**Forum:** Security Council

**Issue:** Addressing measures to prevent violent cartel market activity and rising insurgencies in Mexico

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Introduction

In November of 2019, members of a drug cartel were suspected of the killing of nine US-Mexico dual citizens in Mexico. This act of violence, against three women and six children, was highlighted by news media and politicians as a sign that cartel violence had gotten out of hand. US President Donald Trump’s reaction was to embolden the war on drugs and declare Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. This begs the question of whether the existing actions the US and Mexican governments have taken to combat cartels have been effective, and whether these cartels pose a significant or rising threat to state authority.

In the past few decades, illicit drug trafficking in Mexico has escalated, from a job dominated by small dealers, to an influential industry, upheld by fear and violence. As the war on drugs stretches on, homicide numbers grow, and Mexico becomes home to the most dangerous cities in the world, it is apparent that current measures do not work to prevent violent cartel market activity.

Definition of Key Terms

Drugs

Drugs are substances designed to cause a physiological effect when ingested. Though used often for medicinal purposes, many drugs are used recreationally. Common examples of illicit drugs are marijuana, cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, and fentanyl.

**Cartel**

A cartel is an organization designed to restrict competition and keep prices high. In this context, cartels tend to traffic drugs, weapons, and other illicit products.

**Insurgency**

An insurgency describes an active revolt against a presiding government. Insurgencies are often militaristic and organized in nature.

**War on Drugs**

The war on drugs refers to the international operation, led by the US government, to halt illegal drug activity. Prohibition of recreational drug use has existed for centuries, but the official war on drugs was declared by US President Richard Nixon in 1971.

**Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)**

The DEA is a branch of the US Department of Justice that aims to enforce drug laws. Mainly, the DEA targets drug activity within the US, but often targets drug cartels that supply to the US. Internationally, it mainly targets North and South American drug cartels, but has also launched investigations in drug activity overseas, including in Iran, Pakistan, and the Netherlands. The DEA is associated with operations to suppress Mexican drug cartels and often aids and collaborates with the Mexican government to do so.

History & Developments

The Guadalajara Cartel

Since the Prohibition, suppliers in Mexico have smuggled contraband across the US-Mexico border. However, the solidification of the cartel threat came in the 1970s, when Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo founded the Guadalajara Cartel. The Guadalajara Cartel quickly became the first prominent organization for drug trafficking in Mexico. In the 80s, Félix Gallardo linked his drug ring to Colombian cocaine networks, notably those of the Medellín and Cali Cartels. The Guadalajara Cartel established an organized system of trade that traded marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. The cartel spanned across Mexico and operated by bribing corrupt officials and assigning regions to Félix Gallardo’s trusted traffickers.

In 1985, the Guadalajara Cartel received blame for the torture and death of US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Agent Enrique Camarena. As a result, the US quickly captured Félix Gallardo’s co-founders, and eventually Félix Gallardo himself in 1989. However, before then, Félix Gallardo held a summit that divided Mexico into regions for control by other drug cartels. The Guadalajara Cartel then split into two major cartels that exist today, the Arellano Félix Organization (AFO), led by Félix Gallardo’s nephews, the Arellano Félix brothers, and the Sinaloa Cartel, led by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

The Arellano Félix Organization

The Arellano Félix Organization, or Tijuana Cartel, occupies part of the Sinaloa region. In the 1990s and 2000s, it was considered one of the largest and most active criminal groups in Mexico. The cartel controlled the pathway from Tijuana to San Diego, a vital point for border crossing. In addition, it was known for its unusual methods of torture and violence. However, it has declined since then, a result of infighting and cartel crackdowns. Most of the Arellano Félix brothers have died from violence or have been taken into custody. This leaves many to speculate their sister, Enedina Arellano Félix, now leads the cartel, though it is worth noting that the AFO is considerably less influential today. Now, the AFO has merged with other cartels to form the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG).



Territory of major cartels in Mexico, 2015.

The Sinaloa Cartel

The decline of the AFO allowed the Sinaloa Cartel, its rival, to take control over the Tijuana region. Guzmán, its leader, has since been one of the most sought-after criminals in Mexico. His influence near the US-Mexico border, his access to deadly assassins and an arsenal of weapons, and the strength of his organization has made the Sinaloa Cartel difficult to take down. Even after Guzmán’s arrest in 1993, he escaped in 2001. While arrested again in 2014 after a long manhunt, he escaped in 2015. His final arrest to date was in 2016, and Guzmán was extradited to the US. Despite being imprisoned three times, the Sinaloa Cartel has still not fallen. In Guzmán’s absence, the cartel is currently run by his partner, Ismael Zambada García.

After the decline of the AFO, in 2010, the remnants of the cartel made a truce with the rival Sinaloa Cartel, leading to a period of peace. However, in the past few years, the reemergence of the AFO under CJNG, an anti-Sinaloa alliance, has led to increasing violence between the two groups. According to the former DEA head of international relations, Mike Vigil, “now there's only two major drug cartels in Mexico: Sinaloa cartel, which ... remains the most powerful, and then the Jalisco New Generation cartel” (Woody). Although other cartels exist and control significant swaths of territory, none are as organized and united as CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel. The rivalry between the two cartels caused countless cases of torture and killings, even of innocent civilians.

The War on Drugs

Since the 1970s, the US, in collaboration with the international community, has attempted to eliminate illicit drug use and drug trafficking. In particular, they target drug activity in Mexico, the supplier of most illegal drugs in the US. Currently, the war on drugs is polarizing. Some view it as a legitimate operation that has suppressed accessibility to drugs. Others view it as a failure, only strengthening criminal activity and cartel violence.

DEA Operations

The DEA fights the war on drugs in Mexico similar to how the war on terror is fought. By collaborating with allies in the region, the DEA gains intelligence, aids local enforcement agencies, and targets major drug lords. These strategies aim for total eradication of drug activity. However, the successes of these operations are few and far between. Even after the downfall of the AFO, the DEA was no closer to ending the illicit drug trade. In opposition, some may support complete legalization of illicit drugs, similar to Portugal’s policy. However, some experts argue that legalization would only allow easier access and increase drug abuse (Lopez).

DEA overseas operations are often accused of violating national sovereignty. Though the US and Mexican governments have collaborated and aided each other, the DEA does not always abide by Mexican regulations. In the 1970s and 80s, Mexico tried to slow aggressive DEA tactics, including kidnapping, by renegotiating agreements like the 1987 Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty and the 1989 Agreement on Cooperation in Combatting Narcotics Trafficking and Drug Depedency. More recently, the designation of drug cartels as foreign terrorist groups (FTOs) by the Trump administration has been labelled “interventionist” by the Mexican government. The label of FTO means the US is able to take more drastic action to bring down cartels but is opposed by the Mexican government. Without cooperation with Mexican intelligence and policing agencies, it is unlikely that the US would be successful.

Failures and Shortcomings

The war on drugs, as it has stretched on for decades, is increasingly viewed as a failure. Many are disheartened by its lack of success in eliminating demand, the continued existence of major drug cartels, and the corruption of drug enforcement agents, all while costing over a trillion USD (Coyne and Hall). First, the war on drugs simply aims to punish criminals, while failing to address the demand for drugs. As long as the illicit drug trade is lucrative, people will work for cartels. Though punishing criminals is a way of lowering accessibility to drugs in the first place, research has shown that the difference is marginal. According to a survey measuring American high schoolers, illicit drug use has only dropped 5.2% from 1975 to 2013 (Lopez). Adversely, the war on drugs has been shown to lower the price for illicit drugs through something called the balloon effect: a drug crackdown in one country only causes them to move to other countries, leading to more competition and lower prices. This has been seen multiple times, where drug suppliers moved from Peru to Colombia, or from the Netherlands Antilles to West Africa. This is a possible reason for the prominence of Mexican drug cartels, as the war on drugs has eliminated competing suppliers within the US. Second, without ending demand, drug cartels will always exist in some form or another. Even if law enforcement agencies were able to dismantle every major drug trafficking organization, new cartels would replace them to fulfill the demand for illicit drugs. This can be seen by the fall of the AFO. Without the influence of the AFO near the border, the Sinaloa Cartel expanded, and is now one of the largest cartels in Mexico. In addition, when drug lords are killed or captured, many within the cartel fight for succession, resulting in splintering and infighting. This not only fails to remove cartels from power, but also increases crossfire, further endangering the lives of innocent people. While it is intuitive to target criminals, there must be a strategy to deal with the results of that action. Third, individual corruption has slowed the anti-drug effort considerably. For many years, DEA agents have been leaking intelligence to cartels, misleading the US and Mexican governments, and laundering money. In addition, individuals in the criminal justice system have been paid by criminals to ensure their associates walk free.

Potential for Insurgency

Through observation of increased cartel-related violence and the growing prominence of power and profit-incentivized drug lords, many have feared cartels may attempt to attack state authority. An insurgency goes beyond organized crime but is an active threat to the government. Although some have argued that drug lords have no reason to become insurgent, the uncertainty, as well as their growing power, compels one to err on the side of caution.

Other Criminal Activity

In addition to drugs, cartels often participate in other illegal activities, either to gain more influence and wealth, or to support their drug trade. For example, some cartels participate in human trafficking to supplement their profits. In addition, cartels may traffic weapons, and own many themselves to carry out assassinations and terrorize civilians. Most notably, drug cartels are known for their violence, not just against law enforcement and rival cartel members, but against civilians as well. Currently, Mexico is home to many of the most dangerous cities in the world, due to their high rates of homicide.

Influence

Despite their capacity for violence, even against civilians, drug lords and cartels maintain a significant degree of influence. Firstly, drug cartels have gained fearsome reputations for violence. Major cartels all employ assassins to carry out killings of their enemies and are often infamous for cruel and unusual punishments, such as the AFO was known for dissolving the bodies of their victims in acid to cover up their tracks. The fear of death and injury causes many, including civilians and law enforcement, to want to obey instructions from cartels. Secondly, less intuitively, drug lords tend to be charismatic, and the cartel life romanticized. More recently, drug lords have been praised for providing assistance to locals in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This follows a history of violent criminal groups and insurgencies attempting to win public favor through charity. The Taliban handed out soap, Pablo Escobar threw fiestas, and the Gulf Cartel gave out food after a 2013 hurricane. In addition, the Mexican people sing narcocorridos, ballads that dramatize drug lords. Drug cartels, in one way or another, have built soft power, and use more than just bribes and threats to get their way. If they so desired, major cartels would have the money, influence, and physical force required to attempt insurgency.

Geopolitics

Mexico

Drug Cartels in Mexica had operated with relative success ever since the 1980s. Currently, prominent cartels include the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation, the Gulf Cartel, the Los Zetas Cartel, and more. Fights between the cartels frequently occur, often leading to the deaths of many members and civilians caught in the crossfire. After former Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto came to office in 2012, he announced his plans to put 122 drug cartel leaders during his presidency. He had since then captured 89% of the leaders, leaving just 14. However, during his administration, violence spiked as countrywide turf wars occurred. Nieto’s successor, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, had also faced similar surges in violence. As of July 11th, 2020, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has killed judges, Congress members, dozens of police officers, and thousands of civilians. Evidently, the Mexican government still fails to find methods of minimizing the threats posed by Mexico’s most prominent cartels.

The United States

Since the rise of the Mexican drug cartels, drug-trafficking activities had led to 75-85% of cocaine consumed in the United States coming through Mexico by the late 1990s. Alarmed by such rates, the US government took active measures to combat illicit drug-trafficking operations throughout the past 30 years. Along the border, sheriffs, agents, activists, and concerned citizens had continuously rallied to raise public awareness. Recognizing the stake, it holds in the issue, the US cooperates with the Mexican government to combat the influence of the drug cartels. During the Obama administration, both former president George W. Bush and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had voiced their intent to establish a partnership with Mexico. Sentiments of aggressive involvement arose during the Trump administration, with President Trump designating Mexican drug gangs as terrorist groups. President Obrador had since remarked the intent to cooperate with the US but rejected any plans for direct US intervention.

**Columbia**

Colombia, being the world’s largest producer of cocaine, empowers Mexican cartels to profit from illegal transnational operations. Mexican cartels had long worked closely with cartels and providers in Colombia, smuggling the drugs from Colombia into the US after the US imposed stricter policies on Colombian imports. Currently, Mexican criminal groups ship out unrefined cocaine (coca) from Colombia and process it within Mexico. The Colombian government throughout the years had initiated campaigns targeting drug-trafficking. The Colombian police had specifically targeted coca-farming throughout the nation. However, many drug cartels and farms in Colombia still function with relative ease, ensuring ample supplies for Mexican cartels.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

On January 5th, 1940, Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas signed the Federal Regulation of Drug Addiction bill, legalizing narcotics on a large scale. The outcome, although debated, appears more praised than condemned. Addicts consumed doses at a controlled amount rather than excessive intakes. Prices lowered significantly, indicating that drugs no longer impact the basic livelihood of addicts. Cartels lost their influence on the populous as they cannot compete with government-sanctioned dispensaries. The depleting profits of the cartels diminished their strengths, bringing cartel related crime rates to a decline. Although the program seemingly attained success, it abruptly ended six months later. Officials claim that the program was no longer viable due to wartime restraints on imports of morphine and cocaine. However, records showed that American lobbyists influenced the US federal government to enact an embargo on morphine and cocaine to Mexico, obstructing all hopes for the program to work. The Mexican government would not take significant efforts on the war on drugs until recent times.

Mexico’s war against drug cartels began since the election of former president Felipe Calderon in 2011. The president deployed more than 6,500 Mexican soldiers to Michoacán to battle drug traffickers in the state. Deployment of troops by the government became a repeating trend in the methodology to combat drug cartels, with more than 20,000 Mexican soldiers and federal police deployed across the nation in February 2007 to facilitate local trafficking. More than 2,837 people are killed between 2006-2007 due to Calderon’s plans. Aside from direct force, Calderon also waged anti-corruption campaigns, firing 284 federal police commanders on June 25th, 2007. Throughout the campaign, numerous Cartel leaders were arrested, but violence continued to escalate. Many government officials were targeted, killed, or resigned during Calderon’s presidency. By January 2011, more than 34,612 citizens were killed.

President Enrique Peña Nieto continued his predecessor’s initiatives against the cartels and drug-related violence. As mentioned before, his administration arrested more than 89% of the targeted cartel leaders. On February 22nd, 2014, officials arrested the boss of the Sinaloa cartel, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, marking a major victory in Nieto’s campaign. As the cartel was a transnational criminal organization, Mexican authorities turned Guzman to the US on January 19th, 2017. Throughout Nieto’s administration, US and Mexican authorities cooperated on crackdowns across the border, while also extraditing several cartel members between the countries. Current Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador adheres to similar policies as his predecessors, working with the United States to disintegrate.

Other than the militaristic approach to targeting cartels, the Mexican government also considered other legislative changes. In October of 2019, the Mexican senate voted on a bill to legalize marijuana to limit cartels’ influence. Former Mexican president Vicente Fox Quesada publicly endorsed such a deal, showcasing the political support for new methods. The senate ultimately passed the bill, but the senate had since delayed its implementation to December 2020.

In August of 2021, the Mexican government has attempted a different approach. After over 15 years of conflict and strict domestic enforcements against weapons trafficking, the government has concluded that US gun manufacturers are the main suppliers for these drug cartels and filed a lawsuit against 10 of these manufactures for knowingly facilitating the sale of guns to Mexican drug cartels. However, the manufactures’ protections by the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA) has created many doubts on whether the lawsuit will actually go through.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

* United Nations General Assembly Resolution (64/182), December 18th, 2009
* United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement (4), January 1st, 2010
* United Nations General Assembly Resolution (74/178), December 18th, 2019

Possible Solutions

Though numerous operations conducted by both the Mexican and the US governments had targeted cartels through militaristic means, cartel violence remains prevalent throughout Mexico and the Mexican-American border. The diminishing of cartels clearly had not impacted the amount of gang violence that occurs. Therefore, the implementation of **localized security systems**is necessary to minimize the probability and frequency of turf wars between rival cartels. Localized security systems such as enhanced surveillance methodologies and local special forces rather than national operatives ensure that authorities could efficiently manage rising tensions.

The many clashes between rival gangs take place with no definitive locations. Therefore, civilians could face the threat of being caught in the crossfire between cartel conflicts. Although localized security systems could improve upon the situation, they are insufficient to address the issue’s holistic nature. Thus, **first respondent teams** should be situated throughout hotspots across the nation, arriving at the scenes immediately to contain collateral damage. Through such, the threats of turf wars and skirmishes could recede, ameliorating public safety. Such teams should also hold responsibility for relocating the citizens caught in clashes into areas of temporary safety rather than leaving them displaced until further plans could be developed.

The core of the situation lies in the illicit trafficking of narcotics in their raw or refined forms. Often, political instability and corruption enable cartels to engage in activities with relative liberty. Thus, **transnational institutions consisting of representatives from involved nations should facilitate border security and promote transparency within the countries**. For example, border security teams comprising of personnels from all involved nations should establish outposts that only report to the transnational institutions, preventing local corruption. Through such, cartels would face harsher regulations and hold accountability for their actions. Though many current anti-drugs policies directly combat the cartels, few consider the political nature of illegal activities.

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