Understanding Transnational Criminal Organizations:

Implications for the U.S. Army

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The United States has historically held several national interests constant with respect to interstate relations with Latin America to include: "protecting the U.S. Southern flank, advancing democracy and human rights, promoting economic growth, reducing the flow of illicit drugs, and limiting illegal immigration."[1] Despite the seemingly clear and concise national interests for the region, the unique nature of the threats growing in Latin America, along with the cultural challenges of each individual country, presents a dilemma for the United States to ensure tranquility and stability in the Western Hemisphere.

Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) present a unique threat to most countries in the Southern Hemisphere due to the growing globalization of networks that enable the movement of drugs, arms, explosives, human trafficking, and funds across national boundaries.[2] These transnational threats include both state and non-state actors, adding to the complexity of the issues. Additionally, the relationship between the United States and its southern neighbors has deteriorated over the course of time due to cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences between all the states.[3] Combating these threats requires a complete understanding of the threats, the international relationship barriers and enhancers, and how specific organization capabilities and competencies can contribute to the fight.

Defining the Threat

Defining, describing, and understanding criminal threats to national interest is an essential task for states or organizations to complete so they can effectively neutralize or eliminate those threats. Understanding the threat enables the targeting state to identify strengths and weaknesses of the opposing force. States are then able to do a relative analysis of power that provides them with a wholistic knowledge of how to combat a threat. Building understanding is critical because it drives additional steps and will improve interstate communication on how a multinational effort can effectively defeat a transnational threat.

Central America and Mexico are forced to counter several threats at one time. TCOs are the first threat to inter- and intra-national security. Additionally, most states in the region combat both domestic and international gangs. As a result of these threats, most states experience security issues with displacement of refugees across borders, compounding security considerations at those borders.

TCOs are characterized by their unique organizational structures and desired objectives. Most TCOs will task organize and employ both lawful and illicit means to accomplish their desired goals: obtaining power and influence and maximizing economic profit.[4] Their operations are highly coordinated across state lines, thus the title of transnational threat. Their illicit activities include but are not limited to: drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, extortion, cyber-crime, and significant racketeering activities (bribery, counterfeiting, mail fraud, etc.).[5]

Transnational criminal organizations are extremely complex because they maintain unique hierarchies, networks, and structures, and consistently operate in three zones within the Western Hemisphere: source zone, transit zone, and retail zone.[6] Zones are not limited to a single country. Each zone may consist of multiple countries and group organization, compounding the complexity for understanding the nature of each threat.

TCOs are significant threats rivaling the statistic of civil wars. In his research, Stathis Kalyvas further highlighted that criminal organizations, namely the Mexican cartels, have elevated their ability to operate independently and establish their own network stability through the contracting of an estimated 30,000 "professionals of violence."[7] Four dimensions illustrate Kalyvas's effort in establishing these "wars" on criminal networks: onset and termina-

tion, organizational features, dynamics of combat and violence, and relationship to governance and territory.[8] TCOs establish the military means for the utilization of violence to protect the supply routes from manufacturing, to shipment, to selling.

These criminal organizations seek to delegitimize governmental institutions and security forces to accomplish their goals. Unlike conventionally fought civil wars, TCOs use asymmetry and clandestine operations to effectively undermine state police efforts and demonstrate the organization's ability to provide for the local populace.[9] Providing for the local population both increases recruiting ability within neighborhoods and further incentivizes politicians and security force personnel to defect, allowing their organizations to operate freely.

Transnational criminal organizations adapt to power and influence changes quickly. Removing a TCO (or a TCO leader) from power creates a vacuum and increases market competition. Power and influence changes lead to increased amounts of violence and raise the "cost" to the governing body to demonstrate, or give the impression, that the government can provide security and services to the population. TCOs further gain power and influence when governments demonstrate the inability to capitalize on power consolidation after the collapse of a TCO.

Transnational criminal organizations are evolving along with the globalization of the world. According to John P. Sullivan in his *Small Wars Journal* article "Future Conflict: Criminal Insurgencies, Gangs, and Intelligence," criminal organizations will exploit globalizing economies of nations and further expand their criminal enclaves, progressing through his concept of TCO generations.[10] First- and second-generation TCOs are the typical forms identified in contemporary conflict, most extending their influence into the transnational capabilities through business. Sullivan highlighted the critical importance of understanding that TCOs evolving to the third generation will further elevate the negative impacts of the organizations, but with the added latent political objectives.[11]

Transnational criminal organizations are unlike traditional insurgency threats in the international community. Sullivan wrote that unlike traditional insurgencies that have political aims, "criminal insurgents" seek to maximize their ability for economical advancement by establishing deeply rooted networks to maneuver.[12] These networks include the political and national security sectors within the countries they operate and other criminal entities that operate within those states.

Domestic and international gangs are the second threat to Central American and Mexican security. While the United States has focused on the war on terrorism in the Middle East, the phenomena of gang proliferation in the United States and Central America has increased.[13] According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), transnational gangs are present in almost every state and continue to grow their memberships through aggressive recruitment of youth.[14]

Gangs are organizations that share similarities of TCOs but differ in their methodology and purpose for violence. First, their organizational structure is more horizontal, and the power authority is less centralized for developing strategy.[15] Gangs operate more often in areas where formal government structures are weak, allowing them to utilize violence as a means of control.[16] Although gangs are identified to occasionally take part in drug trafficking, they do not take part in the large-scale transnational movement of those products.[17]

The Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and "18th Street" (M-18) gangs are the two most well-known for threatening citizen security and government authority in Central America.[18] These gangs originate from Los Angeles. Their "expansion" into Central America is partly a result in the deportation of a significant amount of individuals to their respective countries. Both gangs have grown substantially since the end of the 1990s, rising to an estimated 85,000 members combined across all of the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras).[19]

The MS-13 and M-18 gangs are thriving in Central America due to weak national governments. The Northern Triangle countries are especially weak, enabling the gangs to flourish with limited counteraction. The weak governments are unable to coordinate multilateral action to combat the gangs, proving them to be "a destabilizing menace, more immediate than any conventional war or guerilla."[20]

The increase of violence in areas controlled by TCOs and gangs raises another national concern for most Central American states: displacement of citizens. Displacement of citizens occurs both internal to Central American countries and internationally throughout the region. Displacement of citizens from urban and population centers is most common due to the varying and persistent levels of extortion.[21]

A woman walks past graffiti of the gang La Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. Transnational gangs like MS-13 and 18th Street are extremely violent and routinely make money by extorting citizens. The government of El Salvador has designated both gangs as terrorist organizations. (Photo courtesy of Federal Bureau of Investigation)

Displaced citizens across state boundaries significantly increase international security risks. National economies are impacted as large groups of people move from one country to another seeking asylum from the violence in TCO and gang-controlled territories. Additionally, mass movement of people "raises the probability that the strategies of violence and displacement will be exported to disputes in the rural areas of [other] countries."[22] Displacement along international borders also significantly increases the security risk in protecting those borders.

Defining Relationships

Understanding relationships is critical in countering transnational threats. Threats within Central America and Mexico establish relationships by creating networks that assist in maximizing outcomes for each component, further increasing the complexity to counter threats within the region. Additionally, understanding the current status of relationships between nations combating these threats is also critical to identifying where information sharing and joint operations are strong and weak.

Transnational criminal organizations develop networks to enable freedom of action across national boundaries. TCOs protect their operations across all three zones through corruption in government and security forces. "Bankrolling" a politician or local police unit ensures that those forces will not implement any action the formal institution is responsible to complete (that is, if there is a formal institution present). These relationships enhance the power of the TCO or gang while diminishing the power of the formal government or institution.

Gangs develop a similar relationship with institutions for autonomy over their respective territory. As noted in the RAND Corporation paper "Counternetwork: Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks, "the key driver of violence is... change: change in the negotiated power relations between and within groups, and with the state."[23] Violence typically decreases with respect to gangs when their territory and power remain unchallenged.

Transnational criminal networks develop networks with gangs to protect their supply routes through international boundaries. As noted above, gangs are significantly territorial. TCOs acknowledge and capitalize on their control of territory to ensure their trafficking routes remain secure. TCO and gang joint networks provide an additional complexity for states to counter.

International relationships within the Western Hemisphere are critical in combating TCOs and transnational gangs. Kalyvas states that a significant portion of the Latin American "experience" is characterized by recently democratized states that have emerging economies and weak institutions. TCOs and gangs are capitalizing on these weaker institutions to enhance their business. The United States must play a significant role in building relationships within the Western Hemisphere as the leading democracy without encroaching on national sovereignty of Central American states.

Plan Colombia was a 17-year U.S.-Colombian bilateral effort in building strong relationships to defeat international threats from Central America. From Fiscal Year (FY) 2000-2016, the United States provided more than $10 billion for Plan Colombia and other programs to primarily combat drug trafficking issues funding Colombia's 50-year insurgency.[24] The implementation of Plan Colombia and follow-on projects prevented Colombia from becoming a failed state as feared in the 1990s.

Plan Colombia enabled Colombia to suppress two violent extremist groups: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN). Both insurgency groups established a deep, interconnected network with transnational illicit drug-trade organizations for funding.[25] The bilateral effort focused on security posture and institutional building to diminish the production of illicit drugs.

The United States provided the means to strengthen, equip, and professionalize the military and police forces. The United States provided support by enhancing the Colombian National Police and counter-narcotics battalions in the Colombian Army through specialized training.[26] Colombia also benefited from the use of planes and aerial equipment from the United States to destroy coca plants (of which Colombia was the largest producer in the source zone).

Plan Colombia significantly reduced the amount of corruption within the Colombian security forces and governance. The plan enhanced the quality of life by focusing efforts on protecting citizens from violence and promoting human rights through United States inspections. Enhancing this relationship that will "fight against corruption at all levels of society... [and] demonstrate a commitment to governance transparency, and strong institutions" is visible in the outcomes of Plan Colombia.[27] Although security issues persist within Colombia, the "unwavering commitment to achieve [the] five year goal [to eradicate coca production] from the highest level of the Colombian government" indicates that the future for U.S.-Colombian bilateral efforts will remain positive.[28]

The Merida Initiative is a bilateral effort, much like Plan Colombia, between the United States and Mexico to build security and stronger relationships in the Western Hemisphere. Mexico holds significant national interest to the United States because it is the only territory that borders the U.S. to the south. The Merida Initiative is an enduring effort focused on four primary objectives: disrupting organized criminal groups, creating a 21st century border, building strong and resilient communities, and institutionalizing the rule of law.[29]

Disrupting organized criminal groups along the U.S.-Mexico border is the top U.S. drug control policy. Mexico is the primary foreign supplier of heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana to the United States (Mexico is the leading nation in the transit zone for TCOs).[30] The Sinaloa organization is one of six primary TCOs that operates across the U.S.-Mexico border. As a result of these organizations gaining power, the estimated crime-related homicides within Mexico have exponentially increased since 2014.[31]

Denying drugs from Mexico into the United States, and conversely preventing firearms and bulk currency from the United States into Mexico, is an ongoing issue that both countries have failed to adequately accomplish.[32] The growing TCO and gang issues within both countries continue to exacerbate the immigration issues between the two countries. Looking to the future, expanding the success of the Joint Border Intelligence Group (GCIF) is critical in establishing the desired border outcome.[33]

The Merida Initiative has significantly shaped the police forces within Mexico over the past decade. Vetting examinations for police officers were implemented as a subcomponent of the bilateral agreement, with oversight by the United States, to prevent corruption in security forces. From initiation of the vetting exam to May 2015, roughly 14,100 of 134,600 municipal police had failed the exam and were removed.[34] Providing the Mexican government with a stronger, more reliable police force contributes significantly to the legitimacy of the government in their fight against TCOs.

Navy Adm. Craig Faller discusses the importance of dismantling criminal organizations that seek to profit from narcotics smuggling during a press conference for the U.S. Coast Guard offload of more than 34,000 pounds of seized cocaine in 2019. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard)

Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative are positive examples of coalition relationship building within the Western Hemisphere. Both policies have advanced governance, security cooperation, and built relationships between the United States and the Latin American region despite not fully accomplishing the desired end states to date. The United States, as the strongest democracy in the Western Hemisphere, must take lead in multinational relationships to defeat TCOs and transnational gangs.

Culture and regional characteristics are important considerations in relationship building. Building an understanding of the threat is essential, but understanding the local governance and population of a country that is fighting TCOs is also critical. The United States has significant leverage in the international community due to economic dominance and unrivaled military might or "hard power."[35]

Historically, the United States has hurt relationships due to a lack of cultural and regional knowledge. The United States' approach to national policy with its southern neighbors has been characterized as "to reflect arrogance and unchecked hubris... that fail to take Latin American interests into account."[36] Such sentiment has a direct negative effect on the United States' ability to implement what is known as "soft power" in Latin America to achieve national interest.

The United States must understand how to build relationships with "soft power." Soft power is the ability to influence other nations to achieve desired national policy through providing "attraction" through a variety of means for other states to comply.[37] The elements of soft power vary depending on the definition and are highly debated, but Craig Hayden's official working definition comes from Joseph Nye's description that "soft power" is "the ability to get preferred outcomes through the co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion, and attraction."[38]

The United States seeks to develop relationships by encouraging democracy to enhance cooperation through mutual respect. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated in a speech to the University of Louisville that "our foreign policy is built on respect... [to include] respect for how our neighbors and allies run their affairs."[39] The Latin

American region has a heterogeneous mixture of cultures that are significantly different from state to state. Interstate relations are enhanced with cultural respect and understanding.

Defining Issues to Shared Understanding

Shared understanding is an essential element of leading and effectively fighting criminal organizations and gangs. A shared understanding of the threat is critical to identifying strengths and weaknesses that can be exploited in the conflict resolution process. Shared understanding of the relationships between coalition forces is critical because it enhances the threat-fighting capabilities of the coalition force.

There are multiple threatening agents to dissolution of shared understanding. TCOs thrive on the ability to derail police operations to protect their supply routes. Some criminal organizations have further built militant forces capable of conducting counterintelligence operations to ensure their economic profit and long-term protection is secured.

Military intervention is a sensitive subject when dealing with "crime" because the threats are inherently an issue that the state department of nations should address. As stated by Vanda Felbab-Brown, "modern militaries were not designed or trained to deal with illicit economies and organized crime."[40] Military power further exacerbates the issue by militarizing the threat and increasing the collateral damage and civilian casualties affected by the conflict.

In some cases, military action results in increased violence and TCO growth. Whether manifested in perceived cultural disrespect or the collateral damage created in warfare, a rising dissent among the population initiates additional conflict. Acting within the micro level of operations without consideration of effects at the macro level leads to "interveners… isolate themselves from local populations, ignore local dynamics, and privilege universal over local knowledge."[41]

A lack of cultural sensitivity in action encourages local populations of people to defect against the state or intervening element. David Kilcullen describes this phenomenon as creating the "accidental guerrilla." Building legitimacy for a local government without compounding the conflict is an essential task to defeating TCOs and gangs.

Defining Organizational Capabilities and Competencies

Combating TCOs and transnational gangs within Central America and Mexico requires the synchronization of efforts and information sharing between organizations. The United States alone has countless departments and organizations that must work together with multinational organizations in Central America. The Department of State, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of Defense are three of the primary departments that are controlled by the United States government that have specific capabilities and competencies in combating TCOs and international gangs.

The Department of State primarily combats TCOs and transnational gangs through interstate relations (ambassadors, diplomats, etc.). The Department of State is the primary diplomatic office under the President of the United States. Department of State efforts contributed to the success of programs like Operational Regional Shield I and II in 2017.[42] The Department of State has several subordinate offices to include the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

ICE combats TCOs and transnational gangs by focusing on identifying, disrupting, and dismantling criminal organizations.[43] It is task organized into several subordinate components that form joint task forces (JTFs) with the ability to conduct geographic-focused investigations. The JTFs focus specifically in the areas of narcotics, weapons and contraband smuggling, human trafficking, and transnational gangs.[44]

DHS primarily combats TCOs and transnational gangs by focusing on the homeland of the United States. It ensures that domestic affairs are investigated through the use of subordinate organizations. The FBI and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are primary contributors for the department in its efforts to combat TCOs.

The FBI leverages political and law enforcement relationships both domestically and abroad to defeat transnational threats.[45] It has Transnational Anti-Gang Task Forces (TAGs) that work internationally to conduct investigations of gangs within the boundaries of Central American countries. These organizations are critical links between domestic and international information sharing to further understanding international criminal organizations.

The National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) enables tactical FBI units to receive fast and accurate information. The NGIC is responsible for analyzing information collected on organizations to provide additional support to FBI and other agencies to perform investigations. The NGIC shares information from the local, state, and federal levels with multinational agencies to ensure efforts are synchronized in collection.[46]

DHS is leading the initiative in developing academic partnerships to analyze TCOs and transnational gangs. George Mason University leads a partnership with nine other universities, in conjunction with DHS, known as the Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis Center (CINA). The CINA was created in 2017 to "develop strategies and solutions to enhance criminal network analysis, forensics, and investigative processes for on-the-ground use by agents and officers to counteract transnational crime."[47] It combines the efforts of scholastic research in advancing network communications ability and information sharing.

The Department of Defense uses military intervention and training in combating TCOs and transnational gangs. The United States does not have an enduring presence in a majority of Latin America like other parts of world. The majority of forces from the U.S. military come from frequent rotations by U.S. special operations forces, Marines, and National Guard personnel.[48]

The United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) is the geographic combatant command responsible for the Latin American area of responsibility. In the 2019 posturing statement before Congress, then SOUTHCOM Commander ADM Craig S. Faller noted that information sharing and multinational training have provided the best return on investment for combating TCOs and transnational gangs.[49] JTF and multi-agency cooperation has been highly effective in combating threats in Latin America.

Military intelligence organizational capabilities provide the most to the multi-agency efforts in combating TCOs and transnational gangs. Enhancing the threat-link analysis products allows the military to contribute by focusing on activities that have "confluent actions between TCOs and violent extremist networks [counterterrorism]."[50] Linking TCO, transnational gangs, and violent extremist groups will enable joint and multi-national agencies to create a better common operating picture of the transnational threats within Central America.

Conclusion

TCOs and transnational gangs are key matters of national interest to the United States. Understanding the nature of the threats demonstrate that they differ from conventional armed conflict and the traditional insurgencies experience by the United States. Their ability to influence and gain power in countries with weaker governments indicates Central America and the surrounding regions to be of concern.

Combating TCOs and transnational gangs is highly dependent upon building relationships. Building relationships based on respect enables multi-national efforts to synchronize capabilities and competencies across international borders. Without strong relationships, TCOs and transnational gangs will continue to proliferate in Central America.

The current capabilities and competencies of all organizations must continue to advance to achieve success in eliminating TCOs and transnational gangs. The diplomacy of the State Department is critical in joining the "hard power" and "soft power" elements of international influence. The Department of Homeland Security, and all other organizations, must improve information collection and sharing across agencies and countries to keep up with the pace of TCOs reactions. The Department of Defense must continue to develop counter TCO and gang doctrine through continued training and partnership.

Notes

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