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Security Through Partnership *Fighting Transnational Cartels in the Western Hemisphere*

POLICY BRIEF



By Bob Killebrew and Matthew Irvine

The most dangerous threat to the United States and its allies in the Western Hemisphere is the growth of powerful transnational criminal organizations that threaten law, order and governance in Mexico and the seven states of Central America. Over 35,000 Mexicans have died in drug-related violence since 2006 when Mexican President Felipe Calderón began to crack down on the cartels; in 2010 more than 3,100 have died in Ciudad Juarez alone.¹ In neighboring Guatemala, the government declared an official “state of siege” along its northern border with Mexico to permit its military to fight the *los Zetas* cartel.² Unfortunately, efforts to counter cartels and drug trafficking have largely failed thus far.

Worsening violence and instability in the region threaten U.S. national security interests and demand a stronger response. To address this

threat, the United States and its partners in the region should look to Colombia for guidance and assistance. Colombia has fought similar threats with some success and is emerging from three decades of crisis fueled by drug trafficking organizations and violent cartels. While Colombia will face many challenges for some time to come, it is increasingly secure, democratic and able to help its neighbors.

The United States and its partners throughout the Western Hemisphere stand the best chance of securing the region against the most dangerous cartels by attacking them together. A regional security framework such as the “Mesoamerican Security Corridor,” proposed by the U.S. Department of State, offers a new opportunity to link U.S. and Colombian assistance and counternarcotics programs in Mexico to address challenges in the Central American states to Mexico’s south.³ Such a regional security framework will be necessary to defeat the cartels and reinstitute the rule of law and justice. A key element of the framework should be greater synergies between major U.S. security assistance programs including the Mérida Initiative, Plan Colombia and nascent bilateral Colombian-Mexican cooperation.

TABLE 1: MAJOR U.S. ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN LATIN AMERICA

	PLAN COLOMBIA	MÉRIDA INITIATIVE	CENTRAL AMERICAN REGIONAL SECURITY INITIATIVE
Country or countries	Colombia	Mexico	Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama
Programs	Counternarcotics, military, counterterrorism and law enforcement assistance	Counternarcotics, military and law enforcement assistance	Counternarcotics, military, counterterrorism and law enforcement assistance
Start Year	2000	2008	2008
Total Assistance	\$7 billion	\$1.8 billion	\$348 million
FY2012 Request	\$400 million	\$334 million	\$100 million

Source: Congressional Research Service and U.S. Department of State.

Cartels and U.S. National Security

Transnational criminal organizations threaten the legitimacy and power of governments, sow violent crime and terrorism, and threaten regional stability throughout the Western Hemisphere. They compete with one another and with governments for control of territory, markets and influence, and establish fiefdoms for operations and training purposes, such as in northern Guatemala and areas of Mexico. The cartels form illicit networks that operate in constantly shifting alliances; they are enemies today and allies again next week. They are also growing

rapidly, due to the lucrative narcotics market in the United States, modern technology, the wide availability of small arms and global economic integration.⁴

Indeed, some Mexican cartels are now so heavily armed that they can take and hold ground throughout the region.⁵ They are increasing their operations across the hemisphere to circumvent security and law enforcement efforts. For instance, Mexican cartels are constructing new production facilities in Central and South America and increasing activities inside the United States.



The United States both feeds and is victimized by the cartels. It is a major source of weapons and financing used by cartels and violent gangs throughout the region, as well as a major market for narcotics and other drugs.⁶ Inside the United States, drug cartels are already operating in more than 200 cities, wholesaling narcotics and conducting other criminal activities.⁷ These organizations also endanger the safety of U.S. citizens and officials traveling in threatened countries. In February 2011, two U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers were shot in northern Mexico, which resulted in the death of agent Jamie J. Zapata.⁸ Effective U.S. law enforcement and the strong rule of law restrain these criminal organizations, but their growing presence in the United States is a serious concern.⁹

A Regional Security Framework

A regional approach is necessary to attack the activities of criminal cartels effectively. This approach should reinforce the rule of law and justice, focus on pursuing specific criminal organizations across borders and jurisdictions, and pool multinational and interagency resources throughout the region as part of a broader Mesoamerican security framework.

PRIORITIZE ATTACKING CARTELS

Although mitigating the effects of illegal drugs is an important policy issue in the concerned countries, the United States and its regional partners should target the cartel networks throughout the region above all else. Transnational criminal organizations threaten U.S. national security interests by undermining regional stability and conducting criminal and terrorist activities. To

Transnational cartel networks cannot be defeated in just one area, one border or one country. These organizations conduct activities throughout the region and therefore are able to adapt quickly to new security measures taken to counter them.

attack the source of this threat, U.S. and regional attention and resources should focus initially on the most dangerous and prominent Mexican cartels, to enable joint operations and coordinated activity against specific organizations across multiple countries. Future efforts should allocate law enforcement, military, intelligence and financial capabilities against every level (from leadership to financier and foot soldier) of Mexican cartel operations, notably *los Zetas*, the Sinaloa Federation, the Gulf Cartel, the Beltrán Leyva Organization, *La Familia de Michoacan*, the Tijuana Cartel and the Juarez Cartel.¹⁰

WORK REGIONALLY

Transnational cartel networks cannot be defeated in just one area, one border or one country. These organizations conduct activities throughout the region and therefore are able to adapt quickly to new security measures taken to counter them. For instance, the recent discovery of the first cocaine production laboratories in Honduras tied to Mexican cartels indicates a shift of production from Colombia to the states of Central America.¹¹

The United States should respond by integrating its counternarcotics and security assistance, operations and, as appropriate, intelligence efforts throughout the region into a single, streamlined strategy. Budgeting and planning should be conducted at the regional level, synchronizing whole-of-government efforts to achieve specific goals, such as dismantling individual cartels, strengthening the rule of law and fostering greater regional security cooperation. For instance, the Mérida Initiative, Plan Colombia, the Central American Regional Security Initiative and other programs should be coordinated, and where possible combined, into a broader and formal regional policy. Similarly, Mexico currently receives both Colombian and U.S. support in its growing counternarcotics fight.¹² Such efforts should be closely coordinated to maximize their effectiveness.¹³

HELP OTHERS LEAD

Successful efforts against transnational criminal organizations need not originate in Washington. The United States should encourage bilateral or multilateral partnerships in the region that may not include direct U.S. sponsorship or control but focus on shared goals. Many important partnerships are formed among the directly affected parties, notably the states of Central America that face the growing threat by the cartels every day. Colombia should be encouraged, with U.S. financial support as appropriate, to continue providing bilateral assistance to other Central American states and Mexico. Such initiatives should include support for regional efforts like the joint special operations group being formed by Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to target *los Zetas*.¹⁴

The United States should also expand security assistance programs and successful initiatives like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Vetted Officers program to empower other capable actors within the region. In this program, the

DEA develops relationships with trusted liaisons in law enforcement and government organizations throughout the world to better coordinate operations and share intelligence. This established network of liaison partnerships enables multinational law enforcement and intelligence operations against specific cartel networks.

REVITALIZE THE U.S. PARTNERSHIP WITH COLOMBIA

The United States should anchor its regional efforts in a new relationship with Colombia based on a shared interest in countering transnational criminal networks and bolstering the rule of law. To do so, the United States should continue to provide security assistance to the Colombian government to conduct counternarcotics and counterterrorism operations inside the country and to encourage expanded Colombian regional efforts to support a cooperative multinational countercartel strategy.

Unfortunately, just as Colombia is poised to emerge from an era of crisis and contribute to regional stability, the future of U.S.-Colombian relations is in flux. The decade-long Plan Colombia program of U.S. security and economic assistance is winding down. Additionally, the U.S. Senate has yet to ratify the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which endangers a bilateral partnership built through decades of close cooperation and harms U.S. economic interests. To support this key ally in the fight against transnational crime, the U.S. Senate should pass the pending U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

The U.S. Congress should consider a “floor” of assistance to Colombia: a multiyear commitment of U.S. aid that continues support for counternarcotics and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs in Colombia. Such a commitment to the U.S.-Colombia partnership would allow Colombia to invest in the long-term development of training capacity and tools required to support an expanded regional effort. This coincides with what

President Barack Obama calls the “shared responsibility” of the United States to assist countries dealing with the effects of drug-related violence and transnational crime.¹⁵

Leveraging the Colombian Experience

The decades-long partnership between the United States and Colombia is now returning benefits to the United States in unexpected ways. Its success shows that the power of transnational criminal organizations can be rolled back through determined long-term efforts by governments.

For Mexico and the countries of Central America, repeating that success will occur most likely through closely coordinated efforts to counter the transnational threat posed by increasingly violent transnational cartels. These efforts can be aided by Colombia, which stands ready to support regional allies, just as U.S. assistance supported Colombia for more than a decade. Other regional partners should also benefit from U.S. efforts to empower intra-regional partnerships through intelligence, training, financing and operational assistance.

Transnational crime threatens U.S. national security interests and the stability of key U.S. partners in the Western Hemisphere. A reinvigorated partnership between the United States and Colombia, Mexico and the nations of Central America is the most effective means to attack this transnational threat and promote the rule of law and justice throughout the region.

ENDNOTES

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10. The most dangerous and prominent cartels possess transnational capabilities and threaten the stability of regional partners. Additionally, these organizations form transnational criminal enterprises and constitute significant terrorist networks throughout the region. These organizations with transnational reach should be the priority for the United States and allied nations. In the long term, mid-level drug trafficking networks and demand-side reductions of narcotics use must also be a policy aim; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "A Smarter Drug Interdiction Policy for Mexico," *Houston Chronicle* (12 March 2011), <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/editorial/outlook/7469906.html>.
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A member of the
Army watches the
incineration of fourteen
tons of drug in Ciudad
Juarez, Mexico in 2008.

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