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## Narco-Armor in Mexico

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Known alternatively as “narco-tanks” (*narcotanques*), “Rhino trucks,” and “monster trucks” (*monstruos*), the crude armored vehicles emerging in Mexico’s cartel war are evidence of a changing tactical logic on the ground. “Narco-tanks” are better characterized as improvised armored fighting vehicles (IAFVs)—portending a shift in the infantry-centric nature of the cartel battlespace.

Narco-tactics have been, for the most part, infantry-centric—consisting of small raids, blockades, and gun battles. The use of armored sport utility vehicles for transportation, raids, and tactical in-battle maneuver is largely an extension of the small unit infantry operations that characterize the tactical logic of the cartel war. The presence of armored vehicles ups the ante.

Although press accounts label them as “tanks,” Heinz Guderian would scoff at the rustbuckets increasingly being found in Mexico. But those familiar with the history and development of armored fighting vehicle (AFVs) will recognize the tactical logic—however crude—of the “narco-truck.”

The narco-truck is an IAFV with armor plating, air conditioning, and gun ports. Some models have 2.5 cm steel plates. Others have gun turrets. These trucks are enough to stop personal weapons but not defend against anti-vehicle weapons.<sup>1</sup> While these IAFVs are limited by the lack of shielding for the tires, they are flexible enough to serve in a combination of direct fire and troop transport roles.<sup>2</sup> As Gordon Housworth noted, the increased complexity and lethality of platoon and company sized engagements in the drug war has led to a greater demand for mobility—and armored SUVs are not enough to create a “poor man’s mechanized infantry.” Each narco-truck can transport a squad, and are reminiscent of the “gun trucks” used in convoy security operations in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

Narco-trucks grant an advantage over dismounted forces, municipal and state police, and low-level federal units. The importance of this should not be understated, despite the fact that they

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<sup>1</sup> “Narco-tanks’ the latest innovation in Mexico’s drug war,” *Poder 360°*, 07 June 2011, Damien Cave, “Monster Trucks on the Road, From Gangs in Mexico,” *New York Times*, 07 June 2011, and Gordon Housworth, “Narco-Tanks: Mexico’s Cartels Get Asymmetric Weapons,” 11 June 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/1073-narco-tanks-cartel-competition-elevates-to-asymmetrical-weapons>

<sup>2</sup> Diana Wueger, “Mexican Drug War Gets More Fierce,” UN Dispatch, 17 May 2011, <http://www.undispatch.com/mexican-drug-war-gets-more-fierce>

<sup>3</sup> Housewirth, op cit.

would be instantly destroyed in any stand-up engagement with a well-ordered conventional formation armed with anti-vehicle weapons. IAFVs grant greater mobility, the ability to deploy larger numbers of gunmen, and are sure to provoke countermeasures in the escalating battle for territory among respective cartels and their opponents at municipal, state and federal levels. Conventional police tactics are insufficient to address IAFVs. A shift to gendarmerie-type light and mechanized infantry with military support is needed. The Policia Federal (PF) is rapidly adjusting its force structure to accommodate this threat. Municipal and state police have yet to make the shift. This will require higher levels of integration and cooperation among Mexico's police and military than has been seen in the past.

As William F. Owen noted, combined arms does not depend on having an established state military.<sup>4</sup> Operations in Libya (as well as the “Toyota War” before it) demonstrate that primitive conventional capabilities can be reverse-engineered from commonly available industrial products. Commercial medium and heavy-duty trucks and tractors provide the raw material for these modifications, and future models will likely continue to be progressively upgraded into IAFVs.<sup>5</sup> The cartels assemble and modify IAFVs in makeshift factories within areas they control. It is likely the cartels will accelerate use of IAFVs in their competition to control the plazas and retain freedom of maneuver within their zones of impunity. The result is a cartel arms race.

Cartel tactics in Mexico, which began with assassinations and raiding missions bridging the gap between crime and irregular warfare, are looking more and more like conventional combined-arms and infantry and mechanized infantry missions. IAFVs can not only transport squads but—with armaments for gun turrets—also have the capacity to support them in firefights.

Whatever the ultimate outcome of Mexico's criminal insurgencies, the “narco-trucks” demonstrate that the concept of combined arms is inherently flexible. As the military historian Archer Jones noted, it makes more sense to conceive of a set of basic weapons systems that repeat themselves throughout history rather than a set of specific time-dated capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Although there is thought to be a strict dividing line between irregular and conventional warfare, what Stephen Biddle dubs the “modern system” of ground tactics—defined by tactical combat in the First World War—remains a basic and ignored element of warfare in many irregular conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

On the ground in Mexico, it is important to recognize the impact of this tactical innovation. Light infantry-like gendarmerie force structure augmenting civil police, with military and intelligence support—is needed to create the needed *military* conditions for security and governance. Hopefully the presence of IAFVs/*narcotankes* will stimulate innovations needed to address this threat.

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<sup>4</sup> William F. Owen, “The Toyota Horde,” *Small Wars Journal*, 7 April 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/04/the-toyota-horde/>.

<sup>5</sup> Housweith, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Military Power in Modern Battle*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

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