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Strategy for Military Counter Drug Operations

by Robert Culp

The Mexican Army's counter-drug (CD) operations are making a limited impact on narco-trafficking in Mexico. If they continue their current CD tactics, they will not be effective in the long run because SEDENA is not approaching CD operations like a counter-insurgency (COIN) mission, nor are they effectively attacking the Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) Center of Gravity (COG). SEDENA operations are currently centered along two principal lines of operation - source control (drug eradication/seizure) and HVI interdiction (arrest). By weighting these two lines of effort, SEDENA operations are not focused on what is the key terrain in any counter-insurgency environment - the population. Additionally, SEDENA targeting efforts are not focused on attacking the critical vulnerabilities that directly affect the DTOs strategic COG – the revenues derived from drug sales.

The source control and HVI interdiction strategy is the strategic and operational construct that has driven CD operations in the Western Hemisphere since the inception of the “war on drugs.” This ineffective operational construct allowed Mexican DTOs to grow and diversify and brought the US and Mexico to our present crisis where rampant narco-trafficking related violence and organized crime threatens the sovereignty and security of the state in Mexico, a vital US national interest. The rapid proliferation of Mexican DTOs, which have risen to the primary organized crime threat in the US by operating in over 230 cities in the United States, threaten US citizens at home and abroad and has raised the specter of “spillover violence” along our Southwest border.

SEDENA must make a strategic shift in the way that it conducts CD operations or it will continue expending significant resources and risk its personnel and reputation pursuing a strategy that will not produce long-lasting effects. Since Mexican President Felipe Calderon placed SEDENA in the lead role for all CD operations in Mexico, it is the responsibility of the SEDENA staff to develop a comprehensive counter-drug campaign plan. This plan must be an integrated part of Mexico's internal development and defense plan incorporating all elements of Mexico's national power and designed to achieve lasting effects in Mexico's war on drugs.

A successful SEDENA campaign plan that implements the proven-effective tenets of COIN operations and focuses targeting efforts on the DTO's drug revenue COG will effectively turn Mexican municipalities into places where narco-traffickers cannot operate. Effective COIN operations, supported by a comprehensive, integrated strategic communications plan, will result in the local people rejecting the presence of narco-traffickers in their neighborhoods. The population can do this because government security forces implement the rule of law and protect the people through effective security operations and the people trust and support the government and its security forces.

The Drug Trafficking Organization Threat

Mexican drug trafficking organizations function much like insurgent organizations, in the sense that they are similarly organized into small cells for security and they employ similar terrorist and guerrilla-style tactics. However, the DTOs are not known to have any desire to overthrow the Mexican government and run the country. The DTOs political desire is to have government officials in power that are willing to look the other way and enable their business to continue to reap huge profits. In this sense, Mexico's situation does not compare to Colombia's problems since Mexico does not have a large active insurgency like the FARC, and the drug trade has not yet spawned a counterforce on the scope of the Colombian paramilitaries. The DTOs supported two small active insurgent organizations, the EZLN and the EPR, in the 1990s, both of which operate in the states that border Guatemala in the south of Mexico. So far, there is no evidence that these insurgent organizations are colluding with the DTOs like the FARC did in Colombia.

Organized crime exists in nearly every corner of Mexico. Small local street gangs involved in a variety of crimes, including robbery, theft, extortion and kidnapping, can be found in every city. However, it is the country's drug cartels — extended criminal organizations with a monopoly on the drug trade — that hold the real power. DTOs are extending their enterprises to encompass a wide range of organized criminal activities and are effectively cementing their positions at the top of the criminal hierarchy.

Other organized criminal activities that DTOs engage in are widespread but do not generate nearly as much money as drug trafficking. These activities include kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, and weapons trafficking. In general, the major drug cartels do not rely on these activities as a major source of income, but rather use them in a limited way in order to supplement drug profits or as a way to support the overall organization.

Much of the drug-related violence in Mexico is directly related to shifting alliances among the various DTOs operating in Mexico. It is likely that Mexican security force operations have served to elevate these levels of violence. Successful apprehension operations often result in additional violence that as rivals struggle for control of that territory, or exact violent retribution against the suspected rats that tipped off the government.

The Operational Environment

The culture of drug cultivation and smuggling is deeply embedded in the fabric of society in certain segments of the population in Mexican society. Drugs such as opiates, cocaine and marijuana were commonly used in Mexico, generally for medical reasons, until the US and Mexico enacted prohibition laws at the beginning of the twentieth century. As an example, poppy culture existed in Mexico since at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century (1886) in

the north-western state of Sinaloa.¹ Demand for illicit opium in the US spawned Mexican drug trafficking. This new social group of drug smugglers emerged in production areas and border cities. The most important drug trafficking organizations in Mexico formed in the 1920s, when poppy cultivators in north-western states, particularly in the state of Sinaloa, responded to meet the demand for opium in the US. “The region became the center of drug business and a source of trafficking expertise, a know-how transmitted through generations. Born and raised among poppy and marijuana plants, some north-western peasants and people of urban origin with leadership capabilities were transformed into drug smuggling entrepreneurs.²” The demand for their products, supported by police and political protection, multiplied the number of producers in other regions.

Drug smugglers have been lionized in narco-corridos for nearly one-hundred years³ and the drug-smuggling culture has even adopted Jesus Malverde⁴ and Santa Muerte⁵ as their patron saints. Malverde and Santa Muerte churches and shrines are found throughout Mexico and their symbols appear as amulets, statues and tattoos⁶ as well as in narco-produced media. The image of the popular Mexican hero Pancho Villa, seen as a Robin Hood-type figure throughout Mexico, is used as a brand icon for Mexican marijuana from Sinaloa, Jalisco and Michoacan.⁷

Organized crime in Mexico has a long history. Mexican organized crime enjoys no small degree of prestige within certain portions of the



Figure 1. Pancho Villa immortalized.

¹ Alfonso Luis Velasco. "Geografía y Estadística del Estado de Sinaloa", en *Geografía y Estadística de la República Mexicana*, t. II, México, Oficina Tipográfica de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1889, pp.12-13, 20-46, reproducido en Sergio Ortega y Edgardo López Mañón (compiladores), *Sinaloa: textos de su historia*, México, vol. 2, Instituto de Investigaciones José María Luis Mora, 1987, p.143.

² Luís Astorga. "Drug Trafficking in Mexico: A First General Assessment." UNESCO, Management of Social Transformations Programme. Discussion paper 36. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/most/astorga.htm> on 12 Jun 09.

³ Juan Carlos Ramirez-Pimienta. "Del Corrido de Narcotráfico al Narco-corrido: Orígenes y Desarrollo del Canto a los Traficantes." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*. Special issue on border culture. XXIII (2004): 21-41.

⁴ Sam Quinones. "Jesus Malverde." *Frontline: Drug Wars*. October, 2000. National Public Radio. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/business/malverde.html> on 12 Jun 09.

⁵ Kevin Freese. "The Death Cult of the Drug Lords Mexico's Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed." Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS. Santa Muerte in the Zocalo image taken from Originally retrieved from http://www.treearth.com/gallery/North_America/Mexico/photo124738.htm on 12 Jun 09.

⁶ Laura Castellanos and José Carlos González, "La Santa de los desesperados" [The saint of the desperate], *Jornada*, 09 May 2004, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2004/may04/040509/mas-santa.html> 22 July 2005.

⁷ Pancho Villa marijuana sack image retrieved from http://i1.iofferphoto.com/img/1085382000/_i/3059872/1.jpg on 12 Jun 09.

population. Organized crime invokes a combination of fear and respect in the community, making it difficult for law enforcement to locate witnesses willing to cooperate in investigations.

Growing problems of poverty and de-facto disenfranchisement of large segments of the population through low wages, massive unemployment, and class-based inequities have exacerbated tensions with the United States over trade agreements and immigration issues. These confluences of political and economic events are intractable problems for the Government of Mexico. The DTOs are exploiting these social conditions and the historical and cultural aspects of Mexican society concerning drug smuggling by coercing or intimidating the population into allowing drug gangs to flourish in their communities.

A Status-Quo Strategy

There is no overarching SEDENA⁸ counter drug campaign plan. General Galvan has repeatedly said that he affords the Military Regional Commanders with maximum flexibility to develop their own counter-drug strategy and to exercise their own initiative to conduct operations in their sector.

Commanders at the tactical level operate within this broad guidance from SEDENA by using conventional, general purpose forces to replace the municipal and selected state police, secure critical government infrastructure and provide area security and crime deterrence through presence patrols and checkpoints. This security component is not specifically designed to protect the population from the intimidation and corruption of the DTOs, nor is it connected to, or supported by social development programs that are specifically targeted on the segments of the population that are most heavily influenced by the DTOs.

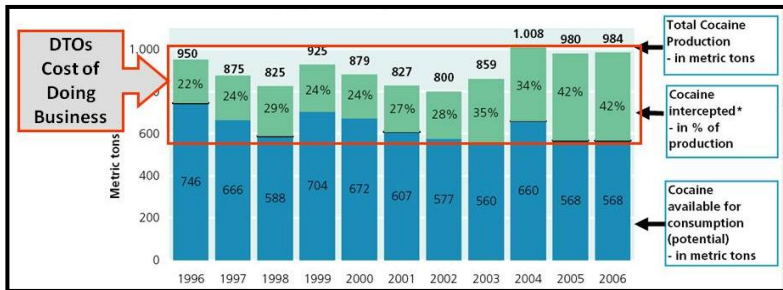


Table 1. Interdiction of Drug Supply Chain.

SEDENA targeting efforts are heavily weighted along two lines of operation: source control and HVI interdiction. Anonymous tips are the primary source of intelligence driving Special Forces to conduct raids to seize drugs or

DTO leadership.

The source control and HVI interdiction strategy for the war on drugs in the Western Hemisphere is a failed operational construct. Using cocaine as an example, in 2007, between 545 and 707⁹ metric tons of cocaine were produced in South America for US markets – with only 272 MT of it ending up in the US for retail distribution.¹⁰ The rest is either eradicated in South America or Mexico, seized in

⁸ The Mexican military is composed of two branches: the Army, known as the Secretariat de Defense Nacional (SEDENA), and the Navy. The Mexican Air Force is subordinate to the Army, and its airframes are considered Army assets. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SEDENA> on 11 Jun 09.

⁹ 2009 National Drug Threat Assessment. National Drug Intelligence Center, United States Department of Justice. Johnstown, PA. December, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs31/31379/appendb.htm#Top> on 12 Jun 09.

¹⁰ Interagency Assessment of Cocaine Movement (IACM), 28th Edition. Office of National Drug Control Policy. December, 2008. Pg. 1 and 4.

transit or interdicted as it crosses the border into the US. As the chart above¹¹ indicates, the percentage of drugs that are seized or eradicated before they get into the hands of the user in the US represent a standard cost of doing business for the DTOs.

Trend analysis available in the 2009 National Drug Threat Assessment in table two¹² indicates that a source control strategy of eradication and


interdiction does nothing to change the demand for drugs in the US. Local drug shortages due to seizures only temporarily drive up the local street price of drugs and cut the purity.

The “so what” analysis from looking at the trends in this data is that a counter-drug strategy that weights its effort toward a “source control” line of operation will only serve to temporarily disrupt the DTOs operations and will not apply all national power on the DTOs center of gravity.

The Diamond Counter-Insurgency Model

The strategic COIN model, developed by Dr. Gordon McCormick, called the Diamond Model depicted in the figure at left¹³, helps planners craft a comprehensive COIN strategy to cut threat organizations off from their bases of popular support and to isolate, capture, or kill their members and leaders. The model offers a structure for relations between the host-nation government, threat groups, the population, and international actors or donors.

The external environment in a COIN operation is depicted along the lower half of the Diamond Model. The state directly targets the supplies and financing flowing from the outside to threat groups along leg 5 of the model to reduce the support of external sponsor. Simultaneously, the host nation government initiates diplomatic operations to gain support and resources for its COIN efforts from partner nations and other international actors along leg 4 of the model. The state uses diplomatic pressure and punitive measures to influence the behavior of insurgent sponsors.



	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Cocaine (any form)					
Individuals (12 and older)	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.5	2.3
Adolescents (12-17)	1.8	1.6	1.7	1.6	1.5
Adults (18-25)	6.6	6.6	6.9	6.9	6.4
Adults (26 and older)	1.9	1.7	1.5	1.8	1.7
Crack					
Individuals (12 and older)	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6
Adolescents (12-17)	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.3
Adults (18-25)	0.9	0.8	1.0	0.9	0.8
Adults (26 and older)	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6
Heroin					
Individuals (12 and older)	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
Adolescents (12-17)	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1
Adults (18-25)	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4
Adults (26 and older)	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1
Marijuana					
Individuals (12 and older)	10.6	10.6	10.4	10.3	10.1
Adolescents (12-17)	15.0	14.5	13.3	13.2	12.5
Adults (18-25)	28.5	27.8	28.0	28.0	27.5
Adults (26 and older)	6.9	7.0	6.9	6.8	6.8
Methamphetamine					
Individuals (12 and older)	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.5
Adolescents (12-17)	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.5
Adults (18-25)	1.9	1.9	1.8	1.7	1.2
Adults (26 and older)	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.4

Table 2. Demand for Drugs in United States

¹¹ The Threat Of Narco-Trafficking In The Americas. Studies and Threat Analysis Section of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. October 2008. Retrieved from http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/OAS_Study_2008.pdf on 12 Jun 09.

¹² 2009 National Drug Threat Assessment.

¹³ Dr. Gordon McCormick. “A ‘Pocket Guide’ to Internal War.” Department of Defense Analysis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1994.

¹³ Lines of Operation for COIN forces and Insurgents graphic provided by Dr. Sean A. Edwards. Chief, Insurgency Combat Support Branch. National Ground Intelligence Center. Charlottesville, VA.

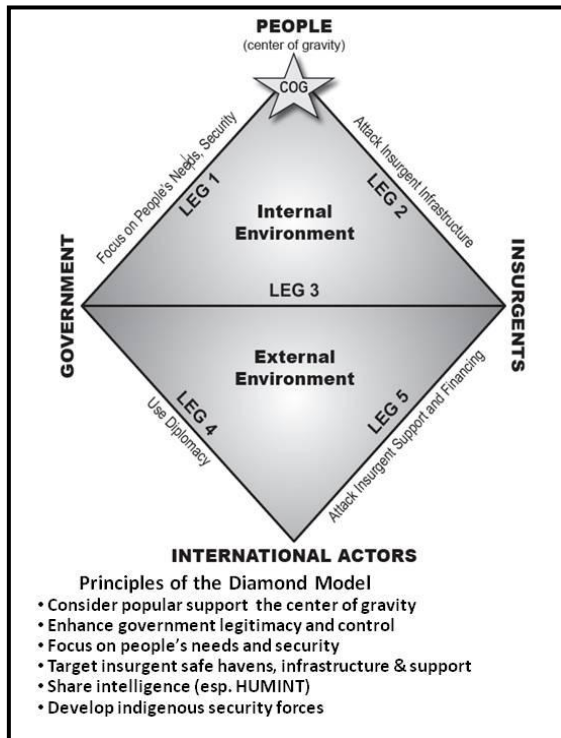


Figure 2. McCormick Diamond Model.

The internal environment of the host nation is addressed in the upper half of the model. The state is enabled to identify and strike the insurgents along leg 3 of the model by patiently pursuing efforts along legs 1 and 2 of the models. Gaining the popular support of the population is done by building the trust and confidence of the people by focusing on their needs while simultaneously providing security to deny or degrade threat influence over the people. Having the confidence and support of the local population may lead security forces to information that exposes the threat infrastructure. Information enables security forces to conduct operations (along leg 2 of the model) to disrupt the threats mechanisms for controlling the people. Operations often lead to additional actionable intelligence enabling security forces to target the insurgency's infrastructure. The state should pursue sequential actions along legs 1 through 3 of the model.

“The overall strategy (internal to the state) identifies the local populace as the center of gravity

in the COIN fight and winning popular support as the key to the state's ability to remedy its information disadvantage and win the conflict. The indirect approach of working through the local populace and indigenous security forces to target the insurgents thus becomes the most direct path to victory.¹⁴” Mexico's military forces conducting CD operations are minimizing or ignoring legs 1 and 2 of the model and are weighting their efforts only toward directly targeting their opponents by seizing drugs and arresting HVIs.

Targeting the DTOs Center of Gravity

The DTOs strategic center of gravity is the revenues derived from drug sales. Attacking the DTOs access to money will directly impact the critical element that the DTOs need in order to sustain their organizations. The key is to take away a cartel's access to the proceeds from drug sales.

Our experience has shown, much like our hunt for al-Qaida around the globe, that arresting the leadership of the DTO will only temporarily disrupt the DTOs operations because we know that there will always be someone (possibly more ruthless and unpredictable than the last) that is willing to take the risks to attempt to control the DTO because of the enormous profit potential.

¹⁴ COL Gregory Wilson. “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and The Indirect Approach.” *Military Review*. November-December, 2006.

The most effective method of attacking the cartels center of gravity is likely by impacting the flow of bulk cash (estimated at approximately \$30 billion USD annually¹⁵) from the United States back to Mexico. Additionally, legal actions against money laundering operations, black market peso exchange and other money-fraud operations designed to get the proceeds of drug sales back into the hands of the DTO leadership will cut the DTOs off from their access to funds which are the critical element to sustaining their operations.

The chart on at left depicts the revenue from drug sales as the strategic center of gravity for the DTOs and it shows the corresponding critical capabilities and critical requirements that DTOs require to sustain the COG. There are a number of exploitable critical vulnerabilities that enable targeting the DTOs center of gravity. *The proceeds from drug sales are the least recuperable¹⁶ asset that the DTOs have.* Eliminating their access to money will seriously impact the DTOs ability to purchase weapons, pay for security forces, bribe politicians and government security forces and pay for the communications and services that the DTOs use to propagandize the population into accepting the presence of organized crime in their communities. Doing so weakens the cartel enormously and could even cause it to collapse.

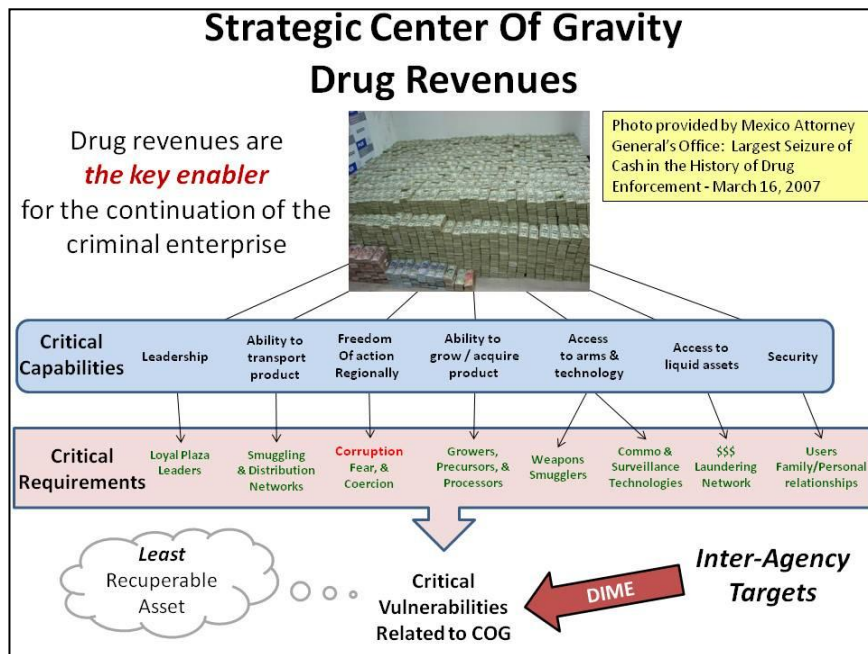


Figure 3. Strategic Center of Gravity for Drug Revenues

Conclusions

The Mexican government must undertake a “whole of government” approach and combat the drug threat to the country as if it were an active insurgency. The key terrain in the CD fight is the population. Mexican security forces must separate the population from the drug gangs and

¹⁵ 2009 National Drug Threat Assessment.

¹⁶ ...how long it will take the adversary to repair, replace, or bypass the damage inflicted on a target. Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Special Operations Targeting and Mission Planning, Appendix A, pg. A-4. Joint Staff. 21 May 2003.

provide security for the population while the government uses all elements of its national power to restore essential services and meet the populations basic needs. This is the most essential step Mexico can take toward enabling a major cultural shift away from criminality for a significant segment of the population.

If the Government of Mexico sustains an effective “counter-insurgency campaign” against the DTOs then terrorized communities may, sooner or later, withhold the support that the DTOs depend on, leading to reduced monetary returns, reduced receptivity to narco-terrorist propaganda, fewer recruitment prospects, and unfavorable national and media coverage. They will also begin to cooperate with law-enforcement agencies.

The DTOs must be cut off from access to the cash that they need to compensate members of the population, bribe officials and buy influence in the population by providing services that the government isn’t, while the government of Mexico simultaneously separates the population from the drug gangs with effective security operations while supported by integrated information operations designed to connect the people back to their government and reject the drug gangs in their community.

LTC Robert Culp is a career Officer in the US Army with extensive experience in special operations and low intensity conflict. He is currently in battalion command at Camp Zama Japan.

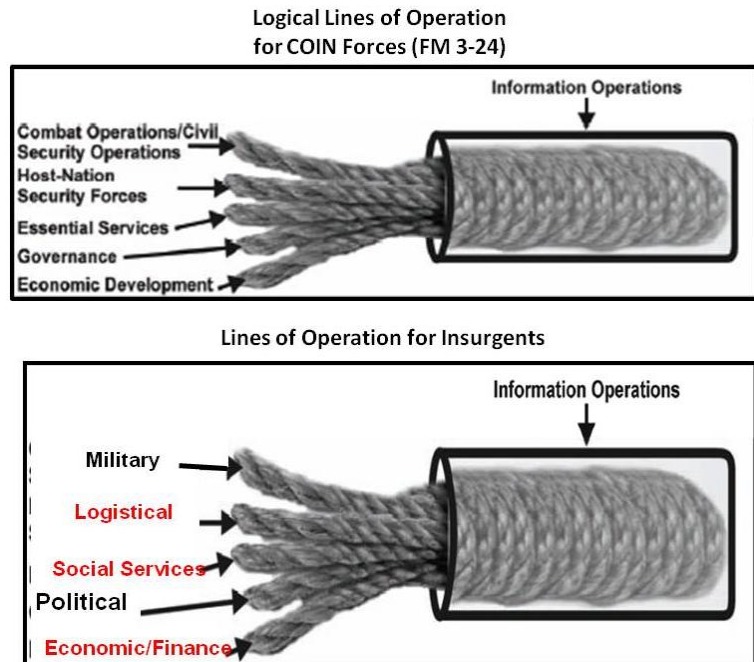


Figure 4. Lines of Operation in COIN.

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