

A Different Fight: Narco-Commercialist Insurgencies in Mexico

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POLICY BRIEF

The United States and its allies increasingly confront commercialist insurgencies that seek to control territory for economic rather than traditional political reasons. These groups render the established “clear-hold-build” approach to counterinsurgency ineffective. To respond effectively to this evolving threat, U.S. officials must take into account lessons learned from previous experiences with commercialist insurgencies. This brief applies the lessons learned from the Colombian insurgency to the contemporary case of northern Mexico and argues that a fragmentation approach is required to disrupt the planning, preparation, and conduct of such groups.¹

FARC: The Commercialist Insurgency in Colombia

Initially committed to the overthrow of the Colombian government, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) evolved into a commercialist insurgency focused on controlling the Colombian countryside for the purpose of drug cultivation.² The FARC entered the drug trade in the mid-1980s with the break-up of the Medellin and Cali drug cartels. Vast profits from the drug trade allowed the FARC to expand its membership and military capability. These profits also transformed the nature of the insurgency, as the FARC’s leadership seemingly became more interested in the narcotics trade than in directly challenging the Colombian government for control of the state. In the 1990s, for example, the FARC did not use its military strength to control Colombia's cities or topple the government. Instead, its major military operations focused on weakening the government's control of Colombia's coca-producing regions.³ The FARC's involvement in the drug trade and growing control of Colombian territory led to a significant U.S. counterinsurgency initiative beginning in 1999, known as Plan Colombia.

Plan Colombia: A Clear-Hold-Build Strategy

From 1999-2006, the United States gave more than \$6.8 billion to Colombia in support of its counter-narcotics and counterinsurgency efforts. Despite the enormity of this commitment, many policymakers, politicians, and scholars have considered Plan Colombia, at best, a limited success and, at worst, in the words of Ecuadorean president Rafael Correa, a complete failure.⁴ Plan Colombia adhered to the clear-hold-build counterinsurgency approach that the U.S. government has traditionally advocated against revolutionary insurgencies.

Operational Goals

Plan Colombia had three primary operational goals relative to the FARC:

- 1) *Clear Insurgents.* In order to defeat the insurgency, Plan Colombia sought to remove the FARC from the areas surrounding Bogota before clearing the rest of the countryside.

Outcome: The FARC remains active in the countryside and uses the region's rough terrain to avoid detection and outmaneuver the military. It controls between one fourth and one half of Colombia's territory and enjoys the support of approximately a quarter of the Colombian population.⁵

- 2) *Hold Territory and Weaken the FARC Economically.* The Colombian government sought to undermine the commercial infrastructure of the FARC through the eradication of coca plants. The United States supported these efforts with approximately \$1 billion for aerial eradication operations.⁶

Outcome: Seeking lucrative coca profits, farmers and traffickers thwarted aerial eradication efforts using various strategies, such as planting their coca alongside legal crops. This resulted in the continued cultivation of approximately 175,000 hectares of coca annually, which generates \$500 to \$600 million per year for the FARC.⁷

- 3) *Build Public Support for the State through Alternative Economic Development.* To win popular support and reduce the attractiveness of the FARC, the Colombian government sought to sever the economic connection between citizens and insurgents. The United States supported this effort by providing \$500 million to promote alternative development programs to encourage legal crop development.⁸

Outcome: The U.S. and Colombian governments were often unable to outbid the insurgents for the farmers' plots. Lack of access to land, irrigation, roads, credit, technical assistance, and established markets made it impossible for most farmers to switch to legal crops. Communities that did switch to alternative crops faced violent retribution from the FARC.⁹

Fragmentation: The Success of Plan Colombia.

Despite its failure to fulfill its clear-hold-build objectives, Plan Colombia eventually reduced the FARC threat by fragmenting the insurgency's organization. This "fragmentation" decreased FARC membership, control of territory, and attacks on the government. Fragmentation consisted of the following components: disruption of the chain of command, disruption of communication, and geographic isolation of insurgent groups.¹⁰

- 1) *Disruption of the Chain of Command.* The government used targeted strikes on FARC compounds to eliminate several top officials, depriving the organization of talented leaders and disrupting its ability to plan operations. The most successful of these operations occurred on March 1, 2008, when the Colombian army killed FARC Secretariat member and spokesperson Raul Reyes.¹¹
- 2) *Disruption of Communication.* The Colombian military infiltrated the FARC's communication network, intercepting key intelligence on insurgent activity and disrupting insurgent communication. This ability allowed the government to free former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and several other high-profile political prisoners in an elaborate deception operation.¹²
- 3) *Geographic Isolation.* The government isolated FARC elements through military encirclement, which reduced the FARC's mobility and disrupted interaction between different groups and fronts.¹³

The United States provided the following support to the fragmentation component of the Colombian military's counterinsurgency strategy:

- 1) *Training of Personnel.* The United States played a crucial role in the improvement of the Colombian military by establishing a non-commissioned officer (NCO) training academy in Colombia. Enhanced NCO training increased the combat effectiveness of the Colombian military and improved morale by mitigating class tensions between officers and soldiers.¹⁴ According to SOUTHCOM Command Sgt. Major Michael Balch, the Colombian military's "previous attrition problems have been resolved through this program."¹⁵
- 2) *Equipment.* Helicopters provided by the United States gave the Colombian military the air mobility necessary to track, encircle, and isolate the FARC in Colombia's rural areas. The United States provided Colombia with enough helicopters to give Colombia the third largest Blackhawk helicopter fleet in the world.¹⁶
- 3) *Signals Intelligence Technology.* The Colombian military relied on U.S. technology to gain real-time intelligence on insurgent activity as FARC members typically relied on cell and satellite phones in remote areas. The sharing of U.S. SIGINT technology allowed the Colombia military to target FARC leaders and disrupt communication.¹⁷

Despite its inability to fulfill its clear-hold-build objectives, Plan Colombia seriously weakened the FARC. Colombia's experience provides several lessons that should inform future counterinsurgency efforts against commercialist insurgencies:

- A state will experience significant difficulty "clearing" a commercialist insurgency because insurgents can draw upon vast profits from the illegal drug trade to bolster their military capability, buy the support of locals, and corrupt officials.
- A state will have difficulty "holding" territory against a commercialist insurgency as both insurgents and civilians will actively resist the eradication of the drug trade to protect their financial well-being.
- A state will struggle to "build" through alternative development programs because of the significant financial incentive locals have to participate in the illegal drug trade. These drug profits make it difficult for the government to win the hearts and minds of the population.
- Targeting a commercialist insurgency's leaders and disrupting insurgent communications can "fragment" the group, disrupting its operations, isolating its members, and making it less of a threat to the state.
- Fragmentation counter-insurgency strategies are heavily dependent on a professional military, especially at the NCO rank, that is highly mobile with access to advanced signals intelligence equipment.

Drug Cartels: The Commercialist Insurgency in Mexico

Mexico currently faces a commercialist insurgency in which drug cartels in northern Mexico corrupt and attack government institutions to create an ungovernable region where they face little restriction on their illicit activities. The drug cartels have evolved beyond mere organized crime networks and now constitute a significant threat to the Mexican state. They have used their vast drug profits to corrupt officials and now field a large well-equipped military force. Since 2001, 150,000 soldiers have deserted the Mexican military, nearly 1,500 of which are members of the elite Airborne Special Forces Groups (GAFES). The cartels have used offers of higher pay to lure many of these soldiers.¹⁸

Mexican cartel activity threatens to turn northern Mexico into a region resembling a failed state, with the following potential costs on the United States:

- 1) *Increased Instability on the U.S. Border.* Instability in northern Mexico will likely destabilize the U.S. southern border through increased violence and a surge of Mexican migrants. Many U.S. border states have already experienced this increased instability. Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steve McCraw recently asserted that "Spillover is here...I've been working the cartels since the 1980s and there has never been a more significant threat."¹⁹ Although U.S. policymakers have shied away from using this language, the recent visit of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano to Mexico

suggests that the Obama administration is worried about growing instability in northern Mexico.

- 2) *Increased Potential for Terrorist Activity.* Instability in northern Mexico increases the potential for terrorist activity along the U.S. southern border. Terrorists may seek to capitalize on instability in northern Mexico in order to fund and plan operations and to smuggle individuals and equipment into the United States. Recent evidence suggests that Hezbollah has started to participate in the Latin American drug trade.²⁰ Although Mexico is not currently a significant hub for terrorist activity, instability in northern Mexico increases the potential for such activity on the U.S. border

Policy Options:

The Mexican government currently has three policy options available for dealing with the growing threat posed by the cartels - one civilian and two military based options.

Civilian Option: Traditional Policing

Under this policy, Mexican law enforcement agencies, rather than the military, pre-empt and react to cartel activity. The United States would provide funds, such as the \$292 million designated for law enforcement improvements for the 2011 fiscal year, to improve the training and equipment of the police force and institute judicial reform.²¹ Under this approach, U.S. border patrol agents would train the Mexican police in order to improve its investigative, intelligence, surveillance, and response capabilities.

Challenges

- The Mexican police have a long history of corruption that inhibits their ability to combat the cartels. Supervisors at both the federal and municipal levels have traditionally encouraged the rank-and-file officers to supplement their incomes through bribes.²² The cartels take advantage of this organizational culture to buy police cooperation. Although the military has not been immune from corruption, it has remained more insulated from private influences. The military also heavily stresses loyalty to the central government in its soldier training programs and has an organizational culture less prone to disloyalty and corruption.²³ As a result, the Mexican population views the military as the less corrupt institution.
- In the near- to mid-term, the police lack the capability to challenge the cartels and provide security. The police require significant retraining and funding to transform from an inept and corrupt institution into one capable of effectively challenging the cartels. This transformation will take time, leaving the country vulnerable to the cartels unless the Mexican military steps in to fill the security vacuum.

Military Option 1: Clear-Hold-Build

Experiences in Colombia indicate that clear-hold-build strategies will likely be ineffective against commercialist insurgencies. The financial incentives that insurgents offer to the local population hinder large-scale clearing operations and efforts to eradicate the drug trade.

- 1) *Clear Insurgents.* It is prohibitively costly and ineffective to provide the Mexican military with the capacity to clear the cartels.²⁴ The cartels' proximity to the population also creates the potential for heavy civilian casualties and human rights violations which would undermine the political legitimacy of the Mexican state and impose political costs on the United States
 - The United States supported Colombia's use of large-scale military operations against the FARC under Plan Patriota in 2003. Although these operations led to significant FARC casualties, they did not clear the FARC. Analysts have since criticized the operations, claiming that it was not the killing of common soldiers, which the insurgents could easily replace, but the assassination of FARC leaders that weakened the insurgency²⁵

- 2) *Hold Territory and Weaken the Cartels Economically.* Military operations are unlikely to undermine the financial incentive for the cartels to engage in the drug trade because of the high demand in the United States.
 - During his tenure, President Calderon has been unable to significantly reduce the overall volume or value of the drug trade, despite intensified Mexican efforts to eradicate marijuana crops, dismantle methamphetamine laboratories and interdict cocaine shipments.²⁶ The United States has experienced similar difficulties, only intercepting 5 to 15 percent of drug shipments into the country despite spending \$40 billion per year on interdiction efforts.²⁷

- 3) *Build Public Support for the State through Alternative Economic Development.* The Mexican government is unlikely to find an alternative economic activity for the 450,000 people employed by the cartels.²⁸ The economic factors that inhibited alternative economic development initiatives in Colombia will be compounded in Mexico because the Mexican drug industry is centered on the trafficking rather than the growing of coca. Drug-related jobs are not limited to the agricultural sector and cannot be replaced through simple crop substitution. The Mexican cartels also provide lucrative jobs to hit-men, drivers, accountants, and money launderers.²⁹

Military Option 2: Fragmentation

Experiences in Colombia indicate that the Mexican government can weaken the cartels through a fragmentation counterinsurgency strategy, which focuses on disrupting the cartels' command and control of their organizations. Like Colombia in 1999, Mexico also faces challenges

in personnel, equipment, and intelligence that currently limit its ability to implement a fragmentation strategy. To execute a fragmentation strategy, Mexico needs to:

- 1) *Disrupt Cartel Chain of Command.* The Mexican government must continue to prioritize the arrest of cartel leaders and important officials. Arrests deprive the cartels of experienced decision makers, leaving them vulnerable to government counterinsurgency efforts. To successfully eliminate cartel leaders, the Mexican government needs a skilled and professional military capable of capturing cartel leaders, while not being corrupted by the cartels.
- 2) *Disrupt Cartel Communication Networks.* The Mexican government must infiltrate cartel communication systems to efficiently target leaders and disrupt insurgent operations. The Mexican government will need improved signals intelligence technology to break cartel communications, which according to one captured Gulf Cartel member, depend on complex, encrypted radio networks stretching from the U.S. border to Guatemala.³⁰
- 3) *Isolate Cartels.* Geographic isolation will disrupt the cartels' networks by impeding communication and coordination operations. The government must have a significant presence in the major population centers to complicate cartel operations and should establish checkpoints along major roads to inspect cargo and monitor cartel movement.

The United States should assist Mexico in implementing its fragmentation strategy by:

- 1) *Bolstering Mexico's Officer Training and Screening Process.* The United States should help professionalize the Mexican military through increased NCO training and monitoring. NCOs traditionally have not played a major role in the Mexican military, adding to class tensions.³¹ U.S.-sponsored NCO training programs would ease class tensions by providing a professional and well-paid career path for young enlisted soldiers. A professional NCO corps also would improve unit cohesion and combat effectiveness. U.S.-sponsored programs that help the government monitor the activities of the military would aid in identifying disloyalty and corruption within the ranks.
- 2) *Providing Additional Equipment.* The United States should continue to provide funding for the non-intrusive inspection equipment, such as ion scanners, gamma ray scanners and X-ray vans, which will allow the Mexican government to identify cartel activity in its cities. The United States also must increase the number of helicopters provided to Mexico, as air mobility is essential for the government to combat and isolate insurgents in rural areas. The United States has only delivered 5 helicopters to Mexico as of December 2009 compared to the nearly 200 helicopters provided to Colombia.³²
- 3) *Continuing Recent Commitment to Intelligence Sharing.* The United States should continue to share classified signals intelligence and computer technology with Mexico so

that the Mexican military can disrupt cartel communication networks and obtain the intelligence necessary to target leaders.

Fragmentation will not eliminate the drug cartels or destroy the drug trade. The United States and Mexico need to invest heavily in Mexico's law enforcement and judicial systems in order to solve the drug cartel problem in the long-term. These investments, however, will not help Mexico until the cartels are significantly weakened. Experience in Colombia has shown that a fragmentation counterinsurgency strategy will weaken the insurgents' power by disrupting the command, control, and communications. The United States should provide Mexico with the officer training, equipment, and intelligence necessary to fragment the cartels so that the Mexican government can succeed in the first phase of its struggle against the cartels.

¹ For a more detailed discussion on commercialist insurgency, see Metz, Steven. "The Future of Insurgency." *Strategic Studies Institute*. December 1, 1993.

² Felbab-Brown, Vanda. *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010. 99. Brittain, James J. *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP*. New York: Pluto Press, 2010. 152.

³ Brittain 221.

⁴ Brittain 224. The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Plan Colombia: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans For Reducing Assistance." October, 2008.

⁵ Isacson, Adam. "Lessons from America's Other Counterinsurgency." *Foreign Policy*. December 16, 2009.

⁶ U.S. GAO report 35.

⁷ Hanson, Stephanie. "FARC, ELN, Colombia's Left-Wing Guerrillas." *Council on Foreign Relations*. August 19, 2009. Romero, Simon. "Cocaine Sustains War in Rural Colombia." *New York Times*. July 27, 2008.

⁸ U.S. GAO report 53.

⁹ Quoted Felbab-Brown 103.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion on fragmentation, see Byman, Daniel. "Do Targeted Killings Work?" *Foreign Affairs*. 2006. While this brief does not argue for targeted killings per se, it borrows from the article the strategy of disrupting an organization through the elimination of leadership and disruption of communications.

¹¹ Deshazo, Peter, Johanna Mendelson Forman and Phillip McLean. "Countering Threats to Security and Stability in a Failing State." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. September, 2009. 25.

¹² Deshazo xiv.

¹³ Felbab-Brown 106.

¹⁴ Deshazo 68.

¹⁵ "U.S. Soldiers Help Colombia Transform its Enlisted Ranks." *United States Southern Command News*, July 2, 2008.

¹⁶ Deshazo 22.

¹⁷ Deshazo 48. Felbab-Brown 107.

¹⁸ Grayson, George W. *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010. 157.

¹⁹ Roebuck, Jeremy. "DPS Director: Spillover is Here." *The Monitor*. March 30, 2010.

²⁰ "House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Hearing; Assessing U.S. Drug Policy in the Americas; Testimony by Ray Walser, Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America, Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, The Heritage Foundation." October 15, 2009.

²¹ Johnson, David T. "FY 2011 Budget Request for Security Assistance Programs." *U.S. Department of State*. April 14, 2010.

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- ²² Lacey, Mark. "In an Escalating Drug War, Mexico Fights the Cartels, and Itself." *New York Times*. March 30, 2009.
- ²³ Diez, Jordi and Ian Nicholls. "Mexican Armed Forces in Transition." January, 2006.
- ²⁴ Grayson 185. The cartels' arsenal includes AR-15 and AK-47 assault rifles, MP5 submachine guns, 50mm machine guns, grenade launchers, ground-to-air missiles, dynamite, bazookas and helicopters.
- ²⁵ Isacson, Adam, "Where the FARC are being beaten-and where they aren't." *Center for International Policy*. May 28, 2008.
- ²⁶ Hanson, Stephanie. "Mexico's Drug War" *Council on Foreign Relations*. November, 20, 2008. Brands, Hal." Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counterdrug Policy." *Strategic Studies Institute*. May, 2009.
- ²⁷ Grayson 261.
- ²⁸ Grayson 254.
- ²⁹ Lacey, Mark. "In an Escalating Drug War, Mexico Fights the Cartels, and Itself." *New York Times*. March 30, 2009.
- ³⁰ Schiller, Dane and Susan Carroll. "Former Gulf Cartel insider spills his high-tech secrets." *Houston Chronicle*. August 25, 2009.
- ³¹ Applegate, Rex. "Time Bomb on the U.S. Border: Mexican Military Unable to Counter Insurgency." 1995.
- ³² The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Status of Funds for the Merida Initiative." December 3, 2009. Deshazo 22.