

## GANGS AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINALS THREATEN CENTRAL AMERICAN STABILITY

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**GANGS AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINALS THREATEN CENTRAL AMERICAN  
STABILITY**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The recent expansion of gangs and transnational crime poses a significant threat to Central American stability. Central American nations generally lack the infrastructure to capture and prosecute these gang members; therefore, they continue to breed instability within the region and have exported their criminal activity in remarkable fashion. This Central American instability negatively impacts U.S. national security interests abroad and is detrimental to U.S. domestic security. This paper will explore and research the depth of this problem and its impacts on U.S. national security. It will also provide critical analysis and recommend courses of action for U.S. policy options, to include a key element for success: regional cooperation to interdict the expansion of Central American gangs and transnational criminal organizations in concert with our Central American neighbors.



## GANGS AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINALS THREATEN CENTRAL AMERICAN STABILITY

Gang activity in Central America and Mexico is a sophisticated form of violence and an increasing threat to security in the region.<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the 1980s, gang violence has increased across the region. Gangs have permeated societies in Central America and Mexico and now are a developing transnational threat vice a localized neighborhood threat to security. Academics, such as Max Manwaring, who has written extensively on gang phenomenon in the region, now link transnational gang activity to insurgency in terms of the instability they wreak upon governments. He describes third generation gangs (to be defined later), as new non-state actors that must eventually seize political power to guarantee their freedom of action.<sup>2</sup> Manwaring argues convincingly that the common link between third generation gang activity and insurgency is the parallel objective of deposing or controlling the government of the targeted country.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of this transnational threat poses a security challenge to the United States. Gangs that threaten state sovereignty in Central America and Mexico have close ties with the United States and the two largest (Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13, and the 18th Street Gang) trace their origins directly to the United States.<sup>4</sup> The threat posed by these gangs comes in two forms. First, these gangs are a criminal threat engaged in many types of illegal activities ranging from murder and kidnapping to extortion and smuggling of drugs, weapons and people. This wide range of criminal activity erodes the resources of the nation state and threatens the stability of the region. Secondly, as these gangs evolve to more sophisticated third generation gangs, they directly

challenge the sovereignty of the nation state as they strive for freedom of action. Their activities degrade the power of the nation state and place it at risk to become a failed state.

As an example, in 2004 MS-13 gunmen randomly attacked a bus in northern Honduras killing twenty-eight passengers. The attack had nothing to do with the identities of the people on board, but rather it was a violent warning and protest against the government's crackdown on gang activities in the country. The mastermind of the attack was later apprehended in Texas.<sup>5</sup> This small example portrays the transnational nature of these gangs, their ability to move freely across borders and their challenge to national sovereignty.

### Regional Gang History and Structure

Gangs in some shape or form exist throughout the world. The focus of this paper, however, is on gang activity in Central America (specifically El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua), and Mexico due to the region's proximity to the United States. Gang activity in Asia may be detrimental, but most likely poses a lesser threat to the security of our nation based on the greater distance from our shores.

The two predominant regional gangs are Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the 18th Street gang (Barrio 18 or M-18). Both originated in the United States. MS-13 is mainly a product of Salvadoran refugees that settled in Los Angeles, California in the 1980's. Barrio 18 was formed by Mexican immigrants in the Rampart section of Los Angeles in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

According to the National Gang Threat Assessment, 2009, MS-13 is estimated to have 30,000 to 50,000 members and associate members worldwide, 8,000 to 10,000 of

whom reside in the United States.<sup>7</sup> In addition to operating in Mexico and Central America, MS-13 operates in at least 42 states and the District of Columbia.<sup>8</sup> MS-13 criminal activities cover a wide range of activities including drug distribution, alien smuggling, homicide, prostitution, and weapons trafficking.<sup>9</sup> Barrio 18 is engaged in similar activities and operates across Mexico and Central America as well. It is estimated to have some 30,000 to 50,000 members.<sup>10</sup>

Data concerning gang membership figures is inconsistent, but the USAID Central America and Mexico gang assessment indicates that the number of gang members in the five assessment nations (Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua) ranges from 50,000 to 305,000. Regardless of the true numbers, the assessment stresses that these gangs pose a regional threat to economic and democratic development across the region.<sup>11</sup> As these gangs grow and expand their activities, they become increasingly costly to combat. Estimates of the direct and indirect costs of the violence they promulgate suggest that the cost of crime is roughly twelve to fourteen percent of the gross domestic product of the five assessed nations.<sup>12</sup>

The root causes of gang activity by an increasing membership are similar across the region. The area is characterized by marginalized urban areas with minimal access to basic services, high levels of youth unemployment compounded by limited educational opportunities, overwhelmed and ineffective justice systems, easy access to arms and an illicit economy, dysfunctional families, and high levels of intra-familial violence.<sup>13</sup> Demographically, the region has a youth bulge: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua have a combined population of nearly thirty million people, of which approximately sixty percent are under the age of twenty-five.<sup>14</sup> This youth bulge

has created a cohort of youth without jobs, decent education or realistic expectations of employment.<sup>15</sup>

Politics in the region have also led to gang expansion. Until the 1990's, most countries in the region (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) were dictatorships where the military was used to exert control and repress dissent.<sup>16</sup> In all but Honduras, this resulted in civil wars of various lengths that claimed thousands of lives and had a disastrous impact on social and economic systems. In no country, less Mexico to an extent, is there a solid basis for democratic institutions or culture.<sup>17</sup> The political institutions are new, democratic legitimacy is problematic, the countries are poor, social problems huge, and the police are inadequate.<sup>18</sup> These characteristics provide fertile ground for gangs to recruit, grow, and operate across the region. These characteristics also provide insight on how to possibly counter gang growth and activity to be discussed later.

The chart below, taken from the 2006 USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment, portrays how gang structures range across five distinct layers.<sup>19</sup> For the purposes of this paper, it is important to focus on the top two layers. These two layers give the gang the transnational identity and pose the greatest threat to the region.

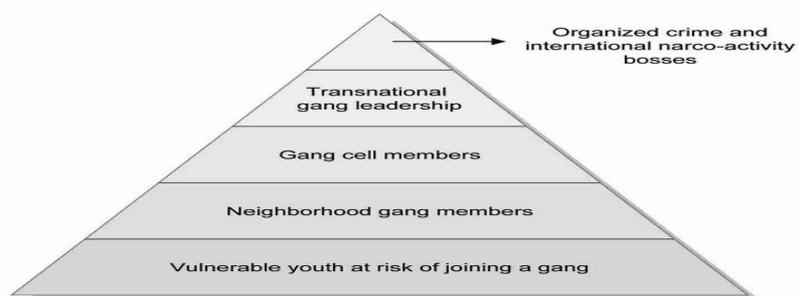


Figure 1: Gang Structures.

Working bottom to top, this chart describes the level of sophistication associated with gangs in Central America and Mexico. The first layer is essentially the recruiting field for gangs. This group represents the largest segment of the population in the region: youths ages eight to eighteen whose lives are characterized by several risk factors making them susceptible to joining a gang.<sup>20</sup>

Vulnerable youths can be categorized in to three groups. First are sympathizers. Sympathizers are youths that have already been exposed to the gang environment and are somewhat familiar with gang culture.<sup>21</sup> This category contains the youths most at risk for joining a gang. The second category is aspirants. These youth are often the youngest youth that have had some limited exposure to gang activity. As they gain experience, they will become sympathizers.<sup>22</sup> The last category is the broad group of youths that live in predominately poor, marginalized urban areas with little access to education or employment. Members of this category are susceptible to join a gang in an effort to offset the need for employment and other basic needs.<sup>23</sup>

The second layer on the chart describes the local street gangs that exist in the region. These gangs are typically comprised of youths from marginal urban neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup> They may or may not be associated with some of the larger gangs such as MS-13 or Barrio 18. The distinction is that these gangs are localized and focus on petty crime.

The third level consists of the national gang cell members. These are the MS-13 cells that operate across several neighborhoods. They focus on a higher level of criminal activity such as extortion. They are connected to the regional leaders of MS13 and may carry out operations directed by these leaders.<sup>25</sup>

The fourth level represents the regional leaders of gangs such as MS-13, Barrio 18, or other gangs with international presence. They oversee well-connected cells within extensive communication networks that are engaged in extortion and support drug and arms trafficking across the region.<sup>26</sup>

The top of the chart is comprised of organized crime and international narco-activity leaders.<sup>27</sup> They communicate with the regional gang leaders and use them to ensure drug distribution in specific areas, or hire them to fight competition.

This chart may also be correlated with Max Manwaring's description of first, second and third generation gangs. First generation gangs are labeled as traditional street gangs that are primarily turf-oriented. They do not have a sophisticated system of leadership and focus their attention on turf protection in order to gain petty cash or loyalty within a local area (city blocks, etc.). Their criminal activities are normally opportunistic and tend to be localized.<sup>28</sup> This type of gang activity correlates with the first and second layers of the previous chart as they are not as organized and do not have the breadth of operation as elements further along in the hierarchy.

Second generation gangs have more centralized leadership and are designed for business and commercial gain. They operate across a larger geographic area and tend to focus on drug trafficking and market protection.<sup>29</sup> Like other more sophisticated criminal enterprises, second generation gangs use the level of violence required to protect their markets and to thwart competition.<sup>30</sup> Second generation gangs also use violence as political interference to counter enforcement efforts directed against them by police and other security organizations.<sup>31</sup> Through these efforts they seek to control or incapacitate state security organizations and often begin to dominate community life

within large areas of the nation-state.<sup>32</sup> Since they are better organized, operate across larger geographic regions, and often link with and provide services to transnational criminal organizations,<sup>33</sup> second generation gangs approach the third and fourth levels of the pervious pyramid chart.

First and second generation gangs are important and pose a threat to regional security and stability. However, third generation gangs are more advanced and offer a significant threat to stability and security in our hemisphere. Third generation gangs are the most sophisticated and operate at the top two layers of the previously mentioned hierarchy chart. These gangs continue first and second generation gang activities as they expand their geographical parameters as well as their commercial and political objectives.<sup>34</sup> At this level, they have evolved into "seasoned organizations with broader drug-related markets, as well as very sophisticated transnational criminal organizations with ambitious political and economic agendas".<sup>35</sup>

Third generation gangs "inevitably begin to control ungoverned territory within a nation-state and /or begin to acquire political power in poorly-governed space."<sup>36</sup> This political action is an effort to provide freedom of movement and provide security for gang endeavors. The third generation gang poses a challenge to the legitimate state monopoly on the exercise of control and use of violence within a given political territory.<sup>37</sup> This challenge elevates the leader of the gang to warlord or drug baron status. That status clearly takes the gang into intrastate war or nonstate war.<sup>38</sup>

Third generation gangs have broad objectives that surpass petty criminal activities and work to erode the very core of national sovereignty. In addition to the objectives of first and second generation gangs, third generation gangs look to depose

or replace the incumbent government, control parts or regions within a nation-state, and work to change the values in a society to those of the gang.<sup>39</sup>

The third generation gang begins to take on characteristics of an insurgent movement since its operations are not solely focused at criminal endeavors but have broadened to include regime and societal change. Third generation gangs also share characteristics with terrorist groups due to their propensity for indiscriminate violence, intimidation, and coercion that transcends borders and targets nation-states.<sup>40</sup> The remainder of this project will focus on the operations and characteristics of the third generation gang and examine how it poses a direct threat to security and stability within the western hemisphere.

#### The Serious Threat Posed by Third Generation Gangs

By nature of their activities, all gangs pose threats to security and stability. By simply increasing the level of violence, nation-states of the region must focus more resources towards combating gang activities. This creates a vicious cycle where nations spend scarce resources on defeating gang activity which limits their ability to focus on the previously mentioned social problems that directly contribute to gang development and expansion.

The threat posed by gangs in the United States is a serious criminal phenomenon combated by the local police and federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).<sup>41</sup> The FBI has even established a national MS-13 gang task force. Although serious, the implications of gang activity in the United States are handled by local and federal police agencies and do not pose a direct threat to US national sovereignty. However, the implications in Central America are much worse.

Gangs, especially the more sophisticated third generation gangs, pose a significant threat to the sovereignty of the region. They erode the fragile democracies of the region and push nations towards a failed-state status. The second order effect to the United States is potentially having one or more failed states within close proximity of our border where third generation gangs continue to gain power, control, and wealth.

Third generation gangs are "highly sophisticated mercenary-type groups" with "goals of power or financial acquisition and a set of fully evolved political aims."<sup>42</sup> They tend to operate in a global environment and may embrace quasi-terrorism or true terrorism to advance their goals.<sup>43</sup> Through this measure, the third generation gang poses a direct threat, or more importantly an existential threat to some Central American nations.

MS-13, and to some degree MS-18, display the characteristics of third generation gangs. They operate across the borders of the region and within the United States. They have a complex organization that is networked throughout the region and are involved in crimes that span national borders. MS-13 has fluid communication between elements in El Salvador and the United States. They are displacing narco-traffickers and have strong links with organized crime.<sup>44</sup> MS-13 is a third generation gang that has functioning networks with extensive transnational linkages. Examples of this gang phenomenon in Central America serve to "delineate their strategic architecture in a way that can be applied more globally. That architecture focuses on motives and vision, organization and leadership, programs of action and results."<sup>45</sup>

This level of sophistication is what poses the greatest threat to nations such as El Salvador and Mexico. In the 1980s the Salvadoran government fought a long and bitter

civil war against just such a highly organized group, the Marti Faribundo National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN was a leftist insurgent organization, politically motivated and dedicated to overthrowing the government. The FMLN was a direct threat to Salvadoran sovereignty and the fight lasted over ten years.

Today El Salvador is fighting another threat to national sovereignty. This threat is not trying to overtake the government in one major stroke by a (golpe, or coup), or by a prolonged revolutionary war like some insurgents, but rather by "subtly taking control of turf one street or neighborhood at a time (coup d' street) or one individual, business, or government office at a time."<sup>46</sup>

Mexico faces the similar challenge of a large and complex network of gangs operating within its borders. The violence has risen to a point where the murder rates along its northern and southern borders are considered epidemic and Mexico suffers from the highest incidence of kidnapping in the world.<sup>47</sup>

The common denominator between gangs, insurgents, and other transnational criminal organizations is that they all desire to control people, territory, and government to ensure their own specific goals and objectives are met.<sup>48</sup> Manwaring identifies this concept as a good definition of an insurgency: "a serious political agenda and a clash of controlling values."<sup>49</sup>

When a government fails to extend a legitimate presence throughout its national territory, this leaves a vacuum in which gangs and other insurgent-like elements compete for power.<sup>50</sup> This vacuum doesn't mean that the area is "ungoverned" however. Gangs, insurgents, and warlords, who operate where there is limited or no legitimate government activity, govern this space. For their own preservation, gangs

directly or indirectly challenge the nation-state in these areas.<sup>51</sup> This unconventional type of conflict or war pits these non-state actors (gangs, war lords, etc.) directly against nation-states in a highly complex political act - political war.<sup>52</sup>

Thomas C. Bruneau, Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, identifies at least five threats to Central American stability posed by this gang phenomenon. First, "gangs overwhelm the governments, including the police and legal systems by their sheer audacity, violence and numbers."<sup>53</sup> In January, 2005 there were one hundred and thirty-eight murders in El Salvador, and MS-13 was responsible for almost half of this total.<sup>54</sup> Overall, MS-13 was reported to be responsible for some sixty percent of the overall crime in El Salvador in 2003. This activity is in a country that has attempted plans and policies to deal with gang violence. It is much worse in Guatemala and Nicaragua, where little has been accomplished towards forming anti-gang plans and policies.

Second, gangs challenge the legitimacy of the state. In this region of weak democratic tradition gangs have eroded strides towards democratic development. Bruneau writes that "democracy is not only about structures, or institutions, but also about culture."<sup>55</sup> The nations of Central America have not had time to develop a culture of democracy in which this form of government is the only "game in town".<sup>56</sup> Guatemala and Nicaragua both suffer from corruption all the way to the top of their governments and their political systems function poorly at best. Adding the challenges associated with rampant gang activity to this mix of poor democratic institutions can only further deteriorate an already low level of government legitimacy.<sup>57</sup>

Third, MS-13 is already acting like a government surrogate in some areas of Guatemala and El Salvador. Even in the capital cities some areas are controlled by MS-13, where gang members collect taxes on individuals and businesses. Those who choose not to pay are eliminated. The governments are unable or unwilling to do anything about it due to lack of police personnel and resources.<sup>58</sup>

Fourth, MS-13 members, at least in El Salvador, have gone into small businesses where they have created an unfair advantage by their propensity to use violence in order to corner a market. They also rent their services out to other businesses in order to coerce competitors. This activity downgrades legitimate economic activity and perpetuates violence. Since they are profitable, many are concerned that these profits go into expansion by buying and taking over more legitimate businesses and paying off police and government officials.<sup>59</sup>

Lastly, MS-13 has infiltrated police and non-governmental organizations and could be used by political organizations. As such, they demonstrate a political sense and an ability to think and act strategically.<sup>60</sup> This further wreaks havoc on the emerging democracies of the region.

Gangs establish these challenges to nation-state sovereignty through a process described by Manwaring as the "Sullivan-Bunker Cocktail, named for John P. Sullivan and Robert J Bunker who are two widely published experts, scholars, and practitioners in the field of emerging threats."<sup>61</sup> This process, appropriately named for its volatile combination of criminal gangs, terrorists, and insurgents, has proved itself in at least fifteen municipalities in El Salvador and in other political jurisdictions in neighboring Central American republics and Mexico. Here is how it works:

If the irregular attacker--criminal gangs, terrorists, insurgents, drug cartels, militant environmentalists, or a combination of the above--blends crime, terrorism, and war, he can extend his already significant influence. After embracing advanced technology weaponry, including weapons of mass destruction (including chemical and biological agents), radio frequency weapons, and advanced intelligence gathering technology, along with more common weapons systems, the attacker can transcend drug running, robbery, kidnapping, and murder and pose a significant challenge to the nation-state and its institutions.

Then, using complicity, intimidation, corruption, and indifference, the irregular attacker can quietly and subtly co-opt individual politicians and bureaucrats and gain political control of a given geographical or political enclave. Such corruption and distortion can potentially lead to the emergence of a network of government protection of illicit activities, and the emergence of a virtual criminal state or political entity. A series of networked enclaves could, then, become a dominant political actor within a state or group of states. Thus, rather than violently competing directly with a nation-state, an irregular attacker can criminally co-opt and begin to seize control of the state indirectly.<sup>62</sup>

Gangs completing this process have evolved from second to third generation gangs that represent a triple threat to nation-state sovereignty. First, murder, kidnapping, corruption, and impunity from punishment undermine the ability of the nation-state to perform its legitimizing security and public service functions.<sup>63</sup> This is similar to Bruneau's observation that gangs such as MS-13 overwhelm a nation-state. Second, by violently imposing their power over bureaucrats and elected officials of the nation-state, gangs compromise the exercise of state authority and replace it with their own.<sup>64</sup> Third, by taking control of portions of given national territory and performing the tasks of government, the gang phenomenon can transform itself into a state within and state.<sup>65</sup>

Regardless if one accepts that gangs may be insurgents, the ultimate result is the same. The tactics, techniques, and procedures offered by various insurgent, gang, and terrorist groups may be different, but the end result is degradation of the nation-

state and either a change in leadership or failure of the state. Failed states matter because they act as breeding grounds for instability, criminality, insurgency, regional conflict, and terrorism. They foster conditions that promote human rights violations, torture, and poverty. Failed states also often spawn humanitarian disasters and massive migration flows, as well as promoting the trafficking of both conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>66</sup>

Terrorism and law enforcement experts G.I. Wilson and John P. Sullivan describe this type of threat to the nation-state as fourth generation warfare. They state that this fourth generation is a "phenomenon where war, crime, and peace blur manifesting themselves as threats to the stability of nation-states by non-state actors (gangs, terrorists militias, cartels, clans, tribes, pirates, and criminal enterprises)."<sup>67</sup>

Before moving on to responses and regional implications, it is important to summarize that third generation gangs pose a significant threat to stability in the region. They erode at fragile democracies and create an unstable environment that at the very least indirectly impacts the security of the United States. Illegal gang activity stymies productive economic activity and drains resources weakening the overall health of the nation-state. This potentially leads to failed nation-states which as stated earlier are havens for further illicit activities. Failed nation-states, especially a potential border state, may pose a direct threat to our national security.

### National and Regional Responses, and Implications

El Salvador and Honduras have responded in similar fashion in developing strategies to deal with gang activity. El Salvador has developed a hard line approach that aims at incarcerating gang members involved in criminal activity. It has enacted a

series of approaches called Mano Dura (firm hand) and Super Mano Dura (super firm hand) in an effort to aggressively deal with delinquents through law enforcement.<sup>68</sup>

Super Mano Dura provides for prevention and intervention activities as well as enforcement. This legislation permits police to randomly apprehend gang members in an effort to get them off of the streets. Super Mano Dura resulted in the arrest of eleven thousand gang members in just one year.<sup>69</sup> The unintended consequence, however, is that the nation's judicial and police systems have become overcrowded. Coordination between enforcement institutions is poor and there are not enough personnel in these institutions to manage the problems.

Honduras has enacted similar type laws that crack down on gang activity, and even used the army to back up police on the street. Unfortunately, they have experienced the same unintended consequences as El Salvador. Additionally, both nations now have problems in their respective prison systems where security is questionable and many illicit gang activities are carried out from behind bars.

Beyond national responses, the governments of the region have realized that the gang problem is widespread and requires regional cooperation in an effort to thwart gang activity. Over the past several years, governments in the region have met at the highest levels and pledged to improve coordination.

The United States has pledged assistance to the region primarily in the form of the Merida Initiative, named for a city on the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico that is a trans-shipment point for drugs. This initiative, signed into law in 2008, is an effort by the United States to partner with the governments in Mexico and Central America to confront criminal organizations whose actions have a negative impact on the region and

spill over into the United States. It is a multi-year program that provides equipment and training to support law enforcement operations and technical assistance for long term reform and oversight of security agencies. The U.S. Congress approved four hundred million dollars in support for Mexico and sixty-five million for Central America in fiscal year 2008 alone.

The Merida Initiative will fund five major components in order to support regional nations in their fight against gangs and their associated criminal activity. It will provide funds for non-intrusive inspection equipment, ion scanners, and canine units in order to interdict smugglers attempting to move drugs, arms, and illegal persons. It additionally supports training and technical advice to regional law enforcement personnel, improves secure communications networks, provides funding for helicopters and surveillance aircraft, and funds community action programs in Central America that implement anti-gang measures.

In October 2007, the FBI announced a direct partnership with El Salvador in an effort to target MS-13 gang activities. This partnership is called the Transnational Anti-Gang initiative. Its centerpiece is direct coordination and collaboration between FBI agents on the ground in El Salvador and their Salvadoran counterparts, focusing on sharing intelligence about MS-13 activities across the region. Salvadoran police identify and track gang members and share information with the FBI team in El Salvador. They in turn load this information into a data base that can be shared with other nations. This effort expands on an earlier enacted fingerprint exploitation initiative that shares fingerprint and biometric information on gang members from across the region.

These anti-gang activities are gaining wider interest within our government, especially as the number of gang members in the United States increases. Other organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations (UN) have developed programs and funding to support legal reform, intervention programs, and infrastructure improvement, in an effort to support anti-gang strategies. The question remains: is this enough? Does this type of support really help the nations that do not have the capacity to interdict gang activity completely on their own? In the case of Mexico in particular, it is important that this support succeed since we share a common border.

Until roughly fifteen years ago, the United States was committed to stopping the spread of communism in Central America. The United States committed millions of dollars and numerous military advisors, and displayed a willingness to face domestic and international criticisms in first halting leftist insurgencies, and then promoting peace processes and assisting the transition to democracies in the region.<sup>70</sup> With the arrival of peace, our goals in the region are focused on stability. Specifically, U.S. security goals in the region include promotion of democratic values, commitment to respect human rights, territorial security and sovereignty, and collective regional security.<sup>71</sup>

Third generation gangs such as MS-13 threaten democratic values, respect for human rights, and territorial security. As such, they pose a threat to U.S. national security and hamper attainment of our regional goals. Gangs erode the democratic process, especially when nations must use their military for domestic security as is the case in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. This use of military force erodes the democratic process and degrades civilian control of the military.

The gang threat is multi-faceted. On one hand it erodes the viability of the nation-state and potentially may lead states in the region to failure. Failed states within the region pose significant economic and political issues for the United States. The environment created by a failing or failed state promotes the expansion of gang activity as the legitimate government grows weaker and loses control over sovereign territory. Failing or failed states within the region provide the United States with a challenging dilemma. Should the United States respond to nations approaching a failed state status? If the United States responds, what type of response is warranted? Do we respond with financial aid as with Mexico (Merida Initiative), or do we respond militarily?

On the other-hand, gangs and their sophisticated networks may be used to traffic terrorists and/or weapons of mass destruction through the region and directly in to the United States. This potential threat requires expending addition resources towards border and port of entry security. It also poses an additional dilemma concerning sovereignty. If the United States develops a linkage that clearly identifies that MS-13 is trafficking weapons of mass destruction for example, do we interdict their activities within the sovereign territory of another nation?

The previous two examples point out that third generation gangs are a multi-faceted threat that must be taken seriously. First and foremost, these gangs are merely another form of insurgency that threatens the security and stability of the region. Their motivation, tactics, techniques, and procedures may be different than the insurgent motivated by a political or religious ideology, but the results are often the same. Both attack the sovereignty of the nation-state and erode the fragile democracies in the region.

The intersection of crime and terrorism is characterized by an increasing interdependence of terrorists and transnational criminals and gangs.<sup>72</sup> Terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and third generation gangs may have divergent motivations (politics versus profit), but both can exploit the benefits of cooperation. They can use interlocking plug and play network connections to further their individual and collective goals.<sup>73</sup> Gang activities generate monies that can be used to finance a terrorist movement. As such, they share a common role as "strategic criminals" whose lawlessness and violence threaten a range of state security interests.<sup>74</sup>

Of the several threats posed by gangs, the potential for gangs and terrorist groups like Al-Qaida to join forces is the most challenging. The extensive smuggling networks controlled by gangs could easily be used to move weapons, money and operatives for Al-Qaida.

Although there is no hard evidence linking gang activities in the region to Islamic Jihadist or other terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida, the skills the gangs have in moving people, arms, and drugs across borders could well be used to traffic terrorists. Third generation gangs are opportunistic and unscrupulous, and experts like Bruneau believe that the extensive networks gangs utilize to smuggle illicit arms, people, and drugs may also be used to traffic terrorists or weapons of mass destruction through the region into the United States.<sup>75</sup>

The serious threats posed by gangs may require the United States to respond beyond a diplomatic or economic approach. Left unchecked in the region, the United States may have no other alternative than to respond with military force to ensure our strategic goals are met. State failure in Mexico for example may require US military

support. MS-13 collaborating with Al-Qaida in El Salvador may be another potential venue for the use of military force against gang activity.

### Recommendations

The United States must recognize that third generation gangs pose a significant threat to stability in Mexico and Central America. As such, our nation must be prepared to use all elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) to counter gang activity. In order to be successful the United States must gain a better understanding of the gang problem and recognize that the nations of the region are at war with these gangs and the scope is beyond some bands of crooks creating mischief in the streets. These nations are fighting an unconventional war with non-state actors that are well organized and pose a significant threat to state sovereignty.

The U.S. should also increase foreign aid to Mexico and Central America to help them improve their police training, expand public infrastructure, and enhance crime fighting technologies. We should refocus some of our national intelligence assets to improve assistance to regional partners and to gain a better understanding of the situation. Our efforts must be directed at building regional partners in order to eliminate the threat of gangs. We must identify the people that will not cooperate and marginalize their activities, while searching for and promoting host nation government officials that will work in a partnership to eliminate transnational gangs.

The short term focus must be towards Mexico and the violence that plagues the border area shared with the United States. Each day there are U.S. national news reports that detail the violence where the Mexican authorities are at war with narco-trafficking gangs that operate almost freely in this region.

The longer term focus should be devoted towards expanding the law enforcement capacity of the region and assisting the legitimate government expand its control over remote territories that often provide safe-haven for gang members. Attention should also be paid to helping nations of the region improve social infrastructure and reform weak economic systems in order to provide a alternative to gang membership. Regional cooperation is paramount and if we succeed at these initiatives, we will vastly increase the security of the region, and enhance our own national security.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored the expansion of gang activity in Mexico and Central America and the threat this poses to the United States. U.S. interests in the region are founded in stability and security. Illicit gang activity attacks stability and security in the region and promotes nation-state failure. Gangs erode democratic institutions as well as derail free-market economies. The U.S. must realize this threat to the region and act in close coordination with our Mexican and Central American partners to eliminate this threat.

### Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> Clare Ribando, *Gangs in Central America* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, May 2005), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Arana, "How Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20050501faessay84310/ana-arana/how-the-street-gangs-took-central-america.html> (accessed October 16, 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> National Gang Intelligence Center, *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009* (Washington DC: National Gang Intelligence Center, January 2009), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation Headline Archives, "The MS-13 Threat, A National Assessment," January 14, 2008, [http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/ms13\\_011408.html](http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/ms13_011408.html) (accessed February 7, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> National Gang Intelligence Center, *National Gang Threat Assessment 2009*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Thomas C. Bruneau, "The Maras and National Security in Central America," *Strategic Insights*, (May 2005), <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2005/may/bruneaumay05.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2009).

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords," in Robert J. Bunker, ed., *Nonstate Threats and Future Wars*, (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 48-49.

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<sup>38</sup> Max G. Manwaring, *Insurgency, Terrorism, and Crime, Shadows from the Past and Portents for the Future* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 108.

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<sup>44</sup> USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> Manwaring, *Insurgency, Terrorism, and Crime, Shadows from the Past and Portents for the Future*, 111.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 119-120.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>52</sup> Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, 3

<sup>53</sup> Bruneau, "The Maras and National Security in Central America", 6.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Manwaring, *Insurgency, Terrorism, and Crime, Shadows from the Past and Portents for the Future*, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.,117.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.,118.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>66</sup> Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson and Sullivan, "On Gangs, Crime, and Terrorism, Special to Defense and the National Interest," 7.

<sup>68</sup> USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*,54.

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<sup>70</sup> Bruneau, "The Maras and National Security in Central America", 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson and Sullivan, "On Gangs, Crime, and Terrorism, Special to Defense and the National Interest," 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>75</sup> Bruneau, "The Maras and National Security in Central America", 8.

