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COIN in Mexico? A Response to Robert Culp's Strategy for Military Counter Drug Operations

by Patrick Corcoran

It has grown fashionable in recent years to argue that the solution to Mexico's public security difficulties lies in treating organized crime within the context of counterinsurgency theory. Many have made this argument, one of the most recent being Robert Culp here at *Small Wars Journal*. This is an unfortunate misreading of the security problems that are plaguing Mexico. While COIN theory offers a handful of sensible ideas, as an overarching philosophical guide, it is an imperfect fit for Mexico.

The first thing that bears mentioning when considering whether COIN as the answer for Mexico is that, problematically enough, Mexico is not suffering from an insurgency. Hillary Clinton and other American officials have indicated that it is, but they are incorrect.¹ An insurgency seeks either concessions from the state or its overthrow, and it uses attacks on the state or on civilians as a means to achieve that. Mexican gangs are seeking profits, and their attacks are overwhelmingly directed at competitors, not at government officials or innocents. (It's worth remembering that roughly 90 percent of those killed in Mexico's drug related crimes are gang members killed by other criminals.)²

Beyond the ill-fitting label, there are other reasons, more operational and less semantic, that a COIN approach falls short in Mexico. One is that the foundation of classical COIN theory—that the victor will be determined by the allegiance of the neutral population, which is what is guiding Culp when he writes of the goal of having “people trust and support the government and its security forces”—has very little in common with the prevailing Mexican reality.

In fact, this is largely already the case. While appalled by the violence and disillusioned by the inefficacy of Calderón's crime policies, the Mexican public is staunchly behind an aggressive approach to drug trafficking. In the battle between the drug gangs and the government, the loyalty of the people is plainly not at stake.

Poll after poll demonstrates this. The polling group BGC published a survey in the Mexico City daily *Excelsior* in September of 2010 showing 88 percent support for anti-drug

¹ Peter, Tom A. (2010, September 9). “Mexico Denies Hillary Clinton's Insurgency Comparison”, Christian Science Monitor on the web. Retrieved on February 17 from <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0909/Mexico-denies-Hillary-Clinton-s-insurgency-comparison>.

² Unsigned article. (2009, February 26). “Mexican president: we're not losing drug war”, msnbc.com. Retrieved February 26 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29413556/>.

policies.³ A few months previous, Pew's Global Opinions Project polled 80 percent support for the use of the army to combat organized crime.⁴ Seeking an answer to basically the same question, the Mexican firm Mitofsky found 74 percent support of using the army in April of 2010.⁵

In other words, the government has already achieved the basic objective of a successful classical counterinsurgency—the consent to govern—yet it is far from defeating organized crime. The reason, of course, is that drug trafficking gangs aren't particularly concerned about popularity, they don't need it to be successful, and their operations aren't fundamentally altered upon its denial.

If one puts himself in the mind of a Mexican drug trafficker, this shouldn't be really a surprise. You don't object to public support, but if you have your Colombian suppliers, your gang of 40 moles from the Federal Police feeding you information, your friendly American customs agent ready to wave your trucks through at the border, and your series of safe houses that you can anonymously slip into around the nation, then you certainly don't need the public to become fabulously wealthy.

Contemporary versions of COIN, of course, are less attached to the notion of population-centric wars than their classical forbears, and Culp nods in that direction with his focus on cash along with than popular support as best way to bring down the drug syndicates. He writes:

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 annually) from the United States back to Mexico.

This may seem a wise strategy, but it's not clear how it differs from a comprehensive law-enforcement approach. In any event, Culp overestimates the ease with which that can be done authorities can interrupt the criminal cash flow. Thus far, such efforts have utterly failed. The basic reason stems from the needle-in-a-haystack nature of the enterprise: hundreds of thousands of cars cross the US-Mexican border on a daily basis, and a million dollars in \$100 bills occupies a space only a bit larger than a shoebox. As a result of this inherent difficulty, American authorities presently seize no more than 1 percent of illicit cash crossing the border, according to the *Washington Post*.⁶

The assessment that John Arvanitis, chief of financial operations for the Drug Enforcement Administration, offered the *Post* doesn't inspire much confidence that a turnaround is in the offing.

³ Beltrán, Ulises and Cruz, Alejandro. (2010, September 6). "Encuesta: Convence a 88 por ciento lucha antinarco", *Excelsior* on the web. Retrieved September 26 from http://www.excelsior.com.mx/index.php?m=nota&id_notas=658329#.

⁴ Wike, Richard. (2010, August 12). "Mexicans continue support for drug war", Pew on the web. Retrieved on September 26 from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1698/mexico-support-drug-war-less-supportive-of-american-involvement>.

⁵ Unsigned executive summary. (2010, April 14). "Percepción ciudadana sobre la seguridad en México", Mitofsky on the web. Retrieved on September 26 from <http://www.consulta.mx/Estudio.aspx?Estudio=seguridad-mexico-mucd>.

⁶ Booth, William and Nick Miroff. (2010, August 25). "Stepped-up efforts by U.S., Mexico fail to stem flow of drug money south", *Washington Post* on the web. Retrieved February 16 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/25/AR2010082506161_pf.html.

It moves so rapidly, so fluidly. It crosses borders. It moves in bulk. It is stored in warehouses. It is moved into business. They have multiple, multiple options. They can hide a million dollars in a tractor-trailer, or they can carry it across the border in a handbag.

Mexico and the US can both do more combat dirty money in the financial system, but in an era of economic integration and open borders, when our not insubstantial efforts thus far have been totally fruitless, stopping the cash flow seems a dubious route to the defeat organized crime in Mexico.

Culp also errs in his interpretation of kidnapping and extortion:

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.**

Here, extortion and kidnapping appear as though they were mere sideshows in Mexico, but in fact they represent a growing menace. A recent study carried out by the Mexican Congress calculated a 317 percent increase in kidnappings from 2005 to 2010.⁷ A Mexican NGO known as the Law and Human Rights Counsel estimates that there were 2.25 million attempted extortions in 2009, up from 1.3 million in 2008.⁸ Other extortion tallies are lower, but virtually all estimates show a sharp spike over the past five years. The most common explanation of the rise in such crimes is that with drug gangs having a harder time moving their merchandise northward thanks to Calderón's more aggressive stance, they are branching out into other criminal arenas.

Furthermore, Culp's dismissal that the major groups do not rely heavily on such activities is overly sweeping. Many major gangs, notably the Zetas and La Familia, serially engage in criminal practices outside of the drug trade. The Congressional study mentioned above reported that close to one-third of all kidnaps are perpetrated by members of organized crime. According to business groups in Juárez, 80 percent of the city's businesses have made extortion payments, a scale that suggests at least some participation by the most powerful criminal syndicates.⁹

Kidnapping and extortion are the criminal enterprises that most directly harm law-abiding Mexican citizens, and therefore should be of the utmost concern to authorities. Because victims of extortion and kidnapping are often targeted because of their success, the practices also disincentivize commerce and prosperity in a way that drug traffic does not. If you accept the theory that much of the rise in these crimes' frequency stems from gangs' need to replace lost drug income, then to crack down on drug sales is to provoke a spike in more menacing activities.

⁷ Merlos, Andrea. (2010, September 7). "El secuestro se triplicó en el país en 5 años", El Universal on the web. Retrieved February 16 from <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/primera/35502.html>.

⁸ Unsigned and undated fact sheet. Consejo para la ley y los derechos humanos, A.C. on the web. Retrieved February 16 from <http://www.mexicodenuncia.org/extorsion.html>.

⁹ Unsigned news article from wire service Notimex. (2010, July 3). "Pagan extorsión a la delincuencia organizada más del 80% de los comercios en Ciudad Juárez", Excelsior on the web. Retrieved February 16 from http://www.excelsior.com.mx/index.php?m=nota&id_nota=518322.

The counterargument would be that cracking down on cash flows and drug sales is the surest way to weaken organized crime, which is the most significant threat to the Mexican state, and the price that must be paid is worth it. Depending on that price, that's perhaps a defensible position, but it's important not to gloss over the ill effects of such a philosophy.

Despite the fundamental disconnects between a typical insurgency and Mexico's security dilemmas, COIN does offer some useful prescriptions, among them the emphasis on good intelligence and the informational aspect of the struggle. (One illustration of Mexico's failure on the intelligence front: despite estimates that the drug trade employs 1 million people, Mexico only has a few hundred protected witnesses working for the government.)¹⁰

However, none of these concepts, absent though they may be in Mexico, are exclusive to COIN, nor are they foreign to basic ideas of competent police work. The areas of overlap are more than anything a reflection of the similarities between comprehensive police work and COIN, and it is in no way clear that there is anything about Mexico's security challenge that makes COIN the ideal vehicle for addressing it.

Patrick Corcoran is a student of international relations at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies. He lived in northern Mexico from 2005 to 2010 and blogs daily about Mexican security and politics at [Gancho](#).

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¹⁰ Ronquillo, Víctor. (2010, October 10). "El Michoacanazo: los límites de la justicia", Milenio Semanal on the web. Retrieved February 16 from <http://www.msemanal.com/node/3083>.