Mexico's Fight against Transnational Organized Crime

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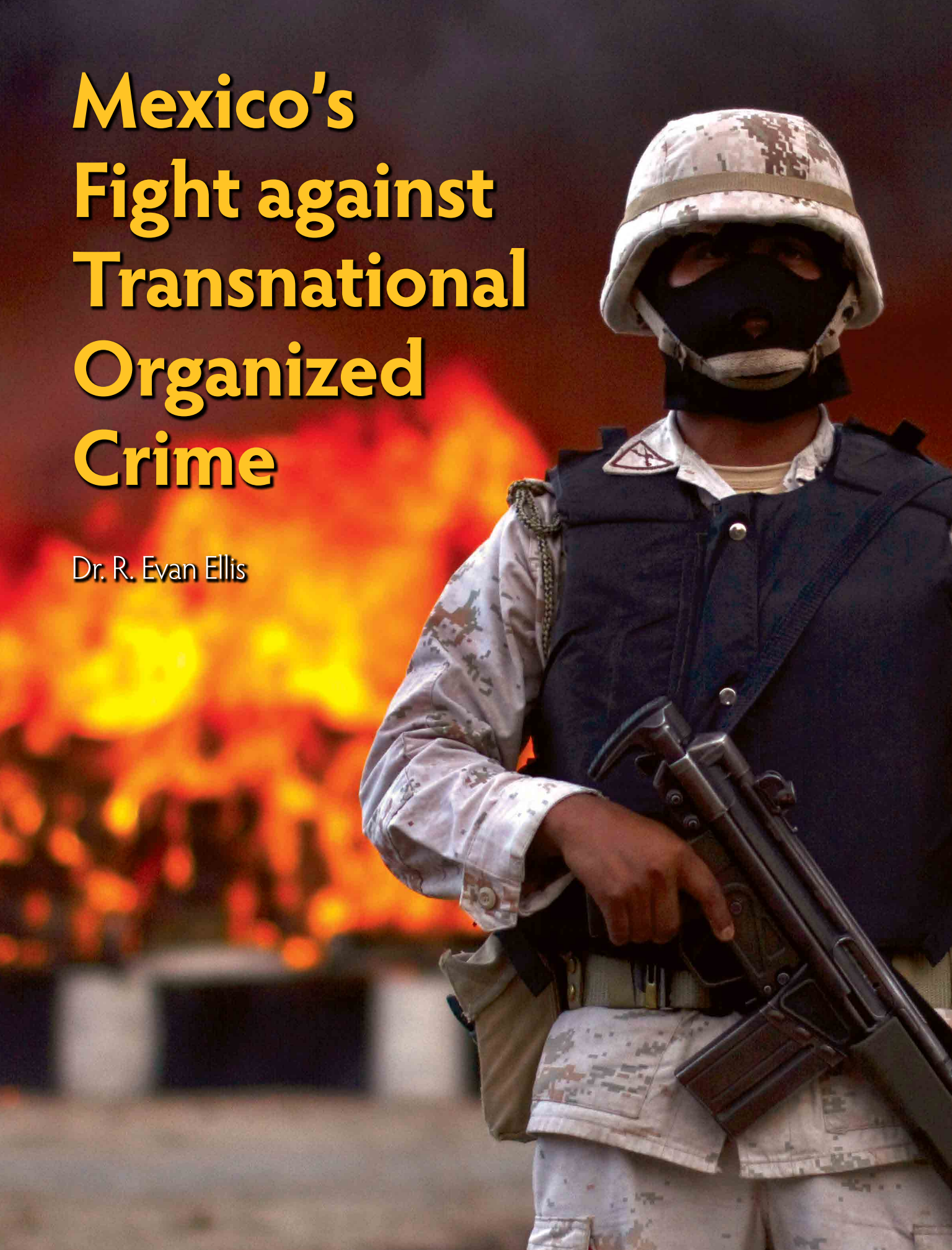

The security environment in Mexico is characterized by a dangerous fragmentation of and competition among criminal groups that pushed the nation's homicide rate to a record high of 22.5 per 100,000 in 2017, a 27.5 percent increase over the prior year.[1] The nation, whose security and prosperity strongly impacts the United States through geographic proximity and associated flows of people, money, and goods (both licit and illicit), is at a critical juncture in its fight against transnational organized crime. Since Mexican President Felipe Calderón launched the "war against the cartels" in December 2006 with the deployment of the Mexican army into the state of Michoacán, the nation's security forces have taken down the leaders of multiple powerful criminal groups and debilitated their organizations.[2] In the process, the Mexican military, police, and other security institutions have evolved their institutional structures, modified both their strategy and their doctrine, and strengthened their ability to combat transnational organized crime. Yet as with the experience of the United States in combatting terrorist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mexico's fight against the cartels, both despite and because of its successes, has created a more chaotic criminal landscape, with both a higher level of violence and a broader range of criminality.

Complicating Mexico's security challenge is the disposition of the Trump administration to act aggressively against illegal immigration from Mexico (among other countries) into the United States, along with U.S. renegotiation and possible abandonment of the North American Free Trade Agreement. These actions increase stressors on Mexico, including the prospect of expanded deportations of immigrants to Mexico, the loss of remittance income, and impeded access by Mexican producers to the U.S. market. The Trump administration's actions, magnified by rhetoric that many Mexicans perceive as an insult to their country and people, have combined with Mexican frustration over the persistence of violence and corruption to create the real prospect that leftist populist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador could win the July 2018 presidential election, potentially taking Mexico on a course of more distant political relations and decreased security cooperation with the United States and expanded engagement with extra-hemispheric rivals of the United States such as Russia and China.[3]

A soldier stands guard 20 October 2010 in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, as packages of marijuana are being incinerated behind him. During a conjoined operation with the Mexican army, local and state police seized 134 tons of U.S.-bound marijuana and detained eleven suspects in one of the country's biggest drug bust in recent years. (Photo by Guillermo Arias, Associated Press)

(Figure courtesy of Geopolitical Futures ©2018, https://www.geopoliticalfutures.com. Source: U.S. Congressional Research Service/Drug Enforcement Administration 2015)

Figure. Dominant Cartels throughout Mexico

This article examines Mexico's serious and evolving security challenges, and the key initiatives and critical issues confronting the nation's security forces. It argues that the Mexican government has made important progress against a range of criminal groups and in innovating and strengthening its own capabilities to combat such entities and associated flows of illegal goods—capabilities that deserve to be recognized, further refined, and exploited in partnership with the United States and Mexico's other neighbors. It concludes with recommendations for U.S. policy makers regarding the importance of strong and respectful support for Mexico at the present critical juncture.

The Transnational Organized Crime Threat

The actions of Mexican security forces against the cartels during the two most recent presidential administrations (*sexenios*) of Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto, and the associated fighting unleashed between those cartels and their factions, have contributed to the fragmentation of Mexico's criminal landscape, with a proliferation of groups that has made Mexico's security environment more violent and less predictable.[4]

In the 1980s and 1990s, a limited number of criminal groups such as the Sinaloa, Arellano Félix, and Carrillo Fuentes organizations and the Gulf Cartel moved cocaine through the country, often with the complicity of corrupt Mexican government officials but with limited violence and competition against each other. Intergroup competition among Mexican cartels and associated violence began to increase before Calderón's sexenio, thanks in part to the disruptive employment by groups such as the Gulf Cartel with significant military training and firepower to compete against each other. Yet, the introduction of military forces by Mexico to combat the cartels arguably accelerated the evolution and splintering of its criminal groups, which expanded from eight major cartels during

Soldiers pile up 134 tons of marijuana for incineration 20 October 2010 at the Morelos military base in Tijuana. Heavily armed soldiers came under fire at least once as they raided a series of homes and seized the drugs from a poor suburb of Tijuana across the border from San Diego, California. (Photo by Jorge Duenes, Reuters)

the Calderón sexenio to more than three hundred by the end of the Peña Nieto administration.[5] (The figure on page 112 shows the most dominant cartels by region.) Such fragmentation expanded violence by increasing uncertainty and competition among groups and by engaging a greater number of entities in the supply chain moving narcotics, other illicit goods, and people through Mexico toward the United States. Whereas organizations such as the Guadalajara Cartel once had the contacts and infrastructure to move drugs from Colombia through Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico to the United States, the breakup of groups left some of the new entities without such connections, dedicating themselves to moving illicit goods along only part of the route, taxing (extorting) others moving the goods, or engaging in other criminal activities. Further complicating matters, as the groups increasingly employed armed wings or gangs to protect themselves and wage war on each other, those groups engaged in local criminal activities to sustain themselves, expanding the level of common criminality in the country.

One of the most worrisome current dynamics in Mexico's evolving criminal environment is the weakening of the Sinaloa Cartel, considered the wealthiest and internally best connected of the Mexico-based criminal groups, following the extradition of its titular leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, to the United States.[6] The fall of Sinaloa has enabled and been accelerated by the rise of the *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (Jalisco New Generation Cartel). With its combination of international illicit business connections, orientation toward violence, and disposition to insert itself into preexisting struggles between other groups for its own benefit, Jalisco New Generation has contributed to the worsening situation in Mexico.[7] Meanwhile, other major groups such as the Zetas are experiencing a resurgence in some parts of Mexico's southeast, and in the state of Guerrero, and to an extent in adjacent states, the expanding violence and struggle among numerous factions in an area in which the state has historically had only a weak presence is pushing the area toward ungovernability.[8]

Innovation and Organizational Adaptation in the Mexican State Response

In the context of the challenges posed by Mexico's increasingly fragmented security environment, the *Ejército Mexicano* (Mexican army), *Armada de México* (Mexican navy), and other security organizations have achieved a number of successes against the cartels. They have also assumed new responsibilities and adapted their organizations to strengthen their capabilities in combatting criminal groups in ways that deserve recognition.

As a presidential candidate, Peña Nieto promised to extract the military from its role in internal security operations in Mexico and replace it with an expanded national police and a new forty-thousand-person militarized police force called the National Gendarmerie.[9] However, the political and other obstacles of doing so prevented the Gendarmerie (that was ultimately created as a division within the federal police) from being large and capable enough to replace the military in the fight against Mexico's criminal groups. The need for Mexico's army and navy to continue their direct involvement, in turn, has obligated the Peña Nieto government to adapt Mexico's laws and to create new structures within the armed forces themselves to facilitate that role.

In December 2017, the Mexican congress passed a new national security law that more clearly defines authorities and responsibilities for the conduct of internal security operations by the armed forces.[10] Importantly, the law does not provide carte blanche to the military to conduct operations throughout the country as it chooses. Rather, it specifies that authority to conduct such operations is limited to specific places and periods of time, and only when the appropriate civilian authority (such as a state governor) has affirmatively declared that the capabilities of civilian institutions responsible for security in the area have been exceeded.

The armed forces, including the heads of both the army and navy (who advocated for it), view the law as positive because of its role in clarifying conditions and responsibilities as much as it empowers their actions. However, as of May 2018, the law had eighteen challenges against it in the Mexican Supreme Court as well as significant political opposition from left-oriented Mexican political parties such as *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* (National Regeneration Movement) and nongovernmental organizations. The law also faced discontent from a substantial part of the ruling *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), as well as from state-level politicians, who are reportedly uncomfortable with the law's requirement that local authorities have to formally declare the failure of their government to respond to the security challenge in the territory for which they are responsible in order to receive military assistance. Based on the wide array of groups with concerns, multiple Mexican experts consulted for this study believe that the law may be retracted or modified after the July 2018 elections.[11]

Beyond the law, the inability to build a police force sufficiently large and capable enough to replace the military in the fight against the cartels has led the Mexican army to create military police (MP) brigades to best ensure that the forces it employs to conduct internal security operations are trained and equipped for the mission, including engaging with civilian populations. Whereas the military police was originally a small organization within the Mexican army dedicated to protecting installations and addressing crimes within the military, the current expansion transforms it into a branch and significantly increases it, with a targeted end strength of forty thousand persons (arguably not by coincidence, the size once envisioned for the Gendarmerie).

As of February 2018, the Mexican army had stood up seven MP brigades and was in the process of standing up an eighth. As part of the expansion of the military police and its transformation from a small organization focused on installation protection and internal criminal matters to a much larger one engaging with the Mexican civilian population, the Mexican army has greatly expanded its training facilities for military police and created a new MP career path (branch). While the officers used for the new MP brigades were initially transferred from other branches, the first class trained specifically for the new MP branch graduates the training program and enters service in 2018.

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A notable characteristic of the new MP brigades is their close relationship, by design, with the local government and population. In establishing the first brigades, the Mexican army chose locations where the presence of the military was strongly supported by the local governments. As part of the concept for setting up the brigades, state governments and local businesses agreed to provide the materials, funding, and other support to construct the facilities and other required infrastructure where the units are to be based. In Monterrey, for example, where the first brigade was stood up, the Mexican conglomerate CEMEX donated all of the cement for the construction of the facility; in combination with other donations, the facilities housing the brigade are the newest and arguably the nicest in the Mexican military. The next brigade will reportedly be established in the tourism-oriented state of Quintana Roo, where there has reportedly been a significant upsurge in violence from groups such as the Zetas.

While the Peña Nieto government and the Mexican military under Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda have indicated their strong support for the MP brigades, the future of the initiative following the 2018 general elections is not clear. As suggested previously, the incoming government could rescind or replace the newly passed national security law, which makes important contributions to the legal framework within which the MP brigades conduct security operations as well as advancing an alternative concept for how to meet the security challenges facing the nation.

Members of the Mexican navy guard drug kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera (*center*) 22 February 2014 in Mexico City during his presentation to the media. El Chapo was recaptured 8 January 2016, months after he escaped from prison. (Photo by David de la Paz/Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

Beyond the MP brigades, the Mexican army is also involved in the installation of new radar systems in the northern part of the country that will strengthen Mexico's control of its national airspace, in part by helping to deny the use of its national territory to narcotraffickers. As of February 2018, the site survey for the radars was underway, although the timetable for the radar acquisition and installation were not clear.

While the MP brigade is the principal internal security project of the Mexican military, the institution is also

in the process of transforming itself into a more internationally oriented force. Notable milestones include expansion of the Mexican army delegation supporting the Interamerican Defense College and the Interamerican Defense Board in Washington, D.C. Indeed, for the first time, a Mexican army general, Maj. Gen. Luis Rodriguez Bucio, has been made head of the board.

Mexico has further committed to establishing a training institute for peacekeeping forces, the *Centro de Entrenamiento Conjunto de Operaciones de Paz de México* (Joint Training Center for Peace Operations in Mexico), and, together with the Mexican navy, the deployment of a peacekeeping battalion by 2020, although the status of the construction of the facility and the contribution of personnel for the battalion are uncertain.[12] In April 2017, the Mexican army also hosted the Central American Security Conference for the first time, and it will host the thirteenth Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas in 2018.[13]

By comparison to the Mexican army, the Mexican navy's role in internal security operations has been more modest, although its special forces and other units have had numerous high-profile successes against the leaders of criminal organizations.[14] While the Mexican army has established the aforementioned MP brigades, the navy's use of its military police in operations for public internal security missions has been limited to a small deployment in the state of Veracruz, done as part of a commitment made by the president to the state. The mission is in the process of winding down in conjunction with the 2018 end of the period in office of the current Veracruz state government.

Although the Mexican navy has not followed the army in expanding its own military police for use in public protection, its naval infantry is regularly involved in operations against criminal groups, not only within one hundred miles of the coast where they traditionally operated but also in the entirety of the Mexican national territory. With approximately fifteen thousand personnel, the Mexican *Infantería de Marina* (Naval Infantry) is still recovering from a severe reduction in its numbers that occurred during the Fox administration (when it had as few as two thousand personnel). The use of naval infantry against criminal groups has arguably leveraged, more than driven, the organization's recovery of end strength. Yet, the mission has arguably shifted the focus of the organization. The principal training school for naval infantry in Campeche, for example, now has a strong focus on urban combat in addition to the naval infantry's traditional missions of amphibious and jungle operations.

Despite the aforementioned changes, there is more continuity within the Mexican naval infantry than one might expect from its substantial role in operations against transnational organized crime. The commands and units comprising the force are fundamentally the same as those before the Fox administration, although some locations that were previously hosting company-size units (such as Puerto Penasco in Sonora) now have battalions. The number of general officers (admirals) coming from the naval infantry has also remained relatively constant, driven by three brigades that are one-star commands, plus the billet for the naval infantry admiral who heads the navy special forces unit. Some general-officer-level staff billets have also been made eligible for naval infantry admirals, supported by a new course at the Naval War College to prepare them for the considerations of commanding both naval and infantry forces.

The most important land-oriented force within the Mexican navy for combatting transnational organized crime has been its special forces command. Previously, Mexican navy special forces were split between regional centers in Manzanillo, Tuxpan (Veracruz), and Coyocan, where they were collocated with regional naval intelligence units that helped them to prepare for their missions. During the Peña Nieto administration, the force has been consolidated into a single brigade-sized force located in Coyocan to benefit from economies of scale with respect to training, technical capabilities (such as command and control), equipment, and other support. From Coyocan, special forces elements can be deployed for operations to any part of the country. Once deployed, the elements of the special forces brigade then leverage local Mexican navy and other intelligence and logistics assets, as well as what they bring from Coyocan, to support their mission. Yet, while consolidation of the Mexican special forces has indeed been beneficial for realizing economies of scale, some interviewed for this article expressed concern about putting "all of the eggs" of Mexican special forces into one basket.[15]

Beyond the employment of its special forces and naval infantry more broadly against criminal objectives, the Mexican navy's most significant new activity in the struggle against organized crime as the

Progressive left-wing candidate for the Mexican presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Juntos Haremos Historia coalition, waves to the crowd 13 April 2018 in the municipality of Cuautitlán Izcalli, State of Mexico. One of his campaign promises is to stop operations in Mexico by the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Mexico's presidential election is scheduled for 1 July 2018. (Photo by Omar López, ZUMA Wire/Alamy Live News)

Peña Nieto administration nears its end has been its assumption of control over port security from the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes* (Secretariat of Communications and Transportation, or SCT). During the initial phases of the war against criminal groups under the Calderón administration, the Mexican navy had established coordinating groups, called *cumares*, in the principal ports of Altamira, Veracruz, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Manzanillo to more effectively provide physical security of the ports, as well as to protect their personnel against criminal groups using threats of violence against port workers to secure access to the facilities and associated flows of goods. The use of these coordinating groups has now been expanded to twenty-one of Mexico's largest ports, making the process of security planning and requesting assistance more direct for port authorities. As part of providing that security, in conjunction with the cumares, the Mexican navy has created and deployed special security units called *Unidades Navales de Protección Portuaria* (Naval Port Security Units, or UNAPROPs), to those ports.[16] The UNAPROPs are generally about fifty persons in size, depending on the classification of the ports. While UNAPROPs are only assigned to the largest 21 of Mexico's 103 ports, smaller ports are covered by Advanced Naval Stations, typically manned by twelve to fourteen Mexican naval infantry.

Since formally assuming control for port security from SCT in 2016, the Mexican navy has established an associated authority for the mission, the *Dirección General de Capitanías de Puerto y Asuntos Marítimos* (General Directorate of Port Captaincies and Maritime Affairs, or UNICAPAM). The navy has also created special programs, including within the Naval War College, to prepare its officers and personnel for the tasks associated with port security, oversight, and administration. Yet, while UNICAPAM provides oversight and coordination, civilian port captains continue to run all but a small number of key facilities such as Lázaro Cárdenas.

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Similarly, the civilian Administration for the Generation and Training of the Merchant Marine continues to retain a number of nonsecurity functions in the ports and coordinates with the navy regarding these functions.

The navy has had some difficulties in obtaining information from and coordinating with SCT during the transition period, but senior naval officers and others consulted for this study generally assess that the navy's assumption of the mission has notably increased the Mexican government's control over the flow of goods through the ports, and correspondingly, seizure of illicit materials. While its new function does not give it direct control over Mexican customs operations, the Mexican navy does have people inside the customs organization, thanks to an initiative put forth in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Although the Mexican navy does not inspect every container going through the nation's ports, naval officials have both inside information and the ability to intervene in select cases, when intelligence from the navy or other sources indicates a reason for intervening with respect to a specific cargo.

In association with its port mission, the navy has also increased controls over illicit flows of minerals, traditionally obtained from both legitimate and unregistered mines in Michoacán and exported through the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, often to companies in China. Similarly, the navy has increased controls over precursor chemicals, including establishing on-site labs for testing suspected controlled substances manned by naval personnel in the ports of Veracruz and Lázaro Cárdenas (also supporting the adjacent port of Manzanillo, an entry point for many drug precursors), eliminating the previous delays created by the need to send samples to Mexico City for testing.

The navy has also made progress in expanding its cyberdefense capabilities, supporting both the defense of infrastructure and operations against sophisticated criminal groups. It recently established its cybersecurity organization, *Unidad de Ciberseguridad* (Cybersecurity Unit), as an independent entity, leveraging officers specially trained in the Mexican Naval War College Information Security Masters Course, set up in March 2017 as the first such capability in Mexico.[17]

Although the Mexican armed forces receive the majority of media attention for their role in the fight against transnational organized crime, the Mexican federal police (as well as state police) continues to be the principal force in combatting the scourge of crime and delinquency in the country. Depending on who is counted, the core of the federal police is comprised of approximately twenty-five thousand officers across five divisions.

As noted previously, the Gendarmerie was significantly reduced in scope from the 40,000-person force originally contemplated to approximately 1,200 today and implemented as a division within the Mexican police.[18] Although a variety of missions have been proposed for the Gendarmerie, from critical-asset protection to community policing, in practice, it has been largely used as a reserve force, deployed to areas such as Valle de Bravo and Baja, California, when existing federal police units have not been adequate to cover the perceived need. While the Gendarmerie initially received significant attention and resources, to include receiving new, high-quality arms and equipment, authorities consulted for this study note that the organization appears to have lost much of its original prioritization within the police.[19]

Beyond the Gendarmerie, while the police in Mexico are widely perceived as corrupt, the Mexican federal police are arguably more professional and less tainted by corruption than their state and local police counterparts. All Mexican federal police officers now have to train for a full year in the Mexican police academy as well as pass a regular a battery of confidence tests, which include physical and drug tests and lifestyle interviews (to identify possible illicit enrichment), among others. Nonetheless, because of limited resources for such controls, officers average only one confidence test every three years, and there is potential

for corrupt senior officials to pressure subordinates to participate in illicit activities by threatening to falsely denounce them. Moreover, the lack of resources, difficult working conditions, and the perception that senior jobs are reserved for the friends of political appointees make it difficult for the federal police to attract quality candidates.

By contrast to the federal police, the performance of Mexico's state-level police forces is uneven. Not only are levels of corruption on the forces often high, but state police forces also generally lack money for severance pay to eliminate police who fail confidence tests from the force, let alone track who employs them after they leave. Training is another problem for some state-level police forces, with at least one state employing officers after they have received only two weeks of training.[20] Other problems include a lack of police investigators as well as serious discipline concerns, to include questions of involvement by some state police officers in Veracruz (among other states) in extrajudicial killings.[21]

In practice, some state-level police forces are significantly more capable than others. In wealthy Monterrey, for example, the previous government established an elite police force, the *Fuerza Civil*, which ultimately recruited some 4,500 persons from across Mexico, including many retired military officers. Monterrey provided the recruits with good equipment and training, and special living quarters isolated from the community to protect members against the corrupting effects of threats by criminal groups against their families. Even such exemplar police forces have had difficulty, however, attracting adequate numbers of quality personnel.

In theory, under Peña Nieto, the Mexican government has been using its control over federal funding to the states to oblige the latter to incorporate the myriad of municipal police forces in Mexico under state control under the *Mando Unico* (Unified Command) Program. Yet, Mexican security sector personnel interviewed for this study noted almost uniformly that implementation of Mando Unico in different states has been uneven, and as the 2018 presidential elections have approached, such initiatives have lost momentum, in part because Mexico's political parties seek to leverage the resources of state-level political machines during this period and are thus reluctant to pressure the governors over policy issues.[22]

Beyond the police, at the federal level, two other key Mexican organizations in the fight against organized crime are the *Procurador General de la República* (Attorney General of the Republic, or PGR, and the national civilian intelligence agency *Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional* (CISEN). According to officials interviewed for this study, while CISEN continues to make important contributions to the struggle against organized crime, it has neither fully overcome significant prior cuts to its experienced analysts and field agents, nor has it placated concerns about its politicization that have historically plagued it.

With respect to the PGR, under the Peña Nieto administration, it has arguably been the most neglected law enforcement organization regarding resources and administrative attention for reforms. While the PGR has an intelligence branch with up to one thousand employees, it is principally focused on analysis to support building cases against criminal groups rather than on conducting field work.

One innovative tool created by the current Mexican government to help provide security in high-crime/high-violence areas has been *Bases de Operaciones Mixtas* (Combined Operations Bases, or BOMs).[23] In the initial concept, BOMs were bases in which federal and local police, military forces, and other government forces were physically collocated to realize operations and act as a deterrent, in part because only the military had adequate firepower and other capabilities to respond to the threat in such areas, yet only the police could perform arrests. While experts interviewed for this study believed the BOMs deter criminal activity to some degree in the areas where they are established, their effectiveness is limited by the lack of confidence of federal forces that the local police with whom they work in the facilities have not been corrupted and could thus compromise their operations.[24] Further undercutting the operational effectiveness of the BOMs, because the BOM facility is a known, fixed site, the concentration or convergence of various authorities to the BOM was a signal to criminals that an operation was about to be launched. As a result, today forces often do not concentrate in the BOM facility before the operation.

Beyond traditional law enforcement institutions, Mexico's Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) also plays an important role, in conjunction with the U.S. Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, in attacking the resources and financial flows of organized crime groups. Yet, despite the FIU's critical role, it is beset by problems. The organization is reportedly

under-resourced, given Mexico's combination of a large, diverse economy with a sophisticated financial sector and a substantial informal economy. The FIU also reportedly has difficulties in coordinating with the PGR so that Mexican authorities can legally act on the cases that the FIU identifies as in need of intervention. Beyond the FIU itself, Mexican banking laws, while seemingly adequate to deter money laundering and other illicit financial activities, are very unevenly enforced.

In addition to the FIU and the fight against money laundering, Mexico's prison system is an important, often overlooked component in the nation's struggle against criminal groups. Effective control within prisons is critical not only in avoiding the escape of high-value targets such as El Chapo but also in ensuring that incarceration in such facilities effectively stops the illicit activities of criminal leaders and group members, rather than allowing them to use the prisons as bases from which they can plan and conduct operations.

At the federal level, Mexico has made progress in expanding and improving control in its federal prisons. During the past two presidential administrations, Mexico has expanded capacity from six thousand to thirty thousand beds in fifteen federal prisons, with modular designs for maintaining more effective separation between different types of prisoners. Prison capabilities have also been augmented with new monitoring technology and automated control systems in high-priority prisons such as the maximum security Altiplano facility (from which El Chapo escaped).

Despite such improvements, approximately 220,000 of Mexico's 250,000 prisoners are in the nation's 150 prisons within the state-level system, where the situation is much graver. Indeed, most of the recent serious stories about abuses within the prison system in Mexico cite incidents that occurred in state-level prisons such as Topo Chico and Piedras Negras.[25]

Finally, in the struggle against criminality and violence in Mexico, the state of judicial reform remains a serious problem. With the financial and training support of the United States, Mexico invested significant resources in transitioning to an adversarial-style justice system. While the implementation of the system was achieved on schedule in 2016, the performance of the new system has been uneven, particularly in states that waited until the last minute to transition to the new system.[26] A key contributor to the problem is the inadequate training of police, prosecutors, and others—a weakness exploited by well-resourced criminals who hire skilled lawyers to secure the dismissal of their cases on technicalities. In one high-profile example in February 2018, José Alfredo Cárdenas Martínez, senior leader and accountant for the Gulf Cartel, was arrested by Mexican naval special forces, then released by the court because of a defect in the way that he had been detained.[27]

Other sources of frustration for Mexicans with the new system include the release of those accused of minor charges who then fail to show up for trial, and people threatening or bribing their accusers while waiting for the case to go to trial to intimidate them into settling or dismissing the charges. By one estimate, as many as 90 percent of the cases under the new system never go to trial.[28]

Recommendations

It is in the fundamental interest of U.S. security and prosperity, and the U.S. strategic position in the hemisphere to support the Mexican government in confronting the challenges of violence and criminality in Mexico's increasingly fragmented and unpredictable criminal landscape. Yet, what is most needed is not significant additional resources for Mexico, and even less, direct action by U.S. forces to help "solve" Mexico's challenges. Rather, the U.S. approach should concentrate on enhancing intelligence and operational coordination, helping Mexico to strengthen its institutions, and working with respect and patience to address issues on the U.S. side that contribute to Mexico's difficulties.

As Mexico demonstrated through its purchase of more than $2.2 billion in helicopters, HMMWVs, signals intelligence equipment, and training aircraft during the past two years, the country does not need U.S. charity, but rather, U.S. partnership.[29]

To date, U.S. intelligence support to the Mexican military and police in going after the leadership and resources of criminal groups and dismantling their networks is one of the most important and appreciated aspects of assistance to Mexico, and it should be continued, if not expanded. Similarly, the United States should continue to enhance operational coordination, such as that between U.S. detection and interception assets on U.S. territory and international waters, and those of Mexico on its own territory. Such collaboration should particularly focus on dismantling illicit networks with

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a presence on both the U.S. and Mexican sides of the border and on expanding collaboration with Mexico to stem the flow of firearms into the country.

To help strengthen Mexican institutions, the United States should explore the expansion of in-U.S. and in-country training for advanced military capabilities (not basic skills training) by its 7th Special Forces Group and others, including the sharing of tactics, techniques, and procedures with Mexican army special forces in areas where they have identified particular needs. The U.S. Department of Defense should further consider an expanded number of billets for Mexican officers in institutions such as the Western Hemisphere National Security Institute, the Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College, as well as the exchange of instructors, to both strengthen relations between the militaries of the two countries and serve as a conduit for sharing knowledge between U.S. and Mexican institutions.

Beyond military cooperation, the U.S. State Department should look for opportunities to strengthen and make more frequent the administration of polygraphs and other confidence tests within the federal police, as well as to expand support for the implementation of financial and other databases to identify cases of corruption and to track law enforcement officers who have been dismissed. Technology and resource support to Mexico's FIU and expanded collaboration in identifying and pursuing the financial resources of Mexico-based criminal groups may be particularly productive.

Beyond the aforementioned assistance, and perhaps even more importantly, the United States needs to do more to control the key drivers of criminality and violence on the U.S. side of the border, including the growing consumption of opioids and cocaine. Without altering its laws, the United States can arguably also do more to coordinate with Mexico to control and track the firearms that are purchased legally on the U.S. side of the border and then smuggled into Mexico; such flows from the United States contributes significantly to the substantial firepower that Mexican criminal groups employ against each other, against authorities, and to extort the local population.

In whatever manner the United States addresses the status of Mexican immigrants living within its borders without legal status, it should also avoid abrupt mass deportations, or at least coordinate closely with its Mexican counterparts if it must do so. Through such gradualism and coordination, the United States will help avoid desperate deportees from becoming the recruits of criminal groups.

Conclusion

It is vital that U.S. and Mexican leaders communicate respectfully with each other. Cooperation and trust between Mexico and the United States is vital to addressing our shared security challenges.

Mexico is at a critical moment in its struggle against expanding criminality and violence, in the context of national elections that will strongly impact both its future posture toward organized crime and other policy issues as well as its relationship with the United States and extra-hemispheric actors such as China and Russia. There has arguably never been a moment in which it is more important for the United States to respectfully support Mexico as an integral part of the North American family whose security and prosperity directly affects that of the United States. ■

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Notes

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