Introduction.

The University of Pittsburgh Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies, the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, the University Center for International Studies, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Office of the Provost, and the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, conducted a colloquium at the University of Pittsburgh campus on October 28-30, 2009, entitled “Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability in Mexico, Colombia, and the Caribbean: Implications for U.S. National Security.” Key note speakers were: (1) Bruce Bagley, Professor and Chair, Department of International Studies, University of Miami and Director, University of Miami’s Center of Latin American Studies (CLAS), who addressed “What Can the Mexican State Do to Combat Organized Crime?” and (2) Jorge Chabat, Professor/Investigator, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), who discussed “The Drug War in Mexico: Dilemmas and Options.” This colloquium was attended by over 150 government officials, academic experts, think tank members, U.S. military, and U.S. and international students and faculty.

The conference focused on a national security challenge which has to this point been contained but is taking dramatically new and dangerous forms. The emergence of new criminal groups in Colombia, increased violence in Mexico, and the possible spread of these criminal activities to Cuba and other Caribbean islands, create new instabilities which could result in one or more strategic shocks, in an area which is both the backyard and soft underbelly of the United States. Even if this does not

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**Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability in Mexico, Colombia, and the Caribbean: Implications for U.S. National Security**

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The third and fourth panels both analyzed the growing violence and instability in Mexico. Members of Panel 3 were: (1) Kathleen DeWalt, Director, Center for Latin American Studies and Professor of Anthropology and Public Health,
University of Pittsburgh, Chair and Discussant; (2) Carlos Flores, Associate Professor at the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), “Drug Trafficking, Violence, Corruption, and Democracy in Mexico”; (3) John Sullivan, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism (CAST); Lieutenant, Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, Emergency Operations Bureau, “Post-Modern Social Banditry: Criminal Violence or Criminal Insurgency?” and (4) Angelica Duran, Doctoral Candidate, Brown University, “Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets.” Panel 4 consisted of: (1) Dallas Owens, Chairman, Strategic Research and Analysis Department, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Chair and Discussant; (2) Luis Astorga, Researcher, Institute of Social Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, “Mexico: Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Political Change”; Paul Kan, Associate Professor of National Security Studies, U.S. Army War College, “Why Mexico is not Colombia”; and Louis Casale, Senior Intelligence Analyst, National Drug Intelligence Center, SPU, “Mexican Drug Trafficking Organization Presence in the United States and Their Ties to U.S. Based Gangs.”

The first panelist took up the idea of increasing violence as a result of the breakdown of state control over organized crime. With homicides increasing in some states at massive rates, he wondered when the threshold of violence would be reached that would lead to an erosion of governance. He concluded by noting that even the Mexican Army would be unable to solve the violence problem without serious reforms at the highest levels of government. The second panelist then examined the nature of the violence itself, and whether it should be classified as criminal violence or a criminal insurgency. He saw evidence of both; at times groups behave as standard criminal elements, but in other cases openly challenging the legitimacy of the government. This led to a problem that was not strictly military, but social, as the groups began to engage in socially attractive crime. The final panelist expanded on the alternative view by examining the connection between illegality and violence, and why, in some cases, illegality flourishes with relatively low violence. She saw that illegal markets could foster low violence if the state operated as a single protector and enforcer. As the state lost its monopoly, either by refusing to cooperate with (perhaps competing with) organized crime or through diminished capacity, violence and instability rose markedly.

The fourth panel continued the analysis of Mexican drug violence, with the first panelist providing a history of state involvement in drug trafficking. He argued that U.S. drug policy has had an enormous, and often damaging, effect on the scale of the Mexican drug trade. He also noted that Mexico itself is not a large drug consumer, but the transit of drugs to the U.S. market nonetheless draws in up to half a million people. The next panelist then warned against the danger of comparing Mexico and Colombia too closely, suggesting that while Colombia had been fighting a war against the FARC, in Mexico the problem was one of law and order. Major challenges to this problem were identified as both the limited capacity of the Mexican state, as well as the hybrid nature of Mexico’s drug problem as a source of both drugs and demand, requiring a more complex and multifaceted response. The final panelist then described Mexican drug organizations’ connections to U.S. street gangs, and the extent of their penetration.

Several participants asked about the militarization of the Mexican drug war. One panelist suggested that the alternative to militarization had to be community based, perhaps raising public outrage. The government could enable this process, but the panelists’ opinions differed as to what extent. Another panelist saw a national security state as the likeliest outcome, as the government lacked the political will or time to forge a political solution. A third participant noted that the disaggregation of illegality and violence suggested a tradeoff between corruption and violence. The other panelists agreed, saying that the theory was not normatively appealing, but that perhaps it could help address violence while later mitigating the resulting corruption. A number of participants also quizzed the panel about the activity of criminal organizations in the United States. Panelists reported that the groups were definitely transnational and had links into Canada; that there was increasing cooperation with U.S. gangs that was likely to continue to grow; and that while cooperation with terrorist groups was certainly possible, there was as yet no evidence of such links.

Panel V: Perspectives on the Caribbean.

The fifth panel addressed the problems of drugs and violence in the Caribbean. Panelists included: (1) Taylor Seybolt, Director, Ford Institute for Human Security, Chair and Discussant; (2) Lilian Bobea, Latin American Social Science Faculty, Santo Domingo, “Private Vices, Without Public Benefit: The Dominican State versus Organized Crime”; (3) Desmond Arias, Associate Professor of Political Science, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, “The Structure of Criminal Organizations in Kingston, Jamaica, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil”; and (4) Anthony Maingot, Professor Emeritus and National Security Scholar-in-Residence, Florida International University, “Sovereign Sensibilities and Small Caribbean State Capacity in the Face of a Changed Geopolitical Environment.”

Panelists noted that the Caribbean has been the victim of extremely imbalanced relationships with the United States. One panelist pointed out that the islands were a minor consumer of drugs but a major transit point to the United States; with the attendant increase in corruption and violence, the Caribbean governments are ill-suited to combat it. The second panelist described Caribbean government policies as being driven by Cold War concerns for decades, leading to relative ignorance of the drug problem, or the framing of it as a U.S. problem. Both agreed on the immense difficulty experienced by the regional governments in navigating the powerful influences of both the U.S. Government and drug organizations. The third panelist then discussed his work doing network analysis on Jamaican and Brazilian gangs. He provided further evidence for the recurring idea that the state plays a key role not only in combating criminal organizations, but also in facilitating them. He described evidence of substantial political organization support for criminal networks, concluding that governments need to understand these complex networks of criminal and political support if they are to make progress in combating the problem.

Many of the questions from the conference participants asked the panelists to address what needs to be done, both by local governments and the United States, given the complex dynamics in the Caribbean. There was agreement that, despite the impact of the recent recession, governments need to meet the
problem head on, especially in terms of rooting out corruption. One panelist argued for the need to expand opportunity for local citizens as opposed to increasing the strength of the security services. Another discussed the role of Venezuela and especially Cuba in supporting many of these states, and the opinion that this support would continue regardless of the U.S. view of Cuba and Venezuela. Others inquired as to the use and utility of network analysis, specifically whether it implied policy prescriptions. The panelist replied that above all, local policymakers need to better understand the interconnected nature of criminal organizations, and that more training was needed for this purpose. These criminal organizations can only be effectively combated once they are more fully understood.

Panel VI: Assessment and Responses.

The final panel was a round-table of U.S. officials who offered their perspectives on the challenges of drugs, violence, and instability in Mexico, Colombia, and the Caribbean that were identified in the conference and how the United States might respond more fully and effectively to the challenges. The panel consisted of (1) William “Trey” G. Braun, III, (COL) Deputy Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Chair and Discussant; (2) Rita Koch (Joint Military Information Support Command-USSOCOM), Agnes Schaefer (RAND), L. Bradley Hittle, Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and Robert Mandel (Lewis & Clark College).

The panel attempted to summarize the broad themes of the conference; the chair identified three core ideas: the dichotomy between corruption and violence; the dangers of unanticipated consequences of policies; and the difficulty with effectively operationalizing policy, running the gamut from decriminalization to state national security. Specific recommendations by the panelists were varied. The first argued that the United States had three specific priorities: organized crime, migration, and terrorism. Addressing this range of problems will require a long-term approach, with a focus on reform and institution building. The second panelist analyzed the situation from the local government point of view, noting that the limiting factor is resources. An effective strategy will have to prioritize challenges and initiatives, and work to build political coalitions to secure the needed resources. The third panelist considered the security challenge from the point of view of the U.S. Department of Defense, explaining that a key concern was local perceptions of criminal organizations. Perceptions of the problem and support for the organizations were important factors in developing a response, and the United States needs to be fully aware of unique cultural factors, especially in terms of coca growing, that affect public perception. The final panelist discussed the overall problem in terms of values, arguing that there are inherent tensions in any policy, and no clear consensus in Latin America about what should be done. The dilemma for the state is how to ensure that steps to combat criminal organizations also improve the lives of the population, since anti-narcotics policies often result in the opposite effect.

Questions for the final panel focused substantially on U.S. relationships with local governments. One panelist noted that in the case of Mexico, it is perhaps the easiest example to defend the necessity for U.S. aid policy because of the synthesis of domestic and international threats. He concluded that current initiatives were generally correct but the United States needs to include the priority for institution building. Other panelists focused on ensuring a coherent and credible U.S. message regarding its drug policy. The United States can only accomplish this by creating an effective partnership at all levels and ensuring long-term resource flows to national, state, and local governments.

Conclusion: The Way Ahead.

This colloquium demonstrated that government experts from across the hemisphere, academics studying the region, and policymakers from many countries understand the complexity of drug trafficking, organized violence, and corruption issues that pervade much of the hemisphere. Additionally, drug consumption is increasing in many areas that were previously noted solely for their production or trafficking activity. Long-term solutions cannot be successful if confined to single countries or bilateral agreements. Though the issues are hemispheric, each country has distinct perspectives about these issues, and they require the unique application of common solutions. Critical relationships that must be considered when developing national strategies to address criminal and security concerns posed by the drug trade include:

- The root causes of violence and the level of violence;
- The host state’s confrontation with, complicity with, tolerance of, or stance against drug trade organizations;
- Relative political, economic, and military power of participating state and nonstate actors;
- The positions taken by regional activist or power states intervening as third party supporters for the state and for drug organizations; and,
- Border control operations and their impact on sovereignty issues and multistate relations.

Distinctions must be made between large countries, such as Mexico and Colombia, and small countries, like any of the Caribbean countries. Regional powers, like Brazil, and countries with long-term activities, like Cuba, and more recent activists, such as Venezuela, must be considered in, or may be distinct parts of, plans to address the issues, especially those that have cross-border operations. The problems of drug trafficking, organized violence, and corruption have evolved over many years; any solutions will require long-term plans and investments to show results.

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