

TIME TO REASSESS DOD COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RYAN P. HERITAGE
United States Marine Corps

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U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

TIME TO REASSESS DOD COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY

by

Lieutenant Colonel Ryan P. Heritage
United States Marine Corps

Colonel Michael J. McMahon
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

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TIME TO REASSESS DOD COUNTERNARCOTICS STRATEGY

Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) pose three specific threats to the United States. First, the increasing level of violence, intimidation, and corruption along the U.S.- Mexico border along with incidents targeting the Mexican government and security forces at various levels are effectively destabilizing the region and bringing into question the ability of the Mexican government to secure its borders and protect its people. Second, the ability of the DTOs to traffic enormous quantities of people and goods across the border into the U.S. and deliver them to established and undetected safe houses presents opportunities to terrorist organizations and non-state actors intending to conduct attacks within the U.S.. Finally, the effectiveness and enduring nature of these organizations has established Mexico as the lead transit area for various types of drugs entering into the United States. The cost to counter these operations and treat those within the U.S. that are addicted or involved with illicit drugs is negatively affecting our economy, crime rate, and general standard of living. The purpose of this paper is to outline those conditions within Mexico that make it fertile ground for exploitation by the DTOs and possibly terrorist organizations and make recommendations to the current U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) counternarcotics strategy that would support overall U.S. efforts to change conditions that are currently threatening the U.S.

Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the 2,000 mile-long shared border region between the U.S. and Mexico gained increased national level attention for two reasons. First, the porous nature of the region presented a potential infiltration route for terrorists into the U.S. and, second, the well-established drug cartels

operating in that area serve as potential sources of support to those same terrorists (see figure 1). While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan detracted attention and resources away from the border, conditions have not improved and therefore necessitate a reassessment of the Department of Defense role in the national counternarcotics strategy.

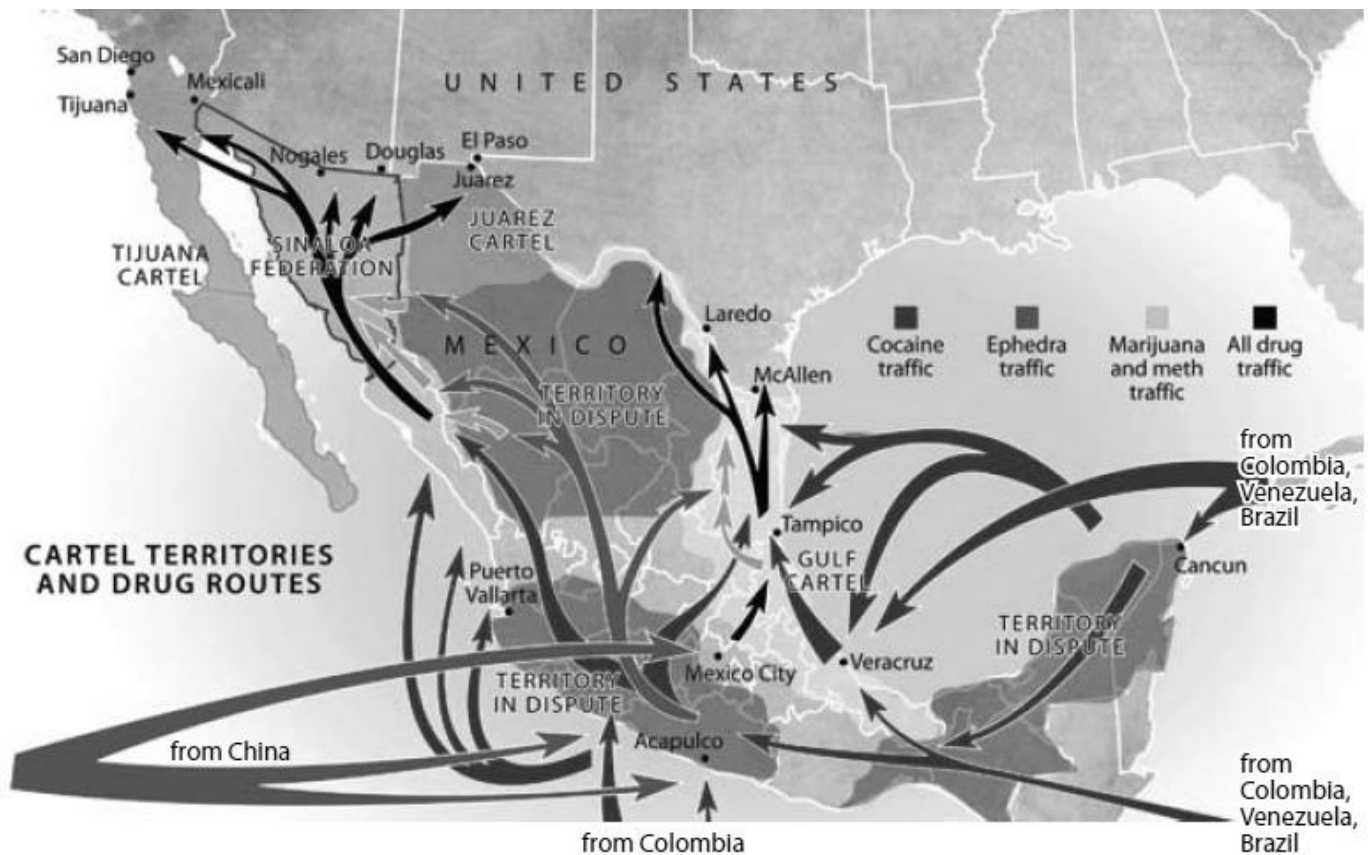


Figure 1. Established cartel territories and drug routes which could be exploited by terrorists for access into the U.S.¹

The current U.S. national strategy for coping with Mexico's drug trafficking organizations rests in four primary documents: the 2009 National Drug Control Strategy, the 2009 National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy, the 2009 Merida Initiative, and President Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy. While these strategies are relatively clear, accessible, and comprehensive, the part of the policy

equation which is missing is an updated, comprehensive counterdrug strategy from the Department of Defense that more effectively applies DoD resources to affect current conditions in support of the national strategies.

Terminology

For clarity I am using drug cartels and drug trafficking organizations (DTO's) synonymously. The term "cartel" continues to be used to describe drug trafficking organizations in the sense that they are organized and equipped in such a manner that they set prices and control production and distribution of their product while interacting in a domestic, national and international market. Narco-terrorism is defined as organized employment of violence against local populace, security forces and government to intimidate those contemplating resistance to drug trafficking.² Narco-corruption is defined as those efforts to intimidate and instill fear to change government and protect establish organized crime networks which are embedded in local populations through covert ties, dependencies, bonds of loyalty, and underground social support networks.³

Conditions within Mexico that Make it "Ripe" for Exploitation

History of Instability and U.S. Intervention. While the U.S. and several international media outlets continue to report on the increasing level of violence and drug cartel activity along the U.S.- Mexico border, this focused reporting often fails to recognize the underlying conditions/elements that exist in Mexico which contribute to an unstable environment and enable DTOs, particularly along the U.S. - Mexico border. These elements include: history of political instability, U.S. intervention, the economy, and geography. The unstable nature of Mexico's history is critical to not only understanding the operational environment but also in determining potential solutions.

From 1910 to 2000, Mexican politics were dominated by one-party rule, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Government sponsored intimidation, alleged plots to assassinate opposition candidates, and corruption at all levels were not only the norm but were the primary cause of instability.⁴ This sort of conduct, on the part of the Mexican government, was a critical element in souring the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico and subsequently hindered combined counterdrug and illegal immigration operations for decades. Although the relationship has recently stabilized with the democratic and relatively peaceful Presidential elections of Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and President Felipe Calderon (2006- present), their ineffectiveness at containing the DTOs, ongoing corruption, and increasing violence continue to foster an unstable environment. As a result, many, particularly within the U.S., have continued to question the resolve and capability of the Mexican government to effectively handle the on-going crisis.⁵

An additional element fueling this instability has been the history of U.S. intervention in Mexico. From Mexico's independence in 1821 until 1919, the United States injected itself directly or indirectly into the affairs of Mexico in pursuit of what were then determined to be our national interests. During this period, U.S. forces crossed into and temporarily occupied territory into Mexico at least thirteen times. These operations included the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), U.S. Marines landing at and seizing Vera Cruz (1914), and tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers conducting operations throughout Mexico from 1916-1919 in pursuit of Pancho Villa and other bandits accused of attacking into the U.S.. The impact of these incursions, years later, has been the perception that a U.S. military presence in Mexico, no matter what the size

or objective, equates to a direct threat to its sovereignty. This negative perception is something that must also be addressed in a new DoD strategy.

Economy. While the history of Mexico, in the context of political instability and U.S. intervention, is important in understanding the overall environment, recognizing the impact of the economy on the standard of living and economic relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is likewise critical. As President Felipe Calderon has stated, a weak economy within Mexico is one of the leading causes for continued drug cartel operations throughout the country. Economic predictions for Mexico indicated an expansion of between 3.8% and 5% in the overall gross domestic product by the end of 2010.⁶ While these predictions are encouraging, they don't tell the entire story. First, such an increase will only return the economy to the point it was in 2008, before the current recession sent the economy tumbling. Second, until the distribution of wealth within Mexico can be righted, 47% of the population will remain in a poverty status despite a 4.94 percent unemployment rate.⁷ Positively changing conditions for this population is a critical objective in any future counterdrug strategy.

With respect to the economic relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, currently over \$1 billion worth of Mexican goods transit the border into the U.S. daily. These goods, combined with the amount of crude oil the U.S. imports from Mexico, equate to the U.S. consuming 80% of Mexico's total exports.^{8 9} Compounding this reliance on the U.S. economy is the level of remittances being sent from Mexicans living in the U.S. back to Mexico. In 2009, the percentage of remittances dropped to \$21.2 billion dollars, the lowest level since 2005.¹⁰ On the illicit trade market, the estimate of annual profits from drug sales in 2009 ranged from \$25 to \$40 billion dollars. This total

represents five percent of Mexico's GDP and twice the value of remittances.¹¹ Coupled with a drop in U.S. tourism to Mexico, reliance on loans from the World Bank, and an increasing deficit, these events have negatively affected the Mexican economy, overall standard of living and continue to add pressure to an often strained U.S. – Mexico relationship.¹² These factors cannot be lost in future DoD strategy development.

Geography. In our attempt to understand the operational environment, the physical terrain, across which DTOs and friendly forces operate, is also critical to strategy development. The 2,000 mile long shared border (see figure 2) has, for decades, been a seam through which illegal immigrants, drugs, weapons, and cash are trafficked.¹³ After continuous study and analysis, the U.S. has determined that current illegal traffic moves through three primary areas: Tijuana in Baja California, Naco in Sonora, and through Juarez in Chihuahua.¹⁴ Recognizing this not only orients the reader but provides greater appreciation for the vastness across which the DTOs operate and how much area Mexican and U.S. forces must therefore monitor. The DTOs ability to operate in this under-governed territory in Mexico is a critical requirement for their success. Additionally, it is important to recognize that any revised strategy will likely involve a greater relationship between local and State agencies operating on both sides of the border.

Current Situation

The degree to which the drug cartels are organized, their transnational linkages, and their ability to move vast amounts of illicit products across the border undetected should not be underestimated. While ninety percent of the cocaine used in the U.S. transits Mexico, Mexico also remains the leading source for black tar heroin smuggled

into the U.S. with the majority of the opium fields needed to produce this drug located in the northern Mexican states of Durango, Sinaloa, Chihuahua and Sonora.^{15 16}

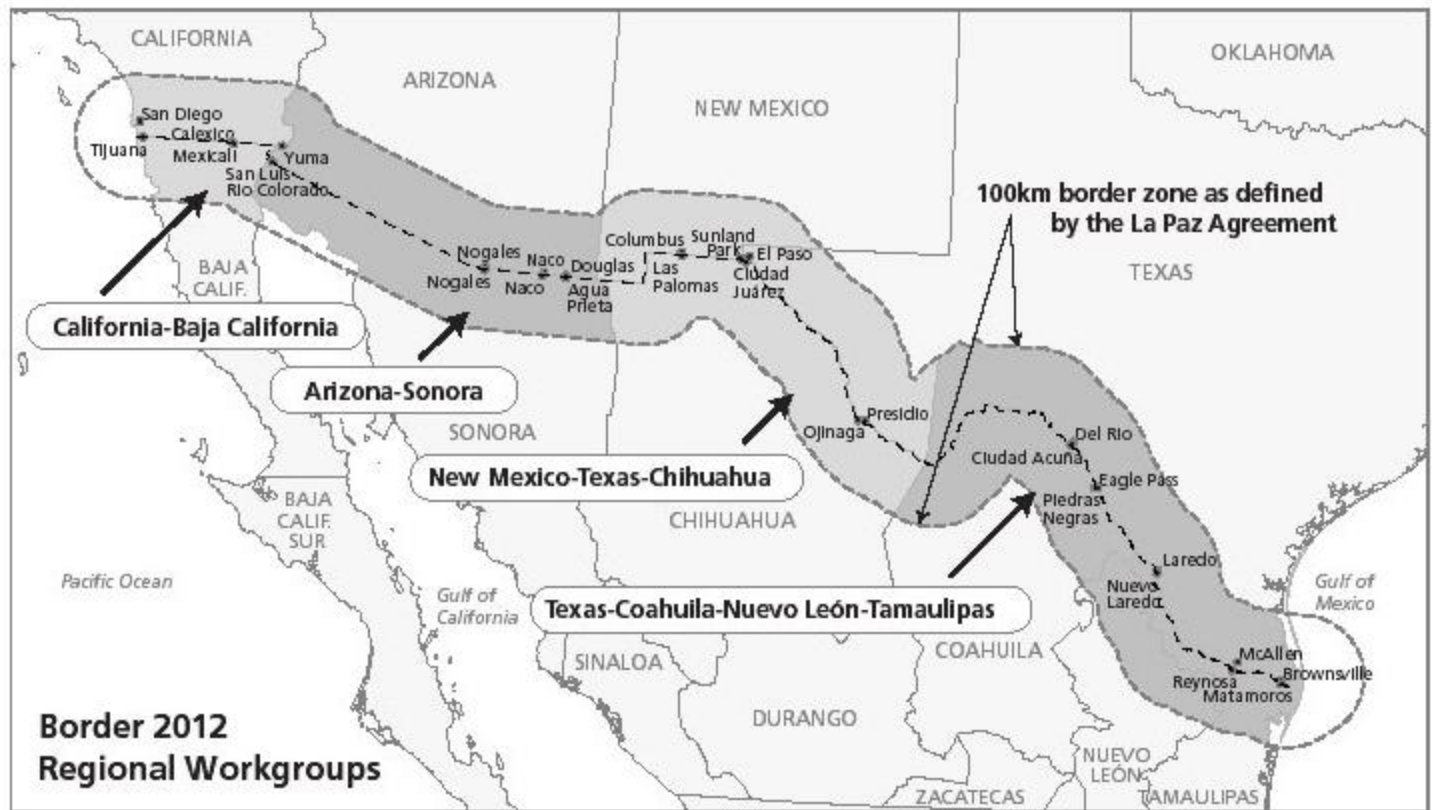


Figure 2. Approximately 2,000 mile long U.S.- Mexico border

A majority of this transnational activity, particularly in Northern Mexico, can be traced to the following drug trafficking cartels/organizations: the Gulf Cartel, the Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO), the Arellano Felix Organization a.k.a. the Tijuana Cartel, La Familia, the Vicente Carrillo Fuentes Organization (VCO) a.k.a. the Juarez Cartel, the Sinaloa Federation, and the Los Zetas. A closer look at the La Familia DTO provides a glimpse into the complexity and capabilities of these types of organizations. La Familia Michoacan is a growing organization which first came onto the scene in 2006 and was operating primarily within the state of Michoacan. Originally described as a vigilante-like group, it has grown in size and capability to the point now where it has been described

as a full scale criminal enterprise operating in several states throughout Mexico. Employing bold tactics, beyond violence and intimidation, they expanded their capabilities to include a strategic communications effort designed to influence local, state, and national politics by proclaiming the government's inability to provide basic services to the populace. To date they have reported control or significant influence over the elected officials in 83 out of 113 Michoacan municipalities.¹⁷

Some have argued that a link between the Mexican DTOs, such as La Familia, and terrorist organizations is unlikely for two reasons. First, the DTOs lack a radical ideology and second, such a link would significantly increase the risk of direct U.S. involvement and therefore jeopardize the freedom of action and profits they currently enjoy. To dismiss the potential linkage, because of these points, is paramount to assuming unnecessary risk which should not be glossed over. First, this argument assumes that the leadership of the DTO or one of its sub-organizations can suppress its greed from what would certainly be an incredibly enticing financial offer from the terrorist organization. Second, given the global nature and complexity of the transnational criminal networks, it is very plausible that a terrorist organization can exploit or leverage the efficiencies and anonymity of the DTOs without them even recognizing it. Third, it ignores the already established links between terrorist organizations and drug cartels in other parts of the world such as Afghanistan, West Africa, and Colombia. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is a perfect example of how a radical guerrilla movement exploited a vulnerable populace and, through the use of terrorist tactics and funding from drug trafficking, challenged the legitimacy and capability of the Colombian government. Often compared to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Abu

Sayyaf Group in the Philippines and the Real Irish Republican Army, the FARC is believed to command and control 110 operational units financed through both drug money and money derived from kidnapping, extortion, and terrorist like acts.^{18 19} Without the connection to the drug trafficking, the capacity of the FARC would be significantly degraded. Fourth, the competition between the Mexican DTOs for increased "turf" and power is intense. If a DTO was able to rationalize how a relationship and resources from a terrorist organization could give it an advantage over another cartel the risk of an alliance may be worth it. Finally, while a definitive link between terrorist organizations and specific Mexican drug cartels has yet to be established, the fact that there are radical ideological terrorist organizations and drug cartels operating in the same country suggests that the potential for a nexus cannot be ignored.²⁰ The Popular Revolutionary Front (EPR), for example, was a Maoist guerilla movement focused on deterring foreign investment, de-legitimizing the Mexican government and demonstrating against globalization. For almost twenty years, this organization attacked private, local, and state facilities, infrastructure and police forces in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guanajuato and Vera Cruz. Not until 2007 was the organization effectively dismantled by Mexican forces and forced into hiding.²¹ Had this or a similar organization turned to or established links with a DTO, with demonstrated capability to transit the U.S.- Mexico border, the threat to the U.S. would have grown exponentially.

In Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), lead U.S. Federal Department for counterdrug and counter narco-terrorist activities, seized more than \$104 million dollars in illegal currency moving from the U.S. into Mexico, made over 20,000 arrests of which 12,000 were related specifically to drug and

human trafficking, and seized more than \$282 million in illegal currency, 7 million pounds of drugs and 6,800 weapons; all of which were moving from Mexico into the U.S.. These numbers represent an increase in every area when compared to fiscal years 2007 and 2008.²² Looking closer at the number of illegal immigrants crossing the border in FY 2009 alone, Customs and Border Protection personnel apprehended over 550,000 illegal immigrants crossing the border.²³ This number, by some estimates, represents only 25% of the total number that actually crossed during this same period.²⁴

Finally, and in an effort to roll-up the impact this data has on describing the complexity and size of the threat we are dealing with, in FY 2009 the DHS estimated that DTOs in Mexico and Colombia "generate, remove, and launder" between \$18 billion and \$39 billion in wholesale drug proceeds annually.²⁵

Mexico's Counterdrug Strategy

Running on a platform of increased public security and justice reform, President Calderon's 2007 national counterdrug strategy focused initially on seeking public cooperation to counter the growing influence of the drug cartels. Offering rewards and increasing arrests, the Administration sought to defeat and dismantle the cartels through "decapitation" of cartel leaders. Though the arrest rates increased, the strategy had a minimal impact, as the drug cartels were able to effectively replace both foot soldiers and leadership alike.

Recognizing these shortcomings, President Calderon shifted the strategy to focus on the eradication of the drug crops and destruction of the manufacturing capabilities of the cartels. Unfortunately this too had a minimal impact and failed to increase the security of the populace from the cartels. In 2009, after once again acknowledging the limited success of the strategy, President Calderon shifted his

efforts; this time with more immediate effects. Specifically, he ordered the deployment of thousands of soldiers from the 120,000-man Mexican Army into 16 states with the following objectives: restore law and order, improve law enforcement operations, institute anti-corruption and reform initiatives, and improve social programs in order to secure the people, restore trust in local government and increase international cooperation against organized crime and drug activities. In this latest strategy, President Calderon has defined victory as the dismantling of drug trafficking organizations, reduction in overall violence, and improved education, job training and community development which address the underlying conditions that have contributed to the operations of the drug cartels and associated violence.²⁶ The objectives in this most recent strategy and President Calderon's definition of what victory looks like will be critical to revising U.S. DoD strategy and should be integrated with and complement these same efforts.

U.S. National Level Strategy

President Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) serves aptly as a capstone document to the other national level strategies listed below. It clearly outlines the threat posed by the DTOs, the unique relationship the U.S. has with Mexico, and the requirement the U.S. has to enable Mexico to more effectively counter the current threat.²⁷ The 2009 National Drug Control Strategy takes a holistic approach to describing the threat posed by drug cartels and the illicit drug trade domestically and internationally. While the strategy acknowledges the efforts to disrupt the drug markets outside the borders by, with, and through international partners, and identified Mexico as a primary transit zone, the focus is primarily on attacking the issues of demand and abuse of drugs here in the U.S..²⁸ The 2009 National Southwest Border

Counternarcotics Strategy, overseen by the Director of National Drug Control Policy, outlines six objectives, all of which drive towards one strategic goal, which is to substantially reduce the flow of illicit drugs, drug proceeds, and associated instruments of violence across the Southwest border.²⁹ This strategy differs from the National Drug Control Strategy in that the focus is on the intergovernmental approach, to include information sharing and training with Mexican counterparts, to disrupt, dismantle and defeat the drug cartels, illicit drug markets, and weapons trafficking originating in the U.S. and along the border region.³⁰ The strategy does not address the issue of domestic demand for drugs or treatment for drug abuse within the U.S.. The 2009 Merida Initiative is the most recent national level effort designed to counter the drug cartels and builds specifically upon the 2007 Merida Initiative signed by President George W. Bush and agreed to by Mexican President Felipe Calderon. The 2009 Initiative is a \$1.4 billion dollar effort, distributed over the course of several years, focused on providing the following: increased capacity for Mexican border security efforts, non-intrusive inspection technology, training in the rule of law and judicial reform, information and communication technology to assist Mexican prosecutors, law enforcement and immigration officials, five helicopters to support Mexican surveillance efforts, and training in human rights and improved witness and victim protection programs.³¹

Defense Strategy

Absent a National Defense Strategy since 2008, the Department of Defense currently relies on the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and the NSS for guidance and direction in strategy development. Comprehensive in its approach, the QDR effectively captures the complexity of the operational environment, the growing

influence and capabilities of non-state actors and the requirement to rebalance the military to meet the current and future threat. The QDR outlines four priority objectives for Defense Strategy: prevail in today's wars; prevent and deter conflict; prepare to defeat adversaries and succeed in a wide range of contingencies; and preserve and enhance the all volunteer force.³² The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Counternarcotics and Global Threats, William F. Wechsler, has the lead for DoD activities and strategy in support of the National Drug Control Strategy and is responsible for linking those activities and strategies to the objectives in the QDR. In May 2010, Mr. Wechsler outlined DoD's Counternarcotics program in testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs. The current DoD strategy is focused on two primary missions. First, help local, State, Federal, and foreign agencies address the drug trade and narco-terrorism by detecting and monitoring drug trafficking, sharing information and helping countries build their capacity and control their ungoverned spaces. Second, maintain DoD readiness through drug demand reduction programs.³³

In 2010, the DoD budget to support this worldwide strategy was \$1.59 billion. In FY 2011 the budget request was \$1.58 billion.³⁴ While significant, this money is to be allocated, worldwide, to the following functions: intelligence, interdiction, international support, investigations, prevention, research and development, state and local assistance, and treatment (internal/domestic).³⁵ Additional efforts which are inclusive of these functions include: facilitate situational awareness and command and control systems, and equip and train partner nations in order to enable them to disrupt trafficking at the source. With respect to Mexico, the lead Geographic Combatant

Commander for these efforts is U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM). NORTHCOM has subsequently delegated its mission to one of its component commands, Joint Task Force- North (JTF-North). Located at Fort Bliss, Texas and formerly known as Joint Task Force (JTF-6), JTF-North was renamed in 2004 and is tasked by the Department of Defense to serve as the lead organization to support U.S. Federal Law Enforcement agencies in the interdiction of suspected transnational threats. The manner in which this mission is being executed is primarily through a series of train and equip missions, with an added emphasis on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support provided through various platforms and defense analysts.³⁶

Recommendation

The strategies and initiatives listed above are intended to provide a comprehensive U.S. Government (USG) approach to countering the threats posed to the United States from the Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Unfortunately, they are too narrowly focused and/or too limited. The following recommendations, broken down into policy and operational recommendations, will address the weaknesses in the strategies above while acknowledging the nationalistic perspective and impact of Mexico's history on a new strategy. The focus will be on increasing military ties and developing a regional approach to achieve a common endstate. Such an approach will not only enhance unity of effort but it will leverage the resources of Mexico and additional partners vice relying on the overwhelming bilateral nature of the current strategy.³⁷ This regional approach will come in the form of regionally based, globally connected Regional Interagency Task Forces (RIATFs), comprised of multiple countries, to which the U.S. is partnered. No longer over reliant on U.S. technology to meet the threat, the new strategy places more emphasis on timely, effective information

sharing at all levels through vetted ready-to-respond partners. The strategy intends to establish a transnational force, capable of monitoring a global common operating picture, which can decisively counter the transnational DTOs.

Policy. The first step that must be taken is a DoD-led public debate on defining the threat. There must be a common understanding of both the threat and the operational environment to ensure unity of effort throughout the USG. While the terms counterdrug and counter narco-terrorism facilitate a clear delineation for purposes of acquiring resources and authorities from Congress, they do not adequately describe the threat or the environment, and more importantly, they create barriers between departments that lead to disjointed planning and resourcing vice integrated and supporting efforts.

The DoD Joint Publication on Counterinsurgency Operations (JP 3-24) defines a failing state as one in which the state is still viable but has a reduced capability and capacity to protect and govern the population. While this situation does not exist throughout all of Mexico, it clearly exists in several areas within several states. Despite Mexican President Calderon's denial that Mexico is a failing state, his aggressive but failing policies to try and protect the people from the Mexican DTO's suggest a contradiction. JP 3-24 further identifies three elements required for an insurgency to be successful: a vulnerable population, available leadership to provide direction, and a lack of government control. Clearly these elements exist in many locations within Mexico. On September 10, 2010, while addressing the Council on Foreign Relations, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reinforced this assessment as she characterized the drug cartel problem in Mexico as being similar to that of an insurgency. While this statement drew

immediate scorn from the Mexican government, which led to the comments being downplayed and corrected by President Obama, Secretary Clinton was correct in her assessment of the environment and the threat.³⁸ A revised DoD strategy must include a common understanding of the threat and the operational environment while recognizing the potential for the DTOs to operate as an insurgent group with or without an extremist or radical ideology. This will provide clearer guidance and will enable planners to consider the full range of capabilities required in a new strategy.³⁹

A renewed debate also forces planners and decision makers to recognize the level of effort and time it will actually take to effectively dismantle the DTOs to a point at which they are no longer a threat to our national security or to the stability of Mexico and our partners. A revised DoD strategy should incorporate objectives of both Mexico and the U.S., such as enhancing good governance and rule of law, increasing essential services, enhancing the capacity and capabilities of the security forces while systematically reducing corruption.⁴⁰ A revised DoD strategy must include an appropriate endstate that accurately captures the conditions we want to create as well as define success. Reading Secretary Wechsler's May 2010 testimony, the endstate for the current DoD strategy is to "help local, State, Federal, and foreign agencies address the drug trade and narco-terrorism."⁴¹ I would suggest an overall strategy statement that reads *Joint and Regional Interagency Task Forces established and operational within the U.S. and globally in support of USG and international efforts to degrade drug trafficking organizations to the point at which they are effectively managed by local law enforcement agencies and no longer provide opportunities and venues through which terrorists could exploit for future attacks.* This strategy statement presents a clear

picture of conditions necessary to define success; it clearly identifies DoD as a supporting effort in the overall counterdrug effort; and it briefly describes the way in which the endstate will be achieved. Such a strategy is measureable and would allow the DoD to determine its effectiveness over time.

Second, a revised DoD strategy must avoid a strictly bilateral approach with Mexico. A transnational threat, such as the Mexican DTOs, cannot be defeated simply by increasing the capacity of the Mexican government and its security forces alone. The Mexican DTOs constantly make alliances with other criminal networks to take advantage of resources or capabilities they don't necessarily possess. We must make similar alliances with partner nations to not only leverage additional resources and capabilities but, more importantly, to reinforce the legitimacy of our actions. Currently there is nothing in our strategy that indicates any effort to stay ahead of the DTOs in terms of planning or operations. A revised DoD strategy must look beyond the U.S. - Mexico border; it must leverage the capabilities and available resources our partner nations possess and complement those which DoD is able to provide. A revised DoD strategy must emphasize the necessity for an agile, responsive solution that stays ahead of the DTOs.

Third, coordinate with the Department of State, the lead U.S. Government organization responsible for coordinating all U.S. counterdrug efforts, to clarify roles and responsibilities between Departments. The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 assigns responsibility for coordinating all U.S. counterdrug assistance to the Secretary of State.⁴² Assessments as recent as April 2010, however, continue to point out that this arrangement, along with the separate counterdrug budget and policy process for the

DoD, has led to disjointed planning and coordination efforts resulting in complimentary solutions at best.⁴³ While one solution may be the addition of DoD planners or liaison officers positioned within the Department of State to assist with this integration, a more comprehensive solution lies in the creation of additional Interagency Task Forces which I will discuss in more detail in the following sections.

Fourth, lower the barriers between Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs) and increase information sharing amongst our international partners. On 11 March 2010, General Victor E. Renuart, Jr., USAF, Commander USNORTHCOM and North American Aerospace Defense Command, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee. In his testimony, he stated that USNORTHCOM's Counternarcotics Program is an integral part of the defense and security of our nation and that USNORTHCOM continues to build its capabilities and establish coordinated efforts supporting our partner agencies and partner nations to address the illicit narcotics trafficking threat to the homeland. While he goes on to mention NORTHCOM's specific partner nations: Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas, Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, there is a noticeable absence of any mention of Latin or Central American countries. This omission, combined with the lack of any direction or structure forcing the integration of counterdrug efforts, suggests we are missing opportunities to share/leverage information, intelligence and resources in future operations, merely because of boundary lines drawn on a map. The perception was reinforced in figure 3 which was presented as part of Mr. Wechsler's testimony in 2010. While it clearly identifies counterdrug tasks for the GCCs, there is no apparent task or organization that serves as an integrator of counterdrug planning or operations.

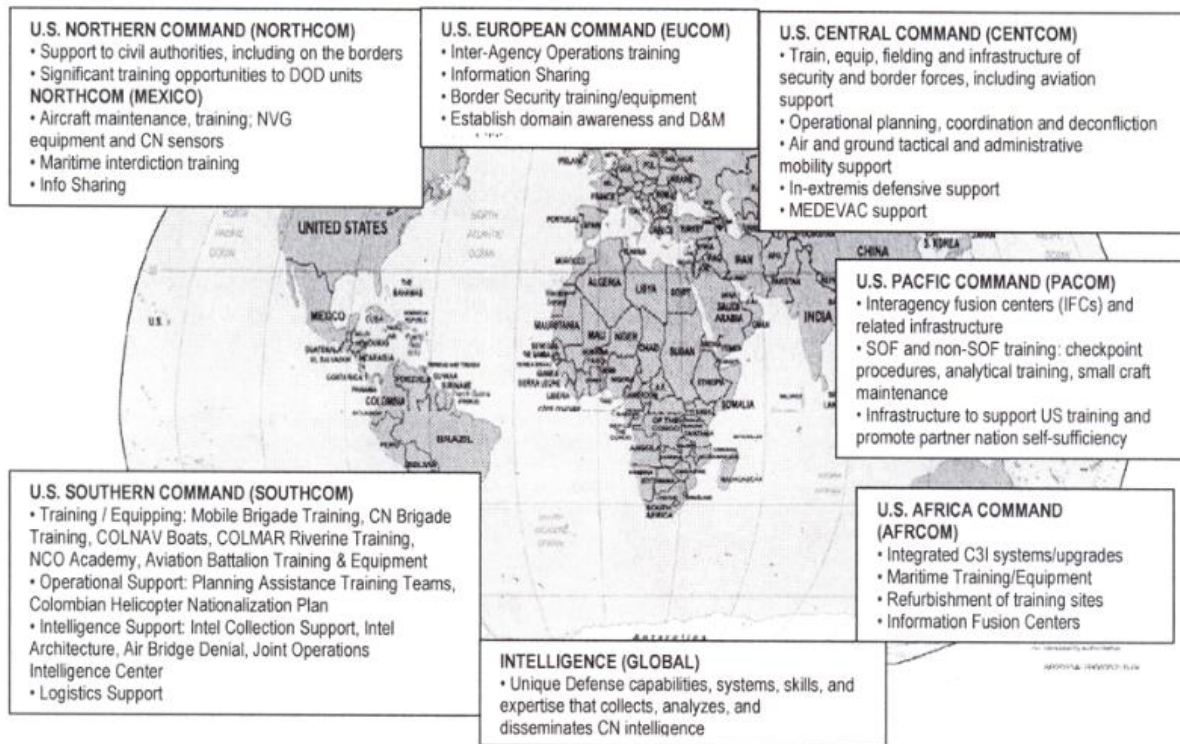


Figure 3: Counternarcotics tasks assigned to Geographic Combatant Commanders.⁴⁴

A revised DoD strategy must include either greater emphasis on the requirement of the GCCs to coordinate or create an organization with the specific mission of conducting the integration. In further testimony, General Renuart states that within JTF-North, robust collaboration exists between JTF-North and operational-level leaders in Customs Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the FBI. Once again there is a noticeable absence of partner and international representation within the JTF. A revised DoD strategy must ensure more partner nation representation and it must correct the inefficiencies associated with current processes for sharing information with our international partners.

Fifth, increase the efficiencies and interoperability of the equipment provided to those organizations involved in the counterdrug effort. Recent DHS assessments highlight continued deficiencies in our operational approach:

- Lack of adequate air and maritime assets at the local and state level;
- Lack of coordinated planning across the different agencies and departments;
- Lack of standardized protocols for classification of information and vetting of personnel necessary for effective planning and coordination;
- Lack of formal agreements between U.S. and Mexico agencies to support counternarcotics efforts.⁴⁵

Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have proven DoD's ability to plan, train, equip and operate alongside interagency and international partners. A revised DoD strategy that increases the level of DoD involvement in the counterdrug effort would take advantage of DoD capabilities and most recent lessons learned to effectively address these shortfalls and increase both the capabilities and interoperability of a multinational or combined force.

Operational. With the policy recommendations implemented, the most significant operational recommendation is the establishment of regional/multi-national Interagency Task Forces (RIATFs). Based in the U.S. and globally, these RIATFs would serve as the tool through which counterdrug operations are planned, resourced, integrated and conducted between the U.S. and our international partners. Using Joint Interagency Task Force- South (JIATF-South) as a model and enhancing JTF-North with similar capabilities, this strategy can begin implementation almost immediately.

JIATF-South, a National Task Force created by the Office of National Drug Control Policy and established in Miami, FL as a component command under USSOUTHCOM, is responsible for detecting and monitoring suspected air and maritime drug activity in the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico and the eastern Pacific, while also

supporting other interagency drug operations.⁴⁶ Currently commanded by a USCG Admiral, JIATF-South is populated extensively by both DoD and non-DoD personnel as well as representatives from several international partners who together routinely plan, coordinate, and conduct counterdrug and interdiction operations aboard partner nations' ships and aircraft. According to JIATF-South, in 2009 the organization was responsible for interdicting 234 metric tons of cocaine worth a reported \$4.5 billion, and is the lead cocaine interdiction agency in the world.⁴⁷

RIATF's, comprised of countries from specific regions such as Mexico, South America, West-Africa, Europe, and Asia, which are interconnected globally and focused toward a common purpose, would allow the U.S. to leverage partner nation capabilities and authorities and would truly represent regional and global unity of effort. Perhaps the most significant advantage the RIATF offers is that of legitimacy of action based upon this common, internationally accepted purpose. This legitimacy is born not just out of a common purpose but out of recognition for issues such as: sovereignty, borders, authorities, and national caveats (limitations) each participant presents and the ability of the RIATF to then operate within those parameters.

In addition to legitimacy, a RIATF brings with it increased ability to influence. Whether this influence is focused on internal or external threats, the strength of the collective RIATF is an advantage not available today. When facing internal threats from DTOs, a RIATF enables a partner nation, through proper coordination and authority, to leverage the capabilities of the entire task force while maintaining its national sovereignty and proclaiming the international support and legitimacy of its actions. Essentially, a weak national government, whose stability is threatened by the DTOs,

would be able to lean on the collective legitimacy of the RIATF to garner public support or demonstrate resolve to its own people. Likewise, a RIATF would be capable of countering external threats (state and non-state actors) through its collective power. Not only would the RIATF be able to leverage the partner nations' operational capabilities and authorities in this effort but a collective diplomatic approach reinforces the legitimacy and increases the level of influence in these same efforts. Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, and the FARC are just a few examples of external actors whose actions contribute to undermining the stability of the region through their direct and indirect support to illegal trafficking of drugs, arms, money, and persons.

In addition to countering external actors, there are several other advantages to regional IATFs. Since the 1970's, the United States has been providing some form of counterdrug assistance to the Government of Mexico. Unfortunately, since that time neither our approach nor the type of support has significantly changed despite the escalating and changing nature of the threat. Without a change in strategy, we will remain narrowly focused on the train and equip task. U.S. Southern Command routinely directs U.S. military forces to assist governments and public security forces in the region by: training partner nation forces who are leading the fight against narco-terrorists; providing assistance and advice; providing nonlethal equipment to include helicopter support, intelligence platforms, and command and control systems; help nations develop human rights policy and programs; and sponsor multinational counter drug and counter-terrorism training exercises.⁴⁸ Creating regional RIATFs would breed similar efforts and would represent a significant push towards enabling our partners; a

theme woven throughout President Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy and the Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review.

So how do we make this work? The first step is a combined DoD and DoS effort to line up support and participants on a regional and global scale. We must leverage and demonstrate the success and utility of JIATF-South. Not only does JIATF-South serve as a model for infrastructure and capability requirements but each participating nation has identified national caveats that may or may not impact the ability to act in certain instances and, most importantly, JIATF-South has identified workable solutions. Through continuous coordination and communication, JIATF-South has leveraged both the capabilities and the authorities of each nation in the conduct of operations. The relationship between the U.S. and Colombia in this effort serves as an excellent example. While relations have not been perfect, there has been a sustained and deepening military-to-military relationship built upon recognition and respect for national sovereignty, the professionalism of its security forces, and acknowledgement that both countries are trying to defeat a common threat. In order to realize similar successes in Mexico and globally, the DoD and DoS must make a concerted effort to develop similar relations and beat back the perception amongst the Mexican population that sees U.S. military presence or support in Mexico as a threat to their national sovereignty. The comments emanating from the most recent visits to Mexico by the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs suggest that as relations improve, as they are now beginning to do, it is time to work for increased access.⁴⁹

Success in this effort translates to success at the tactical level in the creation of a RIATF which presents an agile, credible, and responsive force, capable of staying in

front of the DTOs by leveraging its new-found freedom of action. As is the case with JIATF-South, once a target is identified for interdiction, immediate actions are taken to reposition forces based upon already approved authorities and procedures.

Boundaries and borders become less of a barrier based upon these pre-approvals and the character or make-up of the RIATFs. Nothing in this strategy directs the creation of a RIATF that is solely comprised of military forces. Rather much of the strength of the RIATF is drawn from its combined interagency, law enforcement, and military character from each of the national and international participants.

The second operational change has two parts which are directly related. The first is to leverage the lessons learned from interagency successes in Iraq and Afghanistan and the second is to incorporate and re-direct units that were originally scheduled to deploy but are no longer tasked as a result of the drawdowns. DoD efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan are replete with examples of the military supporting DoS efforts to build governance and enhance essential services within these countries to help foster stability. These same efforts and skills should be leveraged in a revised DoD counterdrug strategy executed through these regionally based, globally connected Interagency Task Forces. The incorporation of units and equipment, originally scheduled for deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, into this strategy provides an asset not previously available but also provides an asset that is very familiar with interagency and combined operations. Notably, this reassignment would be predicated on a reassessment of DoD priorities which I address later in this paper. While U.S. forces may not be the lead element in each of these RIATFs, the experience and capabilities

they bring would make them essential during the initial build or stand-up of these Task Forces and would serve as vital future partners and representatives.

Third, leverage existing U.S. authorities which currently govern the DoD's counterdrug assistance to broaden our approach and increase our level of financial and excess equipment assistance. In FY 2009, DoD counternarcotics support to the Latin American region (excluding Colombia) totaled \$78.5 million, while \$126.7 million was allocated for Colombia alone.⁵⁰ Clearly, past DoD assessments determined the counternarcotics effort was not a priority. This was reinforced in Deputy Assistant Secretary Wechsler's May 2010 testimony when he stated that DoD's role would be limited to "help local, state and Federal agencies and partner nations..."⁵¹ Given President Obama's assessment of the threat and his guidance to DoD to rebalance the force to meet this threat in his 2010 NSS, this level of support should change.

Risks. Up to this point, neither Mexican nor U.S. efforts have changed conditions in Mexico to an acceptable level for either country. While no strategy is without risk, in this case the greatest risk is to do nothing at all. The next greatest risk would be a lack of partner nation support. This strategy is doomed if we cannot garner the support and participation of other nations in these efforts. While the initial burden would likely fall to the U.S., in terms of providing capacity and capability to the RIATFs, the goal must be to have regional partners leading the effort and operations with U.S. support and/or representation. The strength of this strategy comes from this relationship. Limited material resources or capabilities, questions of legitimacy, or wavering national interests are all minimized in a regional approach that involves and leverages the interests and capabilities of multiple partners. Participation by more nations will increase not only the

pool of resources to draw from, but also the number of possible solutions from which to choose, all under the umbrella of legitimacy and common purpose.

Another risk to this strategy is derived from the negative perception, in Mexico and possibly elsewhere, associated with U.S. military forces operating within its borders. This too can be mitigated in several ways. There must be a coordinated information operations and diplomatic effort that emphasizes the joint/combined nature of the force and the focus on countering DTOs. If, for example, Mexico remains emphatic in its denial of U.S. military forces on the ground in Mexico, then the training or support could be provided offshore, in the U.S., or within the territory of another partner nation. The intent is to empower the RIATFs through multiple partnerships vice a continued reliance on the bilateral approach of the current strategy.

Conclusion

There is a clear threat to U.S. interests posed by the drug trafficking organizations operating within Mexico. The increasing level of drug related violence along the U.S. - Mexico border, the continuous stream of illegally trafficked goods, drugs, weapons, money, and people across the border, and the increased potential for a DTO -terrorist nexus are all conditions under which the Department of Defense must reassess its strategy to counter the drug cartels in Mexico.

That reassessment begins with cleaning up some of the policy issues associated with the current strategy. First, we have to move away from the traditional distinctions between counterdrug and counter narco-terrorist operations and policies. A permanent division between the two will continue to create barriers between USG departments and will result in further disjointed planning and budgeting as well as inaccurate assessments of the environment and the threat. Next, a revised DoD strategy must

acknowledge the similarities between insurgencies and the tactics employed by Mexican DTOs. Authorities must explore the motives of the DTOs and recognize the complexities and impact of the unstable environment in which we are operating. Finally, we have to create something different, operationally, that appropriately and decisively addresses a transnational threat with a transnational solution. That solution comes in the form of regionally based, interagency task forces (RIATFs) comprised of partner nations which are globally connected. As the drug trafficking organizations in Mexico become more lethal and transnational in character, the Department of Defense must be in position to effectively counter this threat. By leveraging the capabilities of Mexico and other partner nations throughout the world, a revised DoD strategy that promotes such an approach can have positive effects on countering these threats.

Endnotes

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