas-for-profit-mexicos-crim/>; and “Cartel v. Cartel: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, 01 February 2010 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/02/cartel-v-cartel-mexicos-crimin/> for a view of the trajectory of Mexico's narco-conflict.

According to the Associated Press, the “*La Linea* drug gang — the same group blamed for the March killing of a U.S. consulate employee and her husband — lured federal officers and paramedics to the site of a car bomb by dressing a bound, wounded man in a police uniform and calling in a false report of an officer shot.... The gang then exploded a car holding as much as 22 pounds (10 kilograms) of explosives, killing the decoy, a rescue worker and a federal officer. A regional military commander said a cell phone might have been used to detonate the bomb.” More recent reports suggest the device employed Tovex, an industrial explosive.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it appears this was a simple car bomb, yet not a fully-evolved VBIED. That said, VBIED is an extremely jargon-laden term. The sophistication or operational effectiveness of the device is only one element of the attack and shouldn't be over conflated with the TTP or delivery platform. Recall, “Buda's Wagon” (the first modern “car” bomb)<sup>3</sup> wasn't sophisticated in terms of what we see in Iraq, AfPak theaters either, but was still a car bomb. This device appears to be a transitional weapon, where cartel bomb makers are experimenting and importing TTP from other conflicts to exploit on their own battleground. We can be thankful this device was primitive, but should expect them to remedy their short fallings as the conflict evolves.

In the same report, Cd. Juárez Mayor Jose Reyes Ferriz said authorities “will have to change the way we operate. We've started changing all our protocols, to include bomb situations.” A Mexican Brigadier (BG) Eduardo Zarate, the commander of the regional military zone, said as much as 22 pounds (10 kilograms) of explosives might have been used in the attack, adding that burned batteries connecting to a mobile phone were found at the scene. Clearly that challenges police responders.

In the words of Ferriz, “The threat was directed at the police departments, so it is not a threat against the population...But we have to be very careful with our police departments, their actions and how we protect them, and of course, how we protect the population from the fallout.”<sup>4</sup> As a recent AP report noted: “While Mexican federal police have training in post-blast investigations, no security force in the country has experience with patrolling cities that could be mined with car bombs or roadside explosives.”<sup>5</sup> The same is true of police here in the US and worldwide.

### *Grenades and car bombs escalate Mexico's strife*

Mexico's criminal insurgencies appear to be escalating with not only the use of car bombs as well as hand grenades apparently stolen from military arsenals. Clearly, grenades are not new in the Mexican narco-war. Remember Morelia, 15 September 2008 when Suspected members of *Los Zetas* drug gang tossed grenades into a crowd celebrating Mexico's independence, killing

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<sup>2</sup> Alicia A. Caldwell, “US official: Mexican car bomb likely used Tovex,” Associated Press, 19 July 2010 at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gMi5B2USfJStXxfqgWWr2xjRYpOgD9H2FA2G0>.

<sup>3</sup> See Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb*, New York: Verso, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Alicia A. Caldwell and E. Eduardo Castillo, “Car bomb signals new dimension to Mexican drug war,” Associated Press, 16 July 2010 at [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100716/ap\\_on\\_re\\_la\\_am\\_ca/lt\\_drug](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100716/ap_on_re_la_am_ca/lt_drug).

<sup>5</sup> Alicia A. Caldwell and Alexandra Olsen, “Car bomb in Mexican drug war changes ground rules,” Associated Press, 17 July 2010 at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gMi5B2USfJStXxfqgWWr2xjRYpOgD9H12AUG0>.

eight people and wounding more than 100.<sup>6</sup> It was the conflicts first and only (thus far) attack on a mass gathering of civilians.

Nevertheless, according to the *Washington Post*, there have been more than 72 grenade attacks in Mexico in the last year, including spectacular assaults on police convoys and public officials. In addition, Mexican forces have seized more than 5,800 live grenades since 2007. This is reportedly a small fraction of a vast armory maintained by the drug cartels. The Prosecutor General of the Republic (PGR), Mexico's attorney general's office, claims that there have been 101 grenade attacks against government buildings in the past 3 1/2 years. Reports claim that the majority of grenades have been traced back to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, according to investigations by agents at the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and their Mexican counterparts. In addition, grenades of Asian or Soviet and Eastern European origin are in play.<sup>7</sup>

### *'Narcopinta' warns of future car bombs*

A graffiti message ("narcomensaje" or "narcopinta") on a Cd. Juárez wall warns of a car bombing if US authorities do not look into alleged ties between Mexican federal police and drug traffickers. According to a Mexican official "Yes, another 'narcopinta' was spray-painted on a primary school wall Sunday night," Jacinto Seguro, a spokesman for the Juarez Municipal Police said. "It threatens another car bombing in 15 days if the DEA and FBI don't investigate the federal police ties to El Chapo [Guzman of the Sinaloa Cartel]."<sup>8</sup> While we can't over estimate the value of this threat, it is worth taking heed. The conflict will continue, and it is escalating. The use of information operations and threats is part of the operational environment, but not all propaganda is deception. It is likely the cartels and their gang affiliates will continue to target police, and perhaps civilians, as they seek to eradicate their rivals and secure free space to operate with impunity. Rather than discount this threat, we need to develop intelligence to accurately gauge evolving capabilities and intentions.<sup>9</sup>

### *Dissecting the Potentials*

The Cd. Juárez car bombing attack occurred about 1930 hours near the intersection of Bolivia and 16 de Septiembre streets in Juárez's downtown district. First, what appeared to be a municipal police officer was shot and killed, and when Federal police and EMS responders arrived to the scene there was an explosion. An ambush employing deception (or surprise) was unleashed on patrol personnel. Here we see the need to emphasize IED awareness and force protection. Police responders frequently respond well to familiar threats—that is ballistic and human threats. They respond according to their experience and training. Grenade and IED

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<sup>6</sup> "FACTBOX-Worst attacks in Mexico's drug war," Reuters, 18 July 2010 at <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N18131453.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Miroff and William Booth, "Mexican drug cartels' newest weapon: Cold War-era grenades made in U.S.," *Washington Post*, 17 July 2010 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/07/16/AR2010071606252.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Graffiti message warns of more violence in Juarez," CNN News, 19 July 2010 at <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/07/19/mexico.juarez>.

<sup>9</sup> See John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "Red Teaming Criminal Insurgency," *Red Team Journal*, 30 January 2009 at <http://redteamjournal.com/2009/01/red-teaming-criminal-insurgency-1/>.

(roadside and vehicle bombs) are largely outside their experience (in the US, Mexico, and in reality most of the world). Metropolitan police in the US are rapidly integrating active shooter training into their skill set. This training should (and does) include awareness of explosive threats (grenades, IEDs, and military munitions). With repeated exposure and practice, police can integrate a three-dimensional approach to situational awareness and threat response.<sup>10</sup> All too frequently, responders fix on the immediately apparent threat, engage gun fire, and in the natural “tunnel vision” that results under combat stress, miss non-ballistic threats and threats from other vantage points. This facet of close quarters battle can be corrected in tactical training and drills. Such efforts are essential. These include active shooter and IED awareness drills, drill on rescuing downed officers, and integration of force protection for emergency medical and fire service responders. In addition, this requires training and recognition of command post and crime scene defense capabilities.

Responding to infantry-like battles in rural areas is increasingly common in the Mexican drug war; translating that experience into urban criminal combat operations adds several magnitudes of complexity. In the urban operational space, not only do you face a determined adversary, but urban terrain in complex, three-dimensional settings (with subway stations and high rises, not to mention densely concentrated non-combatants and operational challenges). Beyond these tactical dimensions is the need for operational coordination and synchronization. Addressing multiple, simultaneous combined arms assaults (*i.e.*, small arms and bombs) requires a degree of sophistication that challenges police worldwide.

### *Conclusion*

These potential high intensity/criminal insurgency attacks demand real-time intelligence support, and superb tactical and operational command, control, and communications, all of which require new doctrine, training, and equipment. Essentially, we are seeing the need for “intra-conflict” policing employing “full-spectrum policing” where police can quickly shift from individual community policing duties into a formed unit (contact or fire teams and squads for close quarters battle) for tactical engagements against an armed, and organized opposing force.<sup>11</sup> These capabilities are needed in Mexico, throughout Latin America and here in the US (as well as in Europe, Australia and other nations where the police will undoubtedly face insurgents or terrorists of many stripes).

Such ‘hybrid’ skills would benefit from enhanced law enforcement-military interaction for assessing emerging conflict, developing tactical and operational doctrine, and cross training. It is not simply a matter of bringing counterinsurgency (COIN) skills to the police service, but rather a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and experience to address ‘inter-conflict policing’ where community policing and COIN converge to address the intersection of crime and war. At the

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<sup>10</sup> See Christopher Flaherty, “3D tactics: an advanced warfare concept in critical infrastructure protection,” *International Journal of Emergency Management*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2007 and “A New Approach to Mass Space,” *Red Team Journal*, 12 July 2009 at <http://redteamjournal.com/2009/07/a-new-approach-to-mass-space/> for discussions related to the urban situational awareness regarding attacks that can come from any number of directions and modes.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, “Beyond Active Response: An Operational Concept for Police Counterterrorism Response,” *New Criminologist*, 14 May 2010 at <http://www.newcriminologist.com/article.asp?nid=2211>.

strategic level, there is a need to define the role of police-military interaction for convergent threats such as transnational organized crime, criminal insurgency, and crime in conflict zones. This may require new force structures (such as expeditionary police), as well as integrating existing capacities (such as formulating the traditional DIME—Diplomatic, Intelligence, Military, and Economic—as DIME-P, adding the police service).<sup>12</sup>

Building an adaptive response capacity to address urban terrorist tactics employed in high intensity crime, criminal insurgencies whether they occur in Mexico, Latin America,<sup>13</sup> or further abroad in the Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Iraqi theatres is essential. This requires more than EOD or bomb squad responses, explosives awareness must be integrated into all police and emergency (fire/EMS) response at the general service (patrol, first response) levels here and in the nations currently challenged by conflict. The lessons learned in countering IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan,<sup>14</sup> and now Mexico, must be shared and integrated into evolving public safety doctrine and emerging police operational art.

*John P. Sullivan is a regular contributor to Small Wars Journal. He is a career police officer and currently serves as a lieutenant with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism (CAST). He is co-editor of Countering Terrorism and WMD: Creating a Global Counter-Terrorism Network (Routledge, 2006) and Global Biosecurity: Threats and Responses (Routledge, 2010). His current research focus is the impact of transnational organized crime on sovereignty, intelligence, terrorism, and criminal insurgencies.*

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<sup>12</sup> See John P. Sullivan, "The Missing Mission: Expeditionary Police for Peacekeeping and Transnational Stability," *Small Wars Journal*, 09 May 2007 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/05/the-missing-mission-expedition/>.

<sup>13</sup> See John P. Sullivan, "Criminal Insurgency in the Americas," *Small Wars Journal*, 13 February 2010 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/02/criminal-insurgency-in-america/>.

<sup>14</sup> See Adam Higginbottom, "State of the Art," *Wired*, August 2010, p. 138-144 for a discussion on IEDs in America's current expeditionary operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Lest the reader feel the IED threat is overblown or is a concern only abroad and won't happen in the US recall the Times Square bomber's improvised explosive cum incendiary device in May 2010 and presence of IEDs at the Columbine massacre.

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