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U.S. Northern Command's Security Role in Mexico: An Indirect Approach to Building Capacity among the Mexican Military

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

U.S. Northern Command's Security Role in Mexico: Building Capacity and Trust with the Mexican Military.

The deteriorating security situation resulting from the drug war in Mexico poses significant threat to U.S. national security. As the geographic combatant command responsible for homeland security, U.S. Northern Command has a vested interest in addressing this instability. At the core of the instability in Mexico is civil and judicial institutional dysfunction, and long term security cannot be realized until this issue is addressed. However, when confronted with options for addressing the instability resulting from the drug war, Northern Command must select a course of action that fulfills its defense in depth concept. The Mexican military is a viable, trusted state institution and is capable of effectively challenging the threat posed by Mexican drug cartels. In light of this, U.S. Northern Command can have the most positive impact on the security situation in Mexico through indirect capacity building efforts and increased engagement with the Mexican military.

Introduction

The security situation in Mexico has deteriorated to an alarming state. Murders attributable to drug violence have increased significantly each year since the drug war in Mexico began intensifying, and in 2010 drug-related deaths topped out at 11,041.¹ This statistic represents an astounding *forty percent* increase from the previous year.² While violence associated with drug trafficking in Mexico has been fairly pervasive over the years, the level of violence resulting from the Mexican government's current war against the Mexican cartels is unprecedented. This intensification is largely the result of Mexican President Felipe Calderon's challenge to the Mexican cartels since taking office in 2006. Few have been spared the horrific wrath of the cartels. Too often, government officials, police and civilians are left to suffer as the result of drug cartel and other Trans-national Criminal Organization (TCO) initiated violence. There are few lines these TCOs are not willing to cross as is evidenced by their increasingly brazen actions against Mexican authorities. In some instances, "squad-sized units of police officers and soldiers [have been] abducted, tortured to death and decapitated."³ In an attempt to stymie the spiraling violence and fill the void left by the country's foundering law enforcement agencies, President Calderon ultimately called up almost 45,000 Mexican military personnel to augment the war against the cartels.⁴ However, this measure has yet to have a significant impact on the impunity and effectiveness with which the Mexican drug cartels and other TCOs continue to operate.

¹ Scott Stewart, "Mexico and the Cartel Wars in 2010." STRATFOR.com, 16 December 2010. <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20101215-mexico-and-cartel-wars-2010> (accessed 20 March 2011) .

² *Ibid.*

³ Tom Bowman, "CIA and Pentagon Wonder: Could Mexico Implode?" *NPR.com*, 1 December 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story.php?storyID=101215537>. (Accessed 25 March 2011).

⁴ Roderic Ai Camp, "Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Trans-Border Institute*. (October 2010) 292.

While the impact of the growing violence is certainly tragic for the Mexican people, there is pervasive concern in the United States over the effect this resulting instability will have on U.S. national security. First, there is the potential of the extreme violence in Mexico spreading into U.S. territory. Although cross-border proliferation of TCO violence has yet to manifest itself to a significant degree, it remains a threat. In fact, there are indicators of TCO willingness to export this violence as is evidenced by the recent murder of U.S. Border Patrol agent in southern Arizona.⁵ In addition to such a spill-over, there exists the potential of a large-scale human migration to the United States as a result of the spiraling violence.⁶ Such a migration could easily cascade into a humanitarian crisis with the United States finding itself heavily taxed to provide basic sustainment for a massive influx of displaced Mexican nationals. However, chief among security concerns is the fact that the Mexican government is unable to control significant portions of territory along its northern border. This lack of control lends itself to the potential of the infiltration by various non-state actors and, quite possibly, weapons of mass destruction into the United States. While the preceding worst case scenarios are hypothetical, they are also credible and illustrate the serious risk a destabilized Mexico poses to the United States.

In light of the potentially damaging impact of a destabilized Mexico on the security of the United States, there is considerable cause for concern among U.S. homeland defense stakeholders, specifically U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). U.S. Northern Command is the geographic combatant commander for North America, and Mexico is encompassed within its area of responsibility. In accordance with its mission of conducting

⁵ Devin Dwyer, "U.S. Border Patrol Agent Shot, Killed Near U.S. Mexico Border." ABCnews.com, 15 December 2010. www.abcnews.com/US/border-patrol-agent-shot-killed-us-mexico-border (accessed 7 April 2011).

⁶ Tom Bowman, "CIA and Pentagon Wonder: Could Mexico Implode?"

“homeland defense, civil support and security cooperation to defend and secure the United States and its interests,”⁷ USNORTHCOM has a vested interest to effectively address the deteriorating security situation in Mexico in order to minimize its impact on U.S national security. The difficult question, however, is how to proceed accordingly. Currently, USNORTHCOM, through Joint Task Force North (JTF-N), actively supports counter-drug and counter-terrorism activities of U.S. federal law enforcement.⁸ While these efforts are focused primarily on border security and criminal interdiction, they do not directly address the security situation within Mexico. In order to achieve an in-depth defense along the U.S. southern border, U.S. Northern Command can best contribute to stability in Mexico through indirect capacity building efforts and increased engagement with the Mexican military.

In support of this thesis, this paper will address the following issues. Initially, the nature of the problem will be examined and analyzed, to include the role of both the Mexican military and USNORTHCOM in the current security situation in Mexico. This will be followed by USNORTHCOM’s potential contribution to capacity building with the Mexican military. Existing impediments to a functional working relationship between the militaries of Mexico and United States will then be examined and will be followed by possible solutions to these impediments. Finally, recommendations to USNORTHCOM for the road ahead will be presented.

⁷ U.S. Northern Command. Mission Statement. <http://www.northcom.mil/About/index.html> (accessed 7 April 2011).

⁸ Joint Task Force North. Mission Statement. <http://www.jtfn.northcom.mil/subpages/mission.html> (accessed 7 April 2011).

Scope

The emphasis of Northern Command's role in security cooperation with Mexico is military specific. However, this does not imply that military engagement and capacity building efforts provide the sole solution to mitigating the instability in Mexico, and to purport such a solution neglects the wide-ranging scope of the problem. There is, of course, the problem of U.S. drug demand, without which the drug trade would likely lose much of its lucrative appeal. Also, at the core of the instability in Mexico is systemic civil and judicial institutional dysfunction, and long term security cannot be realized until this issue is addressed. Rampant corruption among Mexican government officials has thus far been a significant enabler for TCO activity. Consequently, the majority of U.S. efforts in Mexico are focused on rectifying these institutional problems.⁹ Given this acknowledgement of the complexity and broad scope of issues associated with the drug war in Mexico, the following analysis will instead focus on how USNORTHCOM can best focus its efforts in pursuit of stability in Mexico.

The Mexican Military: A Viable Option in the South

There are multiple options of how to best address the threat of the instability resulting from the steady escalation of violence in Mexico. One prominent option advocates the virtual sealing of the United States' southern border. The primary argument supporting this course of action, known as retrenchment, is the perception that Mexico is on an irrecoverable course to becoming a failed state and further efforts at building a productive partnership with

⁹ Eric L. Olson and Christopher E. Wilson, "Beyond Merida: The Evolving Approach to Security Cooperation." Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Trans-Border Institute. (May 2010) 3-5.

Mexico would be fruitless.¹⁰ While this view may seem attractive to those frustrated by the difficulties and perceived futility of working with the Mexican government, it fails to consider certain realities associated with the problem. First, the United States and Mexico share a 1,969 mile border, much of which spans rugged, harsh terrain.¹¹ U.S. efforts thus far to secure the border and prevent the flow of people and narcotics north have met with marginal success at best. There is simply no precedent on which to base the belief that channeling additional resources and personnel in a defensive posture along the border would achieve the desired results. The second problem with the idea of retrenchment is its incompatibility with USNORTHCOM's strategy of a defense in depth.¹² This strategy advocates defenses that extend beyond established borders, and is predicated on Mexico's ability to secure and control its own territory. While the retrenchment strategy is intended to shield the United States from the growing instability in Mexico, it ignores the implications for U.S. national security of having a failed state as a neighbor. Finally, there is the practical matter of economic interdependence. Mexico is the United States' third largest trading partner, with over 750 million dollars in legitimate daily cross-border trade occurring between the two countries.¹³ Even if Mexico does not fully regress into a failed, TCO-controlled state, and supposing comprehensive border containment is possible, doing so would prove to have a significantly detrimental economic effect.¹⁴

¹⁰ Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Benjamin Bahney and Jack Riley, *Security in Mexico: Implications for U.S. Policy Options*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009, 62-63.

¹¹ Manuel Torres, "Military exchange program benefits U.S., Canadian, Mexican military forces." U.S. Northern Command News, 15 July 2010, <http://www.northcom.mil/news/2010/071510b.html> (accessed 22 March 2011).

¹² Leonardo Hernandez (USNORTHCOM theater security cooperation coordinator), interview by the author, 7 April 2011.

¹³ George Friedman, "Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State?" *STRATFOR.com*, 13 May 2008. <http://www.stratfor.com/print/116443> (accessed 20 March 2011) 5-6

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Given the problematic nature of the retrenchment strategy, one must look to supporting and bolstering the Mexican security apparatus as the primary method for increasing stability south of the border. However, the inherent problem with this option is the viability of Mexican civilian security forces. Corruption and infiltration by organized crime is prevalent throughout Mexican law enforcement agencies to include the local, state and federal levels.¹⁵ To fully appreciate the scope of police corruption, consider that in 2007, President Calderon terminated 284 federal police commanders to include the commanders of every Mexican state.¹⁶

In contrast, the Mexican military, which includes SEDENA (army and air force) and SEMAR (navy and marines), is considered by many on both sides of the border to be a trusted, capable institution.¹⁷ While law enforcement is generally held in low regard by the Mexican public, the opposite is true of the Mexican military. In a survey conducted in 2009 intended to gauge the level of public trust in the armed forces, 70.8 percent of Mexicans surveyed responded that they trusted their military a great deal.¹⁸ This percentage of positive responses left Mexico ranked third of the nations polled in the Western Hemisphere, with the United States and Canada holding the top two positions.¹⁹ In addition to enjoying a considerable degree of public trust, the Mexican military also has the confidence of President Calderon, as is evidenced by his mobilization of the armed forces to fight the drug war in 2006. It appears, therefore, that the Mexican military is a beacon of promise within an otherwise dysfunctional security apparatus. In light of this, USNORTHCOM can be

¹⁵ Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Benjamin Bahney and Jack Riley, *Security in Mexico: Implications for U.S. Policy Options* 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Biff Baker, "The United States and Mexico Enhanced Military Cooperation." *DISAM Journal of International Security Assistance Management* 29, no. 3 (July 2009).

¹⁸ Roderic Ai Camp, "Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges." 306.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

reasonably assured that increasing capacity building efforts with SEDENA and SEMAR would be a worthwhile expenditure of resources.

In addition to highlighting the Mexican military's merits as an institution, its role regarding changing nature of the conflict in Mexico must also be considered. In recent years, the drug war has escalated into military-style conflict, and the Mexican military is better postured than law enforcement to deal with this growing threat. Mexican law enforcement officials attempting to confront the cartels are finding themselves overwhelmed by increasingly brazen and sophisticated adversaries. For example, of particular concern is the TCO known as Los Zetas. Although relatively limited in numbers, Los Zetas is very well organized and trained, often using insurgent and terror tactics in the achievement of their objectives.²⁰ The organization is also extremely well armed. Following a raid on three Zeta safe houses in 2008, multiple weapons caches were discovered that contained hundreds of automatic weapons, grenades, military-grade explosives and several hundred thousand rounds of ammunition.²¹ Discoveries like this illustrate the severity of the threat to the Mexican state and that TCOs like Los Zetas are surpassing the capabilities of Mexican law enforcement.

The Role of U.S. Northern Command

Although the Mexican military is in a better position than law enforcement to address this growing threat, it is clearly facing an increasing challenge to its efforts of expanding and enforcing the authority of the Mexican state. As a military strategic partner to Mexico, USNORTHCOM is in a position to leverage U.S. experience and expertise to help. While

²⁰ Lisa J. Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (Mar 2010): 63-65.

²¹ *Ibid* 63.

addressing an audience of Mexican military officers at the Mexican War College in 2009, the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, framed the drug war in Mexico as a shared responsibility between the United States and Mexico.²² Admiral Mullen continued by stating that the United States military has “developed the capabilities...in the last several years that have direct application” to the current fight that the Mexican military is facing.²³ Current capacity building efforts with the Mexican military have thus far been predominantly focused on intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) and command, control, communications (C3) training.²⁴ A limited number of unarmed U.S. mobile training teams (MTTs) have deployed to Mexico in order to facilitate this training.²⁵ While these limited capacity building efforts are certainly of value, there is more that the U.S. military can offer.

First, consider the United States’ previous success with military capacity building efforts in the region, namely El Salvador. During the early part 1980s, the government of El Salvador faced a potent communist insurgency, the FMLN, and the country itself was on the verge of becoming a failed state. El Salvador’s military at the time was a poorly trained, equipped and disciplined force that was ineffective at countering the growing FMLN momentum.²⁶ When the United States finally committed military advisers to the embattled country, the future of El Salvador appeared grim. However, throughout the course of the decade, only a handful of U.S. military advisers were able to help transform the

²² “Navy Adm. Mullen Praises Military Cooperation Between Mexico, U.S.” *US Fed News Service, Including State News*. (10 March 2009): <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed 31 March 2011).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Leonardo Hernandez (USNORTHCOM theater security cooperation coordinator), interview by the author.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ernest Evans, “El Salvador’s Lessons for Future U.S. Interventions.” *World Affairs* 160 no. 1 (Summer 1997), 47.

dysfunctional Salvadoran military into an able, professional fighting force.²⁷ As a result, the Salvadoran armed forces were able to effectively counter the FMLN threat and were ultimately instrumental in bringing about an end to the country's civil war a decade later. Even today, the Salvadoran armed forces are considered one of the most professional, capable militaries in the region.²⁸ USNORTHCOM can look to the lessons learned from this successful capacity building precedent when considering the potential of its role with the Mexican military.

In addition to previous experience in the region, the U.S. military has garnered extensive contemporary experience while fighting two major counterinsurgencies that is applicable to the conflict in Mexico. The question of whether the drug war in Mexico constitutes a true insurgency is beyond the scope of this paper; however, there are certain similarities between the methods with which counterinsurgency (COIN) operations are prosecuted and those required for the operating environment in Mexico. For example, an unfortunate consequence of employing the Mexican military in a domestic security role is the marked increase of human rights complaints by civilians.²⁹ While some are quick to observe that human rights abuses are the inevitable result of using the military in a domestic security capacity, there are proven methods of mitigating such operational friction points. According to U.S. COIN doctrine, a critical requirement for operational success is the safeguarding of the civilian population.³⁰ USNORTHCOM could leverage the U.S. military's considerable experience in successfully applying this critical tenet of COIN operations to help the Mexican armed forces limit the occurrence of such abuses.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ "The United States and El Salvador: Summary of Fact Sheets." Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc. (22 March 2011): <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed 18 April 2011).

²⁹ Roderic Ai Camp, "Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges." 306.

³⁰ U.S. Joint Staff, *Counterinsurgency Operations: Joint Publication 3-24*. Washington D.C, October 2009 III-1

USNORTHCOM can also provide expertise that is relevant to emerging tactics being employed by TCOs. For instance, there has been a concern that the TCOs would seek to capitalize on the demonstrated effectiveness of improved explosive devices (IEDs) by employing them against Mexican authorities.³¹ These fears were realized when a cartel employed a remotely detonated, vehicle borne IED (VBIED) in Ciudad Juarez in July of 2010, killing a federal police officer and a paramedic.³² Only a month later in Ciudad Victoria, two VBIEDs were detonated outside of a news station.³³ Over the last ten years, the U.S. military has developed considerable experience and expertise in countering this tactic in both Iraq and Afghanistan. If the employment of IEDs proves to be a growing and enduring tactic used by TCOs, the U.S. military is well postured to provide the required training and support to the Mexican armed forces to deal with this insidious threat. Training could focus on anything from active counter-IED measures to explosive ordnance disposal.

While the previous examples represent potential focal areas for USNORTHCOM's capacity building efforts, they are in no way meant to be all-inclusive. The examples are simply meant to be illustrative of just two of the potential opportunities to leverage both past and present U.S. operational experience in the pursuit of USNORTHCOM's defense in depth concept. In an ideal environment, without any political or cultural impediments, USNORTHCOM would be in a position to freely engage with and train the Mexican armed forces. However, the following issues represent obstacles with which USNORTHCOM must

³¹ Lisa J. Campbell, "Los Zetas: operational assessment," 75.

³² Associated Press, "Unprecedented car bomb attack on police by Mexican drug cartel puts border town on edge." *Foxnews.com*, 16 July 2010. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/07/16> (accessed 11 April 2011).

³³ CNN Wire Staff, "Car bombs explode near Mexican TV station, transit office," *CNN.com*, 27 August 2010. <http://articles.cnn.com/2010-08-27> (accessed 11 April 2011).

contend if it hopes to achieve an effective, sustainable defense relationship with the Mexican armed forces.

United States – Mexico Military Relations: Impediments and Solutions

Most prominent and tangible among barriers to a functional working relationship between the United States and Mexican militaries are the legal restrictions imposed by the Mexican Constitution. Mexican law specifically prohibits both the deployment of forces outside of Mexico and presence of foreign troops within the country's borders without senatorial approval.³⁴ Granted, both overseas combat deployments and bilateral training exercises involving Mexican forces have occurred, but only with the explicit consent of the Mexican senate. As a result, U.S. MTTs deployed to Mexico are relatively few in number, and while there are exceptions, instances of substantive bilateral training between the two countries are uncommon. Although the law represents a powerful obstacle to military engagement efforts, it also provides a framework within which USNORTHCOM can channel its capacity building efforts.

While Mexican legal restrictions certainly complicate military engagement efforts, they are not necessarily prohibitive to USNORTHCOM's capacity building efforts with the Mexican armed forces. Bilateral training with Mexico is a possibility, yet there remains the requirement to receive formal authorization from the Mexican senate. This requirement does not represent an insurmountable barrier, as is evidenced by SEMAR's recent participation in the UNITAS naval exercise with the U.S. Navy in 2009.³⁵ During this exercise, the two

³⁴ Mexican Constitution of 1917, Article 76, Section III.

³⁵ Roderic Ai Camp, "Armed Forces and Drugs: Public Perceptions and Institutional Challenges." 313.

navies trained together with a focus on counter-trafficking operations.³⁶ Though unprecedented, the same concept could be applied to training with SEDENA units in a bilateral exercise within the United States. The emphasis of training could be on small unit tactics, interdiction and counter-terrorism, all of which are skillsets that are germane to the challenges that SEDENA is currently facing. While acknowledging that the deployment of a Mexican military unit would require the same senatorial approval, the option remains a possibility. More importantly, such a measure presents a much less contentious option than the presence of U.S. forces in Mexico.

Aside from potential bilateral military training between the two countries, there also exists the possibility of training Mexican military members in the United States on an individual basis. There have been consistent subject matter expert exchanges between the United States and Mexico for years, and Mexican military officers have occasionally observed U.S. military exercises.³⁷ The most significant benefit of such exchanges is that it creates training opportunities without a requirement for senatorial authorization. Taking this exchange concept a step further, USNORTHCOM could train such individuals at U.S. facilities with the intent of “training the trainer.” Again, the training would be conducted with an emphasis on capacity building and would thereby focus on the tactics, techniques and procedures necessary to overcome the challenges faced by the Mexican military in their fight against the TCOs. Additionally, these efforts would be allowed under current Mexican legal constraints.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Leonardo Hernandez (USNORTHCOM theater security cooperation coordinator), interview by the author.

While the legal challenge imposed by Mexican law represents a fairly well defined impediment to open military relations between the two countries, there is also an intangible factor that USNORTHCOM must address in its efforts to strengthen ties with and build capacity among the Mexican military. Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth, the United States has a history of repeated military intervention into Mexico.³⁸ As a result of this checkered past, even today there exists among the Mexican people a palpable suspicion of U.S. intentions toward their country. Although relations have certainly warmed between the two countries, a degree of mistrust remains among the Mexican military of their U.S. counterparts.³⁹

Despite the constraints imposed by Mexico's constitution, USNORTHCOM is capable of having a direct, positive impact on this sometimes distant relationship between the two militaries. USNORTHCOM can realize an improvement of relations through increased engagement based on the commonality of mutual security concerns with Mexico. Unlike the previously discussed capacity building efforts directed specifically at the Mexican military's ability to counter the TCO threat, these engagement efforts would be aimed at building a regular working relationship with the Mexican military based on mutual trust. In essence, these engagement activities could take place outside the counter-TCO domain in order to build working relationships across the spectrum of national security issues germane to both countries. An additional benefit would be the assurance of deliberate, planned collaboration prior to the onset of a crisis. The end state envisioned by such activities would be a closer working relationship between USNORTHCOM and the Mexican military that could

³⁸ Craig A. Deare, "U.S.-Mexico Defense Relations: An Incompatible Interface." *Institute for National Strategic Studies: National Defense University* no. 243 (July 2009): 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

potentially act as an enabler for further bilateral efforts to stabilize the security situation in Mexico.

There is, in fact, an excellent precedent for effective military cooperation between the United States and Mexico during a time of crisis. The period following Mexico's entry into WWII after being attacked by Germany witnessed significantly increased security cooperation.⁴⁰ A prime example of this partnership was the United States trained and equipped Mexican fighter squadron known as the Aztec Eagles.⁴¹ The squadron actually deployed overseas during the war as the 201st Mexican Expeditionary Air Force and flew in support of U.S. ground combat forces in the Philippines.⁴² While acknowledging that this cooperation was only legally possible due to Mexico's entry into the war, it demonstrates that history of pervasive mistrust among the Mexican military is not an insurmountable issue.

Using this historical precedent as an example of the possibility of closer ties with the Mexican military, USNORTHCOM can seek increased engagement with both SEDENA and SEMAR that focuses on a wide spectrum contemporary security concerns. Bilateral military disaster response is one possible avenue of such collaboration. Following the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the United States received a timely disaster relief effort from both SEDENA and SEMARA.⁴³ The fact that the Mexican military was able to respond so effectively with aid to a natural disaster is due in large part to the existence of the military Plan DN-III, which essentially mandates disaster response as a core military mission.⁴⁴ In

⁴⁰ Biff Baker, "The United States and Mexico Enhanced Military Cooperation." 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Biff Baker and Victor E. Renuart, "U.S.-Mexico Homeland Defense: A Compatible Interface." *Institute for National Strategic Studies: National Defense University* no. 254 (February 2010): 4.

⁴⁴ SEDENA homepage. Plan DN-III-E. <http://www.sedena.gob.mx/en/index.php/plan-dn-iii-e> (accessed 8 April 2011).

contrast, the United States relegates disaster response to the civilian domain. While state-controlled National Guard forces are often used to augment these response efforts, the employment of federal military forces for domestic disaster response is usually a last resort in the United States. Bilateral disaster response training not only provides a potential engagement opportunity for USNORTHCOM and the Mexican military, there also exists the potential for USNORTHCOM to leverage Mexico's proficiency in this domain to enhance its own capabilities.

In keeping with the same theme, there is the potential for the two militaries to collaborate on a bilateral response to a disaster that affects both nations. One such possible scenario is the landfall of a category IV hurricane at the mouth of the Rio Grande River. In this hypothetical scenario, both the United States and Mexico would be affected by massive flooding which would completely blur the border, and a bilateral response to the disaster would be a requirement.⁴⁵ Bilateral military training to address such a scenario could represent a regular engagement opportunity between the USNORTHCOM and the Mexican military. This regular engagement, in turn, would continue to foster increased trust between the two militaries.

Mutual security concerns need not be limited to natural disaster response. Possible scenarios could include Pandemic Influenza or a chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosive (CBRNE) event, both of which would require an effective bilateral military response.⁴⁶ The important takeaway is that such scenarios represent opportunities for USNORTHCOM to engage with the Mexican military without having to focus on a highly

⁴⁵ Leonardo Hernandez (USNORTHCOM theater security cooperation coordinator), interview by the author.

⁴⁶ Biff Baker, "The United States and Mexico Enhanced Military Cooperation." 33.

stigmatized issue such as the drug war. By engaging with the Mexican armed forces on a wide-ranging host of issues, USNORTHCOM can begin building closer ties with its Mexican military counterparts, thereby working to overcome any lingering feelings of mistrust.

Recommendations

The preceding analysis initially focused on why the Mexican military is the best solution for providing short term stability in Mexico and how USNORTHCOM can best support their endeavors. However, measures must be taken by USNORTHCOM to provide a foundation for such efforts. First, given the importance of future engagement with the Mexican military, USNORTHCOM should have purview over all such activity in order to ensure that these efforts are complimentary. In support of this, USNORTHCOM should conduct a review of its process and procedures in order to ensure optimal joint coordination among its service components and other U.S. based military activities regarding all engagement efforts with the Mexican military. USNORTHCOM should also seek to leverage the lessons learned from previously successful capacity building efforts such as El Salvador. While understanding that such precedents do not serve as templates with which to approach the situation in Mexico, there are likely applicable lessons that will prove useful. Next, understanding that increased engagement is critical to strengthening its security relationship with the Mexican military, USNORTHCOM should create engagement opportunities to increase the regularity of positive military to military contact. Finally, with the understanding that the ultimate goal is to build the Mexican military's capacity to cope with its country's deteriorating security situation, USNORTHCOM should actively solicit training opportunities at U.S. facilities for members of the Mexican armed forces.

Conclusion

The instability resulting from the spiraling violence in Mexico presents a major threat to the future of the Mexican state. More concerning to the United States, however, is the credible, severe threat posed to U.S. national security by a TCO-controlled state along its southern border. As the geographic combatant command responsible for U.S. homeland defense, U.S. Northern Command has a strong, vested interest in mitigating this instability and aiding the Mexican government in its war against the TCOs. While acknowledging that there are a host of issues that must be rectified in Mexico for the long-term security situation to be improved, USNORTHCOM must decide how to best economize its resources in order to achieve the optimal effect. As a respected, competent state institution, the Mexican military is best postured to deal effectively with the growing violence in Mexico and should therefore be the focus of USNORTHCOM's efforts. However, USNORTHCOM faces significant challenges to a meaningful partnership with the Mexican military. These challenges can only be successfully addressed through patient, sustained efforts aimed at building long-term trust and mutual respect between the two countries' militaries.

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