

Gang and TCO Activity in Mexico: Should the U.S. Be Concerned?

Written by Max G. Manwaring

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MAX G. MANWARING, DEC 3 2012

Since the end of the Cold War, non-state actors, including gangs, have successfully elevated their asymmetric hegemonic actions onto the global security stage. From 1648 and the Peace of Westphalia, the international security dialogue and *de facto* sovereignty was the province of the nation-state. Signs that the Westphalian system was beginning to breakdown, however, were already being articulated as early as the 1980s by the eminent classical realist Hans Morgenthau. He wrote about hegemonic non-state actors operating outside the Westphalian structure with the objective of radically changing or controlling an existing political-economic-social system and replacing it with something else. Nazi Germany under Adolph Hitler is a case in point.[1] Hitler's attempt to change the international system began as a gang (The Brown Shirts) effort in Munich, Germany, and, over the period 1933-1945, imposed the ethics of a criminal gang on an entire civilization.[2]

The Brown Shirts in the 1930s and the Mexican Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) today are not unique or totally isolated cases. Hegemonic or politicized gangs and other non-state groups all over the world are threatening the stability and existence of individual nation-states and the contemporary world order. Thus, over time, gangs have also succeeded in acting as if they were nation-states attempting to overthrow or control another. Most gangs operating around the world today, including the Mexican non-state actors, claim only commercial profit-oriented motives. But, to secure the freedom of movement and action necessary to attain their commercial motives, they pursue a subtle and ominous political agenda. They are in fact engaged in the pursuit of human, territorial, and political interests. As a consequence, states operating within the *status quo* often fail to see non-state actors (that is gangs, TCO's, insurgents, warlords, organized criminals, and other modern mercenaries) as nothing more than bit players in the international security arena.

Organization, Motives, and General Effects

Authorities have no consistent or reliable data on the gang-TCO phenomenon in Mexico. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged to be large and complex. It is also known that it is different in the north (along the U.S.-Mexican border) than it is in the south (along the Guatemala-Belize borders). It is also different in the areas between the northern and southern borders of Mexico. Nevertheless, there is a formidable gang/TCO presence throughout the entire country, and—given the weaknesses of national and local political and security institutions—criminality has considerable opportunity to prosper.

Organization

The major cartels (TCOs) include the 'big four'—Juarez, Gulf, Sinaloa, and Tijuana cartels, that operate generally in the north. Additionally the Beltran-Leyva, the Familia Michoacana, and the Zetas organizations must also be acknowledged as important players in Mexico. As an example, the Zetas appear to be in the process of transforming themselves from a gang into a cartel in its own right. They have launched an aggressive expansion strategy into areas as far away as Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. At the same time, and rumors of premature demise notwithstanding, the Juarez cartel maintains a presence in 21 of the 30 Mexican states; the Gulf Cartel is found in 13 states; the Sinaloa Cartel is located in 17 states; and remnants of the reportedly disintegrating Tijuana Cartel are

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present in 15 states. It goes on from there, with the Mexican mafia and the Central American *Maras* (*Mara Salvatrucha* 13 and 18) further complicating the Mexican TCO-gang picture. Each of the above entities (and others) appear to be fighting against each other, against the Mexican state, against the citizenry, and, at the same time, moving singly or cooperatively into over 1,000 cities in the United States.

Motives and Where They Lead

Even though commercial enrichment remains the primary motive for TCO-gang phenomenon, challenges to state stability, security, and sovereignty in Mexico, the strategic architecture of the major organizations within that phenomenon resembles that of a political or ideological insurgency. Nevertheless, the primary objectives of these non-state actors are not to depose the Mexican government. Rather, the objective is to coerce the government and the citizenry into allowing the level of movement and action (impunity) that provides for the achievement of significant self-enrichment. This defines war as well as criminal insurgency. That is, the violent coercion of a given political-economic-social system to compel it to accept one's will.

In that context, traditional assumptions regarding crime, terrorism, and warfare are blurred, but define a feudal environment of extreme violence, torture, farming body parts, and trafficking in people, as well as the usual drugs, arms, patronage, bribes, kickbacks, and cronyism. And, as in a feudal environment, these activities are governed only by the personal whim of a gang/TCO leader. As a consequence, democracy in much of Mexico is a joke, and the state's presence and authority (sovereignty) is at best questionable in over more than 980 affirmed 'Zones of Impunity' (criminal-free or quasi-states). This kind of instability and insecurity has been known to define the state failure process and/or a criminal state.

The Problem of State Failure

Like revolutions, state failure is a process, not an outcome. The process is brought on by poor, irresponsible, and/or insensitive governance and leads to one other fundamental reason why states fail. That is, state failure can be a process exacerbated by non-state groups that, for whatever reason, want to radically change or control a given country or parts of it. Violent actions by non-state groups or counter-actions by state authorities can weaken the government and its institutions, and it may become progressively less capable of performing the fundamental tasks of legitimate governance. Somewhere near the end of the destabilization process, the state will be able to control less and less of the national territory, and fewer and fewer of the people in it. But, just because a state fails does not mean that it will go away. The diminishment of responsible governance and personal security generate greater poverty, violence, and instability—and a downward spiral in terms of development and well-being. It is a zero-sum game in which non-state or even corrupt public officials are the winners and the rest of a targeted society are losers. Ultimately, failing or failed states become dysfunctional states, dependencies, tribal states, rogue states, criminal states, narco-states, new 'People's Republics,' draconian states (military dictatorships), or neo-populist states (civilian dictatorships). Moreover, failing or failed states may possibly dissolve and become parts of other states or may reconfigure into entirely new entities.

The above possibilities do not delineate the end of the state failure problem, however. Sooner or later, the global community will likely be called upon to pay the indirect social, economic, and political costs of a country's failure. At the same time the global community will increasingly be expected to provide the military and financial leverage to ensure peace, security, development, and stability in an increasing number of similar situations. The consistency of these lessons derived from relatively recent experience throughout the world inspires confidence that these lessons and associated threats are valid.

Conclusions

The internal security environment in Mexico today is dangerous and volatile, and it goes well beyond a simple social or law enforcement problem. At the same time, other hemispheric political, military, and opinion leaders do nothing. The present vision of the human capacity to treat explosions, automatic weapons fire, beheadings, and the terrified screams of victims from "down the street" as mere background noise to a Mexican soap opera should create, at the

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least, a vague unease. A future vision of larger and larger parts of Mexico and other parts of the Americas adapting to criminal values and forms of behavior should be, at a minimum, unsettling. But, again, hemispheric political, military, and opinion leaders continue to do nothing. As a consequence, stability, security, sovereignty, and democracy are slowly destroyed, spillover expands, and thousands of innocents continue to die, yet nothing of Mexico was even mentioned in the recent U.S. presidential election. Should Americans be concerned? Obviously, yes!

The problem is that most scholars, opinion-makers, policymakers and decision-makers have not yet broken out of the intellectual vice-lock imposed by the Westphalian system. Given the pressures and reality of the gang/TCO situation in the hemisphere today, it is appropriate that anyone who has the responsibility for analyzing, planning, implementing, and/or reporting on these kinds of conflicts: 1) take the 'new' enemy into consideration; 2) start thinking about the 'new' kind of conflict it is in which they are engaged; 3) start making recommendations regarding what must be understood to conduct a successful 'new' counter-gang/TCO strategy; and 4) start writing policy-relevant papers and books that address this 'new' reality.

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These are the personal views of the author and not of the U.S. Army War College, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

[1] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: McGraw-Hill Publish Company, 1985.

[2] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, New York: Vintage Books, 1956, p. 179.